

The Red Road

A Novel

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Author's Note

While many of the dates of past events, such as the releases of music albums, films and sports fixtures, are historically accurate, some timings have been modified for the purposes of storytelling.

Michaelmas Term

September 1991 – December 1991

Chapter One

I had always known that at some point in my life I would see a dead body. Whether it be a grandmother, a grandfather, a life-long friend, or my own mother or father, it was a certainty of life. What I didn't expect was for it to be the body of a ten-year-old boy, when I myself was only fifteen. I also never expected the corpse to have been dumped by a roadside as a result of a murder.

I was jogging along the so-called Red Road at the time, a woodland road that wound its way through the countryside close to St Christopher's boys' boarding school. I had always hated having to do the run. Word would spread around lunchtime that we wouldn't be playing rugby or football that afternoon, but instead the teachers would be making us go on a three-mile jog. The Road was always such a torturous affair that I wouldn't believe it until I went to the main notice board and saw a printed piece of A4 pinned up over the usual sports schedule, informing us of what time the run started (one forty-five, directly after lunch).

Some would say that the run was to help us build up our stamina and maintain a certain level of fitness, so we could sprint around for eighty minutes during rugby matches. But in my humble opinion, it was because the teachers were feeling lazy and/or sadistic that day.

I would have been a little more tolerant of the run today if I had been doing it along with one of my close friends — Sam, Baz, Rory, Marvin, Rob or Carson. I had set off early, however, changing into my sports kit straight after lunch. I just wanted to get it over and done with.

Two things were almost guaranteed to happen during these runs. The first, that even before I was halfway done, I would hear of how one of the incredibly athletic African boys at the school was already finished. Desperately out of breath and wishing I could be finished at that point, too, I would trudge on through the wind and the rain, climbing the hills and dodging the holes, imagining the guy reclining in his room with a magazine, having barely even broken a sweat.

The second thing that would happen is that one of the sixth formers would choose to vent whatever pent-up rage that was afflicting them (hormones, stress, general sexual frustration) on one of the unfortunate younger boys they met along the way. A swift and not so discreet punch in the guts would be the norm, the older boys knowing that there would be no repercussions from the assault. Not that this happened to me any more, thankfully. I was almost sixteen, tall and able to handle myself better than when I had been thirteen and simply forced to shut up and lump it. Not that even now I would still hit a sixth former back if they did choose to attack me; I wasn't that stupid.

There was no getting out of the runs, either. One of the sports teachers (usually Mr Edmunds, well-known for his bad breath and poor sense of humour) would be sitting at the end of the road in his car, along with a clipboard and pen, to tick off the names of the boys as they arrived. If it was raining, which it often was in good old England, he would be sitting with a smug look on his face and pouring out some hot coffee from a Thermos flask, making a point of displaying his comfort to us as we arrived. Not having your name ticked off would usually result in detention, essay writing,

or possibly something worse depending on how much the teacher in question disliked you.

Still, the runs had their upsides. Sometimes the less-fit teachers would come tramping along the Road with us. I was never sure whether that was for their own benefit, to keep an eye on us, or just to provide us with some extra motivation, but I always enjoyed watching them get a stitch and have to pull up and stop, taking some time out to ease their aching sides.

But at this moment, the person pulling over was me. I had caught sight of the dead boy's hand as I had turned a bend. It was fairly well hidden, easy to miss if you gave it just a glance, as I suspect all the other boys running ahead of me had done. At first, I thought it was someone hiding. Then, after further investigation, I discovered otherwise. The boy's dead, unblinking eyes stared out from the bushes at me as I came closer, his face, hands, arms, and body extremely pale. He was naked, whomever had left him here having stripped him before dumping the body.

My stomach lurched, and I felt as though I was going to vomit. I did so as soon as I saw a fly land on the boy's face and casually walk around it, before disappearing up one of his nostrils. I cast frantically about as my half-digested lunch shot up my throat and splattered all over the ground, seeing Mr Rod, housemaster of Martin, jogging along the road towards me.

His expression was initially one of mild concern, laced with humour. I was sure he wouldn't be laughing in a moment.

"Are you okay, Joe?" he asked, stopping alongside me and rubbing me on the back.

"Sir ..." I said, spitting particles of food and bile from my mouth and pointing to the bushes.

"What's that ...?" Mr Rod began, before giving a start. He didn't investigate for very long and immediately began instructing me to tell everyone coming our way to turn around and head back to the school, no questions asked. Just say there had been an incident, he told me.

"Make sure you get word to the prefects to ensure everyone goes back," he added, "but send a couple of them this way."

"Do you want me to tell the headmaster?" I asked, spitting the remainder of the vomit from my mouth and wishing I had some water to hand.

"No, just get back to the school and don't say anything. Understood?" Mr Rod said.

"Okay," I replied and started back the other way. It was the shortest run of the Road I had ever done. Likely, I had even beaten one of the African boys this time.

*

The assembly hall was packed, all five hundred boys crammed inside. I had rarely ever seen it this full, and there was barely enough room for all of us. We sat in our houses, a raft of black suits and multicoloured ties for the senior school covering the vast majority of the seats, while bright blue blazers filled what chairs were available to those in the junior school. There weren't nearly enough seats for everyone, many of the juniors being made to stand. They lined the walls closer to the front, skinny white legs exposed in shorts. I recalled shivering during the winter months in those and was

grateful that I was no longer forced to wear them, trousers being part of the uniform in the senior school.

“Crotty saw it.”

I heard my nickname mentioned and leaned forward to look down the line of boys seated on the same row as me. Anthony Simmons, Charlie Smith and Daniel Rye were whispering together.

Although in the same house as me, they weren't three people that I usually had a great deal to do with. They were part of the exclusive third-year “Clique” that numbered around twenty, made up of boys from the five different houses. In the main, those in the Clique would only ever speak to me if they wanted something or had heard some disparaging rumour either about me or one of my close friends. In those cases, it would either be to rile me about it or seek further information. The whispering continued for a time, before all three turned in my direction.

“Oi, Joe,” Simmons hissed.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Did you see the body?”

I nodded.

“Who was it?”

“I don't know,” I shrugged.

“What year?” Smith interjected as Simmons made to ask another question.

“I think he was from the junior school,” I said, glancing in the direction of the skinny white pins. “They looked like it.”

“How do you know?” Smith asked, somewhat incredulously.

What's with the bloody interrogation? I wondered. “Because he looked about ten.”

“How cou—” Rye started.

“What uniform was he wearing?” Simmons interrupted.

“He wasn't wearing one,” I admitted, catching the eyes of other boys who had turned in their seats to focus on me. “He wasn't wearing anything.”

“He was naked? Gross!” Rye said, scowling. “Was he—”

“Oi, shut the fuck up, Ben,” Simmons glared at him. “Do you know what happened to him? Was he covered in blood?” he asked, looking back to me.

Good question. To be honest, I hadn't actually noticed; I was too busy being sick. I couldn't recall having seen any blood or anything like that on him, so he could well have been hit by a car for all I knew. The real question was what he was doing all the way out there.

I told the three inquisitive boys as much as I knew, and they mulled the information over.

“You don't know anything else?” Simmons demanded, sounding a little annoyed that he wasn't about to become privy to exclusive information ahead of time.

“No,” I said.

“Well, you're no fucking use, are you?” The three turned back to discussing things between themselves.

“Joe, you saw it?” Sam, sitting next to me, asked.

I nodded. As per Mr Rod’s instruction, I hadn’t told anyone of what I had seen and was only now admitting it, having been outed by the Clique. I had denied all knowledge of it to those who shared my dormitory.

“What happened?” Sam asked.

I didn’t have time to answer, as the headmaster was coming in through the tall doors at the rear of the hall. We all fell silent and rose from our seats, as was expected of us whenever the headmaster entered a room. He said nothing as he proceeded down the central aisle and up to the podium at the front.

St Christopher’s, as with so many other boarding and prep schools of its ilk in the South East of England, had been founded on the grounds of a monastery. In the past, the school had been staffed almost exclusively by monks. These days, the monastery’s influence had waned somewhat, and the teaching staff now came from a variety of different backgrounds.

There were still a number of hangovers from the past, however, with many of the more senior positions being held by monks or chaplains; the position of the headmaster always held by a member of the clergy, in this case a monk named Father Benedict. It had often surprised me that for all the authority and power the man held, he was very placid and easy to talk to. It was rumoured, however, that though he was a patient man, he had been the type to happily throw a school-wide blanket punishment, should he feel the need to. These usually only happened under extreme circumstances and usually involved no talking at meal times, in our houses or in the classroom block, an early lights out, and no privileges (meaning that the tuck shop, arcade machines, TVs and all else were off limits). Thankfully, this had not yet happened during my six years of attendance.

“Please be seated,” Father Benedict said. “I’ll keep this brief.”

And so he did. Following on from the discovery of the body on the Red Road, the school was to be closed for at least the next seven days, while the police conducted their investigation. The body was that of a first-year junior school boy named Scott Parker, who had actually disappeared the previous night.

I could tell that Father Benedict was loath to suggest that the boy had been snatched from his dorm and murdered, but it was obvious that that was what everyone was thinking. Having seen the body for myself, it was clear to me that that had been his fate. No blood, though. Perhaps he had been strangled.

Ever since my sighting, the school had been busying itself in calling all of our parents, to have us taken home as soon as possible. We were all, following this assembly, to go back to our dormitories and wait for our families to come and get us. The school should be completely vacated by the following evening, at the latest. For those boys that couldn’t easily get home because they either lived abroad or their parents were not immediately available, another of the boys’ families would be requested to look after them.

“Joe,” Sam whispered in my ear almost immediately, “can I stay with you?”

“Should be able to, so long as I can persuade my parents. They’re away on a business trip at the moment.”

“Oh. When are they back?”

“Tonight,” I said. “I expect they’ll come here straight from Gatwick. I’ll talk to Mr Somers and get him to explain things. He’s got the number of their offices in Geneva.”

“Cool, thanks,” Sam nodded.

We returned our attention to the headmaster who continued talking for a while, letting us know that letters would be posted out in the next couple of days giving our parents more information on what was going to happen.

I saw the matron of the junior school move from her place and pick one of the younger boys up out of his seat as the headmaster started to wrap things up. I thought that I had heard him sniffing earlier and saw as the two walked from the assembly hall that he was sobbing quite profusely.

Was he related to the victim? I wondered. Or was what had happened just very upsetting for him? If this was his first time away from home, then I could well understand. Many first-year junior boys cried a lot with homesickness. For them, today would have been even more traumatising. It wouldn’t have surprised me if, after today, some didn’t come back.

Father Benedict concluded the assembly a few minutes later, asking anyone who might have problems leaving the school that night to talk to their housemaster. I wondered how this might affect me if for some reason my parents were delayed or chose to stay out of a country for longer than originally planned.

I didn’t relish the thought of being left nearly alone in the school after everyone else had gone. And I couldn’t shake the feeling that tonight I would be treated to a long overdue visit from the goblins.

Chapter Two

In recent years, I had started to suffer the most horrific nightmares, in which I was tormented by a recurring image of being chased down a dark corridor by hoards of stunted, spear-wielding goblins. Or, at least, 'goblins' was what I called them. To tell the truth, I wasn't really sure what they were. Whenever I encountered them in my dreams, they always appeared the same – glowing white faces, sharp, pointy, yellow teeth, sticky-out ears, and murderous black, pupilless eyes. They would laugh and lash their tongues when they saw me, howling in delight ...

... and, damn, could these things run.

I wasn't sure what caused the nightmares. Maybe it was a hormone imbalance, puberty, stress, or something else. All I could be sure of was that the dreams always started out the same way. I would find myself standing in a narrow, white corridor, like those of Enfield and Cookson House. The lights would be on, but far dimmer than they should be, and I would be stood about halfway along, with several doors to my left-hand side. Where the doors led depended on what the nightmare had in store for me that night. Most often, like the windows on the right, the doors would be locked. I had tried many times to open those windows, sometimes unable to even reach them, so high up they would be placed.

It would be silent, save for the soft splatting sound of the goblins' feet as they approached from around the bend in the corridor ahead of me. The slapping would be followed by elongated shadows of hands and arms, clutching spears and other terrible implements. Heads, with hooked noses and long ears, came next until the first of the creatures rounded the corner. They would charge instantly towards me with bloodcurdling screams, wasting no time at all. It was as if they could smell me from miles away.

At that moment, I would always attempt to do one of two things – either try and find a place to hide, or run. Hiding never worked. Either the doors to the left would remain shut tight, and the goblins would immediately dive on me, biting, scratching, stabbing, eviscerating ... or the doors would open, only to offer no sanctuary.

The interior of the room the door opened into was inconsistent between dreams. Sometimes it was a dormitory, vacant, save for bare mattresses set upon metal beds, bedside lockers beside each. At other times the door led into one of the school's classrooms. On one occasion it was a poky little library. Most of the time, I would run into a room already populated by the sharp-toothed stumpy creatures, who would be waiting for me within.

I would try to barricade the room whenever I could and hide under the beds, or even get inside the bedside lockers themselves. It made no difference; the goblins would always get in eventually. The door would burst open, dozens of the pale-white creatures pouring in and starting to stab me with their little spears and knives. I would crawl into the corner, begging them for mercy and pleading with them to stop, but they never did.

Whenever I chose to run from them, it was always atypical of a dream. Either I would never be

able to run fast enough, my legs moving as if through treacle, or I would fly like the wind. When I was able to run properly, I would thunder the opposite way down the corridor to the door at the other end, smashing it open and rushing out into the clear light of day. I would always emerge somewhere on the school grounds, though the exact location varied every time. The grounds were always deserted and deathly quiet, as if I were the last person left alive in the world. I would sprint past the houses, the classrooms, the main school, sometimes even the church, and down towards the sports fields. The goblins would always be just behind me, never willing to give up. Even when I was able to outstrip them, they would magically appear somewhere in front of me, teeth gnashing and steel flashing.

And no matter what I did, the dream would always end the same way – with my death.

The first time I experienced the nightmare, I woke to find myself standing in the darkness of one of the lavatories of the main school. One of the other boys was standing by the door, holding it open and speaking very calmly.

“Joe?” he said.

“Hmm?” I replied.

“You’ve had a bad dream.”

“Huh?”

Despite everything, he didn’t turn on the lights; perhaps he was concerned about how I might react. I was standing directly in front of the long trough of the urinal. Thankfully, it didn’t appear as though I had actually wet myself.

“Come on,” the boy said. “It’s okay. Come with me and go back to bed.”

He stretched out a hand towards me, and I went with him, leaving the lavatory and returning to my bed. That was all I remembered about the incident. The next day, however, my bed was surrounded by every other boy in the dormitory, no less than fourteen faces staring into mine, all firing questions at me and wanting to know if I was okay.

“Do you remember what happened last night?”

“What were you shouting about?”

“Did you shit yourself?”

“How do you feel?”

“You *did* shit yourself, didn’t you?”

Apparently, I had been screaming the place down, wailing about how Freddy Krueger was going to get me, or something like that. Though I had never seen any of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, I’m not sure whether I would have really preferred Kruger to the goblins in all honesty. A number of the other boys had seen the films and told me about the vengeful spirit’s murderous transcendence of the dream world and the real one. At least *my* tormentors were confined to my sleeping hours.

Though Butcher House provided a bedroom for the housemaster or duty master, neither had heard me, as none had been sleeping in the house that night. In the main, the duty of ensuring a

tightly run ship fell to the head of house, the house prefects, and my own dormitory prefect (a boy by the name of Julian Patrick, who left St Christopher's after completing his GCSEs). It was the first time he had been in charge of a dormitory, as well as my own first month in the senior school itself. Wonderful introductions, both of them.

I felt like death that morning and was advised by Patrick to stay in bed until the school nurse became available. I did so, and after all the other boys had showered, dressed and made their way down to the refectory for breakfast, I slouched on down to the clinic, still in my PJs, dressing gown and slippers.

With my head spinning and my bowels threatening to fill my pyjama bottoms with gallons of diarrhoea, I was admitted to the infirmary immediately, where I stayed for seven days while I sweated out a terrible fever. Only a handful of the boys came to see me, mostly to bring me work I had missed, as well as letters from home and penpals. Even so, they would stay as long as they could to keep me company. They became my best friends from then on – Samuel Gilmore, David Nurse, Robert Walker, and Barry Green. It was Sam that had come to walk me from the lavatories back to my bed the night of my sleepwalking episode.

The doctor came by twice during my weeklong stay in the infirmary and discharged me on his second visit. At the time, I thought the goblins were simply connected to the fever. Sadly, they reappeared only a few weeks later. Quite what they stood for I had no idea; maybe at some point in the future I would find out.

Chapter Three

The parents began to arrive at the school a little over an hour after the assembly had finished. They came as a trickle to begin with, some of the more local families putting in an appearance with such speed as to make me think they did nothing except wait by the phone all day, in case their little darlings were to fall down and graze their knee and be in need of some TLC from Mummy.

By around six that evening, the school grounds had been transformed into a scene that lent itself more to the last day of term than a normal weekday. The roads outside the houses and the main school were populated by all manner of four-by-four vehicles; it looked like many of the parents had been practical and just jumped into the family car, so as to arrive as promptly as possible.

Others had to be different.

I had no idea whether they had been told the true nature of events (I very much doubted it), but even if they had, it clearly would have done nothing to dissuade some from turning up at the school in sports cars. Some families at St Christopher's would leap at the chance to rub their wealth in the faces of others, seeming to trade their cars in regularly for a more up-to-date model in a bid to one-up one another.

I actually hoped that none of the parents knew what had happened here today, and that it had simply been reported as 'an incident'. If not, I couldn't believe that someone could be as callous as to still feel the need to show off at such a time as this.

"Oh look, there's Timpson's mum," Baz said, as we stood together outside the entrance to Butcher House. "Never wastes an opportunity to show off."

We watched as the Ferrari drew gracefully to a halt outside, looking as though it had just received a thorough wash before leaving home; I couldn't see a spot of dirt or grime anywhere on its perfect red paintwork.

"I swear that's a different car to the one she arrived in at the start of term," Baz muttered.

Baz (or Barry, to give him his proper name) was one of the few boys in the school I really saw eye to eye with. He had only been at the school for two years, much shorter than my own tenure of six, but I already got the impression that he didn't intend on staying much longer. He had his head screwed on right, though he was picked on by many of the other boys for no reason other than his cockney accent. The Clique loved to rip into him for that, repeating everything he said with emphasis on the missing letters in his pronunciation.

Mrs Timpson stepped out of the car, power dressed in a figure-hugging suit that I was fairly certain had never seen the inside of an office, even on a visit to see her husband. From what I understood, work was a four-letter word to the woman. She was a lady of leisure, one that had found herself a rich, older man; a successful but lonely man, of course, to live an easy life. Now out of the car, she closed the door behind her and then remained not three feet from the vehicle, clutching an expensive-looking purse as she waited for her son to turn up.

"Why is she wearing sunglasses?" I asked incredulously. "It's cloudy."

“Stuck up bitch,” Baz said.

The entrance to Butcher House was a good place for people watching. Standing just outside the entrance with the main door open, we could see most of what was going on in the parking area, as well as into the downstairs hall and who was coming down the flight of stairs.

We watched as other boys came down from the dormitories and rooms above, some giving us a nod and a wave (the younger ones), others sticking a finger up (the sixth formers). They all carried an overnight bag filled with personal possessions that they didn’t want to leave on the school grounds in their absence. Ordinarily, when leaving at the end of term, we would have our suitcases fetched and fill those with all our clothes, picking up duvets, pillows, and all kind of other miscellaneous bits and pieces along the way. The nature of the afternoon and the urgency to clear the school completely within the next twenty-four hours meant there was no time for any such thing.

“Look at her, standing around so everyone can see that it’s her bloody car,” Baz continued, glaring at the woman. “I’d not be surprised if she starts draping herself across the bonnet in a minute.”

“She used to be an actress, didn’t she?” I asked.

“*Failed* actress,” Baz smirked.

“When are your parents getting here?”

“Not until seven. My dad’s coming straight after work, and my mum’s in hospital.”

“Really? Is she okay?”

“It’s just an x-ray,” Baz said dismissively. “She’s just getting a fracture looked at.”

“Are you going to stay for dinner, then? They’re doing it half an hour early tonight.”

“Nah. I’ll probably go to McDonald’s on the way back,” he said with a grin I knew was meant to annoy me.

Lucky git. “Wish they’d take us to McDonald’s,” I said.

After vomiting up my lunch on the Road earlier, and unable to get anything else down at teatime as I was still recovering from the shock, I was starving. I wondered if the school were going to open the tuck shop at all, so I could at least grab a packet of crisps or a bar of chocolate, in case I didn’t fancy the evening meal.

A Lion Bar would really hit the spot right about now, I thought. “They could at least have ordered pizza for the ones that are staying tonight,” I said.

“You’re definitely staying?”

“My mum and dad aren’t back until tomorrow morning now, so yeah.”

“What happened to Sam?”

“He’s gone to Dave’s house, in London.”

“Doesn’t Rob live in Baconsdale? You should have gone home with him.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t find out my mum and dad weren’t coming back until just a while ago, and Rob had already left.”

“Oh, that was unlucky. How many others are here?”

“No idea,” I said. “I think my entire dorm is leaving tonight. All first years, so not unexpected.”

Mrs Timpson turned her head, looking about her surroundings, seemingly unimpressed by the other parents’ chosen methods of transport. She gave the passing cars little more than a cursory glance before she looked back to where Baz and I were leaning up against the stone doorway. Presently, a somewhat diminutive second-year boy came struggling down the stairs with an oversized and overstuffed bag. He paid us no attention whatsoever as he walked past, waddling his way through the front doors and towards the red sports car.

“Funny how little Eddy went from the B stream up to the A stream at the start of the year,” Baz said.

“Yeah, I noticed that,” I said. “It came right after the school received that generous, anonymous donation towards the music department, too. What’s the bet he’ll become head of house?” I added as Mrs Timpson strutted around the front of the car, opened the boot and helped her son lift the bag in.

“Not high at this point,” Baz said. “But a few new textbooks and a computer for the library would probably see to that.”

“A prefect at the very least,” I said as the boy skipped gleefully around to the passenger side of the car and hopped in.

“Spoilt bastard,” Baz muttered as the car sped off.

“Think he left the laptop? He has some cool stuff on there.”

“Doubt it,” Baz snorted, pushing off the wall, now clearly bored of people watching. “I think he threw that one away, anyway. He’s got a new one that’s in colour. Not even my dad has one of those at work.”

“*Colour?*” I said. “He’s got a *colour* laptop?” It shouldn’t have surprised me to be honest.

“Yep. I actually think it’s been nicked about a million times already. He’s the only one in the school with one, apart from AJ Long, and he just gets all that stuff dirt cheap from Hong Kong when he goes home, anyway.”

“No one’s going to be stupid enough to go nicking anything off him,” I said. “Size of him, he could probably kill you with a head butt.”

“He still does judo, too. What do you want to do now?” Baz asked, as we wandered back into Butcher House. “Want to play the game?” He nodded to the switched-off arcade machine that sat in the corner.

“Nah, it’s crap,” I said. “They’re all crap this term. Let’s go to your dorm and listen to some music, until your dad gets here.”

*

Baz’s father arrived a little after seven, just as we were wandering down to the refectory to get

dinner. We had steadily made our way through Baz's CD collection, as well as raiding some of the other boys' while we waited for his dad to turn up. But as dinnertime approached, it appeared that the man was going to be late.

Still looking forward to his McDonald's, Baz had decided to go down to the refectory and grab a little snack, as I ate whatever was being served up. We decided to walk the long way, rather than go straight into the main school through the west wing where Butcher was situated. The trip took us out the side entrance, walking the road down to the huge front doors of the main building as we effectively circumnavigated it. We sighted Baz's father's car about halfway around, and so we doubled back to Butcher, Baz striding a great deal faster than me.

Mr Green stepped out of the car, wearing what I guessed was his work suit; he must have driven straight from the office. As expected, Baz's mother wasn't with him. Baz headed up to his dormitory to grab his bag, leaving me to engage in small talk with his father.

"Evening, Joe," Mr Green said, shaking my hand. "I'd have thought you'd be gone by now." Unlike Baz, the man's accent wasn't in the slightest bit cockney.

"No, not yet," I said. "My parents aren't going to be here till sometime tomorrow morning."

"Oh dear," he said with genuine concern. "Are you staying at the school overnight?"

"I am, yes."

"Are you going to be okay here all by yourself?"

"There are some other boys staying here tonight, too," I explained. "So I'll be okay."

"Hmm," was all he answered. The school might not have told the parents all the details, but it seemed as though some had figured out the story for themselves.

I had only met Mr Green once, and I didn't know a great deal about him. I had never really paid that much attention to what the other boys' parents did for a living, most of them simply working in an office somewhere. Baz's dad worked somewhere in London, in the City, but that was about as much as I knew.

"It's awful what has happened here," the man said, scratching at the stubble on his face and looking around the grounds.

"What have they told you?" I wanted to know.

"That the body of a boy who disappeared last night was found on a road not far from the school grounds. No details other than that. Do they know who it was?"

"I can't remember his name, but it was one of the younger boys from the junior school," I said. "He wasn't actually wearing any clothes when I saw him."

"Oh!" the man's eyes widened in surprise. "You saw him?"

I only nodded.

"Where they found him?"

"Uh huh."

"Oh, that must have been a terrible thing to see."

"It was. I threw up everywhere when I saw him," I admitted. "I didn't think I'd be able to eat for

the rest of the day, but I'm hungry now."

I wasn't sure why I told him that; he probably didn't need or want to know. Perhaps I wasn't actually as all right as I thought. Perhaps the shock would hit me a lot later on in the coming weeks.

Baz returned then, carrying his bag with him. His father opened one of the rear passenger doors, and Baz threw the bag in the back rather unceremoniously. He looked keen to escape the school as quickly as possible. I envied him there.

"See you later, Joe," he said, getting into the front like a bolt of lightning and pulling on his seatbelt.

Mr Green seemed to take note of his eagerness, but paused for a moment, thumbing his car keys. "Barry, Joe tells me he has to stay at the school tonight."

Uh oh. I knew what was coming.

"Would you prefer to come home with us tonight instead, Joe? Your parents could pick you up from our place in the morning," Mr Green went on to offer.

I caught Baz's eye for a brief instant, able to recognise the signs of trepidation within. The vast majority of the pupils at St Christopher's saw their home as a sanctuary away from the school, and the idea of another boy violating that sanctuary was never high on anyone's list. Unless they were very nearly blood brothers, there was always a certain degree of reluctance to take anyone home with you. There was a sense of pride in that no one ever wanted someone else to see how they really lived, in case their house was small and poky, or that outside of brief encounters such as these, their family were an embarrassment to them. Being as close as we were, Sam had stayed with me on a number of Exit Weekends, not having any family in England. My parents reluctantly permitted this; Sam was always grateful for the invitations, and he was polite and easygoing whenever he stayed. Though Baz and I were close and spent a lot of time together, there was an unwritten rule that this didn't permit home visits.

Mr Green added, "Your parents live in Richmond, don't they?"

Saved. "No," I said, shaking my head. "Baconsdale, near Guildford, so quite a bit further." I caught Baz's eye again. He seemed to have relaxed.

"Not all that far," Mr Green said.

"I'll be okay here," I reassured him (and Baz). "It's just for one night, after all. I might have some duties to do, too. I'm a dorm prefect this term, so Mr Somers might want me to look after some of the younger boys who are staying."

Mr Green nodded. "Well, if you're sure?"

"I'll be okay," I repeated. "I'll call you next week," I added to Baz.

"Better hurry to dinner," Baz's father said. "Otherwise there might not be anything left worth having."

"There usually isn't, anyway," I chuckled, shaking Mr Green's hand before the man got back into the car.

I started off once more for the refectory, catching snatches of words of Baz and his father's

conversation as I went.

“McDonald’s.”

“Sweets. Proper dinner.”

“Late. Long drive. Quarter Pounder. Milkshake. Please.”

“Give them to Joe, then.”

“Joe,” Baz called after me. “Do you want these, in case dinner is shit?”

“Barry!” his father scolded.

“Oops! Sorry, Dad.”

I returned to the car, seeing Baz holding up a white plastic bag filled with an assorted of sweets – chocolate and other treats. They looked like they’d been bought from a petrol station. I spied a Lion Bar. I was sold. “Yeah, okay,” I said.

Baz passed the bag over, but I hesitated to take all of it; it seemed somehow rude. I rummaged around inside, extracting a few snacks for later, before handing back what remained.

“No, don’t worry,” Mr Green waved it away. “Share it with the other boys that are staying if you don’t want to eat all of it.”

“Ah, good point. Thank you,” I said. I thought for a moment about taking the bag back to my dorm and locking it away in my tuck box for safekeeping, rather than taking it to the refectory with me, on show for everyone to see. It occurred to me, however, that I was hardly likely to get mugged for it on a night like this.

Barry’s father finally started the engine. “See you later, Joe,” he said, as the car began pulling away. “I hope all of this doesn’t give you nightmares.”

I chuckled. Yes, so did I.

*

Dinner that night wasn’t actually as bad as I had at first feared. The cooks had produced a more than acceptable chilli con carne, not nearly as watery or tasteless as it usually was, and with a fair amount of spice for a change. The kidney beans, too, had been cooked properly and weren’t crunchy. Starving as I was, I polished off my first plateful rather quickly, returning to the front for seconds. There was more than enough to go around, what with only a few pupils remaining at the school. There were almost as many teachers in the dining room as there were boys.

I counted about thirty boys staying at St Christopher’s for the night, a lot more than I had originally expected there to be. Ordinarily, we would eat our meals at tables separated out by our respective years, but tonight the teachers had us sitting together, regardless of age.

No one spoke very much, and I noticed that some of the first years were taking great pains not to make eye contact with the sixth formers, staring at their plates most of the time. When you’re thirteen, small as you are and still growing, it was understandable not to want to cross a testosterone-fuelled eighteen-year-old whose only outlets tended to be punching small boys on the

arm, smacking heads on rugby pitches, and attempting to talk to girls at the sporadic disco nights that occurred during term time.

A couple of years before, when I myself had been in the first year, I had been rather like those at the table and avoided the sixth formers as much as possible. It worked in my favour for the most part, and while some of the other boys in my year had been known to have been beaten (and in some rare cases suffering broken limbs in the process), the sixth formers had for some reason never done anything more than just shout at me a lot. That wasn't what had bothered me, though, as I could deal with the verbal abuse. What bothered me were seven simple words – *I'm putting you on the Murga List*.

Thankfully, I was too old to be given serious punishments by the sixth formers now. They could only levy such penalties to the first and second years. I wasn't immune, however. The teachers could still put third-year boys on the *List*, though it was rare and reserved only for the most serious of offences. By your third year, you should have learned your lesson.

I had heard that some of the teachers were looking forward to seeing the backs of a number of the sixth formers when they finally completed their A-Levels at the end of the year and left for good. Apparently, they found some of the eighteen-year-olds a little intimidating. I never really got that.

Edward Darwin, of Tudor House's upper sixth, looked up at me from where he had been shovelling some tinned peaches into his mouth, slopping the juice half onto the table in the process. He was a scruffy-looking guy, his hair long and wild and in need of a cut. He didn't look as though he had had a shave in well over a week, either.

"You staying here tonight, too?" Darwin asked me. "Or are you just going home late?"

I smiled to myself. It was funny how people like him became all talkative and polite when they were missing their friends. Staying here," I said. "My parents are out of the country and won't be getting back until tomorrow morning. They're going to pick me up when they land."

He grunted his response and dug into his peaches once more.

"You?" I asked.

"Tomorrow morning. Train back to Edinburgh."

"You couldn't have gone earlier?" I genuinely wanted to know.

"They only go twice a day from Hallmouth."

That being as much contact with the lower years as he was apparently willing to subject himself to, and having now finished his peaches, Darwin dropped his fork into the bowl, picked up his tray and started away from the table. He paused by Mr Sutherland, maths tutor and housemaster of Enfield House, sitting on an adjacent table.

"How long will the school be shut, sir?" Darwin asked the man.

"Seven days, I believe the headmaster said, Edward," Mr Sutherland said. "I think it might be a little longer than that, though. You'll have to call up every few days to check and see. I'd estimate maybe a couple of weeks, myself."

“Because this could affect my studies and my Oxbridge application.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. They’re sure to take this into consideration.”

Darwin nodded and trudged off without another word, stashing his tray on the empty rack and exiting the refectory.

“Edward,” Mr Sutherland called after him, “where are you going?”

“To my room,” Darwin grunted back.

It was pretty obvious that he wasn’t. Most likely, he was heading out for a post-dinner cigarette. I found it funny how even the threat of a murderer on the prowl wasn’t enough to persuade the school’s heavy smokers to refrain from their habit for even one night. I half-expected Mr Sutherland to go after him, letting Darwin know that he knew he was going for a smoke, and to not leave the school building. He said nothing, however. He was probably too scared.

But two weeks? No school for two weeks? It sounded great, but I knew it would ultimately mean pushing the end of term back, and that I wouldn’t be getting out of here until it was very nearly Christmas. They had done the very same during the hurricane of 1987. Oh well, I would just enjoy the time off and worry about everything else later.

“Joe?”

I looked over to see Mr Sutherland seeking my attention. “Sir?” I asked.

“When you’re finished, could you please walk these boys back up to Butcher?”

I glanced across the group, sure that some of them weren’t from Butcher.

“We’re all sleeping in Butcher tonight, as it’s within the main building and easiest to secure,” Mr Sutherland finished.

I nodded, finished my food and made ready to walk the boys to the west wing of the main building.

*

That night, at around nine p.m., we sat in Butcher’s common room and, led by Mr Somers, my housemaster, we said prayers for the dead boy, his family, the other students, others around the world who might be suffering a similar loss, and all those people still fighting in the Gulf. St Christopher’s was a Catholic school, meaning weekday prayers and Sunday Mass (as well as the occasional weekday attendance) were a regular part of school life.

I went back to my dormitory after that. The place was empty, all the other boys having left. I was a dormitory prefect this term, my second time as one. The dormitory I was in charge of was actually the same as I had been in myself, during my first year in Butcher. There had been some architectural changes since then, and the dorm had been split in two. I was looking after seven boys instead of fourteen, all first years. Some had come through from the junior school, but about half were new to St Christopher’s that term. I recognised none of them from my own time in the junior school.

Next term, I would be shifted into a different dormitory, either to be another prefect (likely to second years this time), or to the third-year dorm. I hoped to be spending the summer term in the third-year dorm, so I would be able to concentrate on my studies without having to deal with excitable, irritating younger boys (and I knew they were, as I'd been one twice before, myself).

A couple of the larger dorms in the school had two prefects. I was the sole prefect in here, the dorm containing only eight beds, including mine – two bunk beds and four singles. The beds were still all made, slippers, dressing gowns and a handful of other items such as books and alarm clocks remaining where they had been left that same morning. They would likely remain there until St Christopher's returned to normal.

The only person here, I put the radio on and listened to the DJ talking with a guest about something or other for a little while. I wondered as the news came around if they were going to mention the incident at St Christopher's and that the school had been closed, but they never did. It was a long shot given that the incident had only occurred that afternoon, and that the station I was listening to, Capital FM, was London-based. The reception could sometimes be weak, but on most days it was fairly clear. I'm not sure why I listened to that station in particular; maybe it was because most others at the school did.

I looked at a piece of work on my desk that I'd been doing before lunchtime – a large rectangular diagram of a plant cell. They were a little more complicated than animal cells, having a few extra parts to memorise and label. I always tended to get chlorophyll and chloroplasts mixed up, too. The rest I could remember.

With little else to do, I considered quickly redrawing it, just to reinforce it in my mind. I gave up when I was unable to locate any pencils. Clearly one of the more boisterous of the first years I looked after in the dormitory had helped themselves to them, to do a crossword or something. I would have to make a better effort to secure them in future. I thought about hunting through the boys' bedside lockers, to see if I could locate them, before I decided to just buy some more during the break.

I switched off the radio as *Take That* came on, deciding that with the time approaching ten I should get into bed. I switched on my lamp and turned off the main lights, put on my pyjamas and grabbed my Wilbur Smith book. I wasn't in the mood to read it though, and after about a page and a half, I set the book aside. I felt more in the mood for something light. I'd seen a copy of a film magazine, *Empire* or something else, floating around the dormitory the previous day that I felt was more apt. I got out of bed and had begun to hunt for it when there was a brief knock at the dormitory door. It opened before I could say anything, and I was relieved to see Mr Somers, my housemaster, in the doorway.

"Hello, Joe," he said, looking around at the empty beds. "Are you in here all by yourself?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Okay, well could you grab your duvet and pillow and come down the hall, to 2E? I thought it would be best if we all stayed in the same dormitories tonight, and most of the other boys are first

and second years, so I need you to look after them.”

“What about the sixth formers?” I asked.

“They’re okay up in their rooms,” Mr Somers said, before indicating for me to come along.

I got out of bed, locating my slippers and putting them on. I noticed as I did so how the bottoms seemed to be crusted in mud. *How did that get there?* I wondered. I hauled my duvet and pillow off my bed and carried them down the echoing hall of the silent first floor to 2E, the only other dormitory that had its lights on. Mr Somers followed me in, explaining to the boys already there that I would be sleeping in the dorm with them that night. Should they need anything, they were to tell me. If it was important, I should then tell him.

I glanced around the dorm, recognising only one of the faces there – Neil Booth, a second-year Butcher boy who was almost as wide as he was tall. The other boys were from the other houses. I had seen them around the school in passing, though I couldn’t name any of them. Unknown to them, the younger ones looked at me with some trepidation, in case I should be one of those older boys with a quick temper; maybe even one of the more violent ones from Tudor House. I wondered for how many of them this was the first time they had lived away from home. Quite an experience this was turning out to be for them.

“I’ll be sleeping in my room tonight, Joe,” Mr Somers said. “Mr Sutherland is sleeping in 1C with some of the boys there, and the other boys are in 2D. Father Matthew has also volunteered to sit up all night and keep watch.”

All night? I knew that from time to time some of the resident monks stayed up late, treading the corridors of the main school until a little after midnight, but I’d never known them to be up all night long. I imagined Father Matthew would be patrolling the corridors with a lantern, much like the teachers did whenever we had a power cut. I had seen a significant number of those oil lamps during the Great Storm of 1987.

“If any of you need to use the toilet in the middle of the night, please could you let Joe know, and he’ll walk you there,” Mr Somers said. “Even you, Neil,” he added to the rotund boy.

“Yes, sir,” came a little chorus from the boys.

A little extreme, I thought, as I bundled up the current dorm prefect’s duvet and pillow and set them on top of the linen pile in the corner. I didn’t have time to remove the bed sheet itself; I just had to hope that it was clean.

“I’m going to lock the front and rear doors,” Mr Somers said. “I’ll unlock them tomorrow morning, and then we’ll all go down to breakfast together. Okay, it’s past ten, so lights out.” He clicked off the light switch and closed the door.

The dorm remained as silent as it had been when I entered. I guessed the other boys just wanted to go to sleep and get the night over with. Good idea. I decided to join them.

“Prefect ...”

The pitch of the voice told me that it was one of the first years.

“Hmm?” I murmured. I was a light sleeper, easily woken. Half-expecting to be called upon in the middle of the night, I had clearly been sleeping far shallower than most other times. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I need to go to the toilet,” the boy replied.

“Okay, so go,” I said.

“We were told not to go on our own,” he apologised.

Damn, that was true. “Do you really need me to go with you?” I asked. I kept my voice even so as not to come across as irritated.

“I don’t know where they are. I’m from Enfield.”

“Ah.”

“Do you mind?”

“No. Let’s go.” I started to get out of bed, seeing the silhouetted form of the other boy as he pushed aside his covers. “Who else is awake?” I asked generally of the dorm in a hushed voice.

“Me,” came another voice.

“Who’s that?” I said.

“Neil.”

“Do you need to go to the toilet, too?”

“No. I just can’t sleep.”

“Okay. Anyone else awake?”

No answer.

“Will you be all right for a bit?” I asked Neil.

“Sure,” he said.

“Cool. I’ll be back in a bit.”

I left the dorm with the first year, and we began making our way towards the toilets. The corridor was near pitch black, save for a little light filtering in from irregularly sized and spaced windows along the way. They didn’t help much, though; the sky must have been quite cloudy. Out here, in the middle of the countryside, it could be difficult to see at night. I fumbled around for the light switch.

“Shit,” I said.

“What’s wrong?” my short companion asked.

“Nothing, I just can’t see a bloody thing.”

I tried to remember where the light switches were at this end of the corridor. I couldn’t remember if they were individual ones by the corners or if it was actually a bank of switches at either end. I slid my hand along the wall, hoping to feel a bump where the panel was. Nothing. We inched along, coming around the corner, where I once more looked for a switch.

“Don’t happen to have a torch back in there, do you?” I asked.

“No, sorry.”

“Okay, never mind.”

I walked slowly. Even though I knew the corridor would be empty, I couldn't shake the ridiculous notion that a load of pillars and pipes could have magically appeared in the darkness, waiting for me to walk into. What was even more ludicrous was the misplaced belief that the floor had become a minefield of garden rakes, all ready for me to step on and make them spring up and thwack me in the face. I guess it could have been worse – it could have been an army of pale-white goblins lurking in the gloom, waiting to drag me away and tear me to pieces.

“Have you been here long?” the first year asked me. I could hear a small quiver in his voice. Perhaps he, too, was picturing something awful waiting in the dark for us; though he was probably picturing a murderer who had snuck in through a window, the same who had killed the boy on the Road.

“Over six years,” I told him. “Did you come from the junior house?”

“No. I went to a local school in Kent, before.”

“Okay.”

“Six years. That's a long time.”

I know. Too long, I thought.

“I never wanted to come here,” he went on, as though finding comfort in the sound of his own voice, “but my parents made me. Are you going to do your A-Levels here?”

“No,” I said. “I'm planning on going after I finish my GCSEs.”

“Are you looking forward to leaving?”

“Can't wait.”

We reached the toilet without encountering any rake traps on the way. I gratefully clicked on the light, and the first year went over to the urinal. I decided it would be best to go myself, to avoid having to walk that corridor again on my own.

“Where are you going to go after you leave?”

“I don't know,” I confessed. “I only just thought about it at the start of this term. To tell the truth, I've not even told my parents yet.”

We repeated our cautious walk back to 2E and got back into bed. I lay there for a while, thinking about things and turning thoughts over in my head. That first year was the first person I had ever told that I was planning on leaving St Christopher's after my exams. *I should probably tell my parents soon*, I thought. I made up my mind, rolled over and fell asleep.

*

My parents arrived early the next morning, just after nine. They didn't ask too many questions about what had happened as we drove down to Surrey, and only a little about how my schooling was going; they were far more focused on their own careers for that. I could tell already that

informing them of my desire to return home permanently would probably be met with a great deal of resistance. Perhaps it could wait until Christmas.

Chapter Four

My parents lived in the suburbs of Baconsdale, a small town in Surrey. It was a fairly quiet, quaint sort of place; nice to retreat to when you had had enough of work/school/life and needed to get away from it all. Or so those that I knew who lived and worked in London said.

Despite being a small town, there was a fair amount to do. The town centre was home to a high street with all the usual suspects – a Woolworths, WHSmith, Argos, Dixons, Virgin and a Waterstone's. There was also a McDonald's, a Pizza Hut, an Indian restaurant, and a Chinese restaurant. A Thai restaurant had also once existed, though it had closed earlier that year. I wasn't surprised, as it was hideously overpriced. A shame, I did enjoy a good green chicken curry. There was a corner shop with a post office, a pub and a Cullens close to my parents' house. We also had a cinema with two screens, that thankfully tended to get all the major releases.

"Did they give you much work to do?" my father asked as we pulled up to the house. He clicked a button on a device clipped to the sun visor, causing the automatic gates to open.

"No," I said. "There wasn't time."

"Oh, well that's no good." He sounded somewhat appalled. He clearly didn't want to think that the money he had spent on my education was going to waste. Or maybe he was bothered that, with nothing to be getting on with, I would be getting under his or my mother's feet all day long.

"They're just going to extend the term by a couple of weeks, or however long it is," I said.

"Ah, like they did when we had the hurricane." That seemed to please him a little more.

"Exactly," I said.

"Did Rob not offer to take you home with him?" my mother then asked. "He only lives on the other side of town. It's not a long way."

"He'd actually gone home when I found out you were staying the night in Geneva," I said. "His mum and dad were some of the first to arrive, apparently. I'll see him tomorrow I suppose."

"Hmph," my mother said. "They probably didn't offer on purpose. Jane and Andrew were always a little weird like that."

"Jealousy, as I keep telling you," my father added, undoing his seatbelt and exiting the vehicle.

"Where's Sam gone?" my mother asked me as she, too, began getting out.

"He's staying with Dave, in London. I was going to ask if he could stay with us, but you were still away."

Neither my mother or father said anything to that. I wasn't surprised. They were probably grateful they had missed the opportunity to host him.

I spent the rest of the day talking to them about what had happened and what I'd seen, but they still didn't appear all that interested. Though they found it tragic that a young boy had been murdered in his first term at St Christopher's, and his first time away from home, their focus was, as always, on work. My father soon retired to a room he maintained as a home office and went back to organising things for his return to work the next day. My mother dropped the same kind of hints

that she wished to return to dealing with everything that had happened during their business trip and so began to sort through leaflets, handouts, files, brochures and all manner of other things, transforming the living room into a sea of multicoloured paper.

I made myself scarce, retreating to my room. It sadly only took twenty minutes or so for me to discover just how little there was to do. I had no stereo to listen to – that was at school. And I had no Walkman for the few tapes that still lived on my shelves. I spotted the box for my Mega Drive, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to play anything. I couldn't see where the games were, either. The idea of being at home for two weeks with little to do was suddenly quite daunting. Had I become institutionalised? I wondered. The other major trouble was that, having been at St Christopher's for six years, I no longer had any real friends back home to spend time with. Trying to fit in with those I had known before attending boarding school was an incredibly awkward experience.

I unpacked, thinking that after lunch I would go for a walk into the town centre and have a look around the shops. I then heard the phone ring, stopping after only two rings as my father answered it in his study. Somehow, I knew it was for me.

“Joe,” he then called.

“Yes?”

“It's Rob for you.”

I was down the stairs and by the phone in the hallway only seconds after my father had finished speaking. I had known Rob for a number of years before going to boarding school, connecting loosely via the local parish that we had both attended. Apparently, after hearing about my acceptance to St Christopher's, Rob's parents had been keen to send him there, too; though he had skipped the junior school and only started there in time for his GCSEs. However, whereas my parents were doing so to get me out from under their feet so they could focus on work, Rob's parents only wanted the best education they could afford for him. I was certain my parents weren't too bothered about what I ultimately did with my life, as long as I embarked on a reasonable career. If they were expecting me to become a doctor, a surgeon, a lawyer, a dentist, or a vet, then I was going to disappoint them on that front. To be honest, I hadn't a clue what I wanted to do with my life. That was something else I would need to think about carefully this week.

“Hi, Rob,” I said.

“Hi, Joe,” Rob said. “What are you doing?”

“Not a lot. I only just got in.”

“You stayed last night?”

“Yeah. There were only about thirty of us left.”

“Oh, you should have said. You could have stayed here. Anyway, do you want to meet in town after lunch and do something?”

Clearly, he was bored already. An only child as well, he had likely found that there wasn't too much going on, either. His parents were probably at work today, too, leaving him with only the TV for company.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll meet you at about ... two?”

“Cool. See you later.”

*

To begin with, I was quite excited at the prospect of not having to be at school during term time. It meant I would be free to wander the town and go to the cinema without hordes of people getting in my way. Rob had other ideas, his first suggestion being that we head into the pub and try to get served. He was desperate to try a drink of beer.

“We look old enough,” he said.

“No, we don’t,” I pointed out.

“Yes, we do. Neither of us is short, either. Besides, what’s the worst they’ll say?” he asked.

“They’ll just ask for ID and then refuse to serve us.”

It was true enough, I suppose, but there was always the embarrassment of trying to do so and failing miserably. I absentmindedly brushed a finger along the bum-fluff moustache that was currently gracing my top lip and wondered how long it would be until I was buying my first razor and shaving every day. I somewhat reluctantly agreed with Rob, and we made our way to the Queen’s Head, a pub just off the high street.

“Out,” the barman said before we had barely even crossed the threshold. He was pouring a pint for a group of burly-looking men in work clothes, paint and caked-on-plaster-splattered overalls, propping up the bar.

“We’re eighteen,” Rob began to protest.

“No, you’re not,” the barman said, shaking his head.

“If we weren’t, we’d be at school.”

“Look, just get out,” the barman repeated, no longer making eye contact and instead concentrating on pouring the workmen their pints. The four men gave us some incredulous stares, as if angered that we should invade their domain. Defeated, Rob and I exchanged a glance and walked out.

We walked the high street, Rob stopping at the McDonald’s to grab a cheeseburger and some chips, saying that the toast that had constituted his lunch hadn’t been enough, and he was still hungry (he had apparently only gotten out of bed at eleven-thirty). We then slipped into Virgin and browsed the racks.

“Butters has got this,” Rob said, pointing out a weird-looking CD with black, white and red art, with four men’s faces on it. “He’s had it for ages.”

“*Red Blood*?” I asked, inspecting it. I tilted the case as I saw more words around the side. “*Red Blood Hot Sugar*?”

“*Red Hot Chili Peppers*,” Rob explained. “The album’s called ‘*Blood Sugar Sex Magik*’.”

“I’ve never heard of them.” The case I held was empty, and I looked at the release schedule next

to the shelf, which stated that the album would be available at the end of the month.

“How did Butters get it?” I asked, nodding to the release schedule.

“Same way he gets all the new stuff – off his uncle.”

“Ah,” I said, turning the CD case over and looking at the track listing. “Is it any good?” I asked sceptically.

“Brilliant,” Rob said.

“What kind of music is it?”

“Rock; so drums and guitars. This is their fourth or fifth album, so you’ve probably heard some of their music already, just never realised.”

“Okay. I might get it at some point,” I said, nodding. “Jesus, I’m not paying fifteen quid for it, though,” I added, looking at the price tag on the front.

“That’s because it’s on CD,” Rob said, putting the case back and picking up a smaller, rectangular case from the shelf below. “It’s a tenner on tape.”

“I’d get the tape version, I think,” I said.

We browsed a little longer before seeing all that we wanted and decided to move on. Rob stopped off at WHSmith along the way, buying a couple of car magazines. He had been a total petrol-head ever since I had known him, hanging up posters of cars whenever he could and decorating his work folders with cut-outs from magazines. He even had a Porsche key ring, despite not owning a car himself. I was actually certain that he had a Dodge key ring, too.

It was a fairly warm and bright day for late September, and we took a walk around the park, talking about the murder, schoolwork, and general gossip about some of the other boys at St Christopher’s.

“Who do you think could have done it?” Rob asked me, as we sat down on a bench.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I doubt it could have been one of the staff.”

“It could have been anyone, Joe. There are some real weirdoes at St Christopher’s, too. Take Quasimodo for example. He’s meant to have a dodgy past.”

“He lives in the monastery,” I said.

“Doesn’t mean he can’t walk out any time he likes. Being a groundskeeper, he probably has access to loads of different parts of the school. He always has that massive bunch of keys with him that opens ... everything.”

It was possible, I admitted, but I doubted it.

“You saw him, didn’t you? The murdered boy, I mean,” Rob asked. “What was his name?”

“Scott Parker.” I recalled the name the headmaster had used during the assembly the previous day. “He was all the way down the Red Road. That’s a long way. Whoever did it must have put them in a car, and I don’t think Quasimodo can drive.”

“So, if not Quasimodo, then who else?”

“Maybe he went for a walk in the middle of the night because he couldn’t sleep, and someone snatched him outside the school.”

“Eh?” Rob looked at me. “Who goes walking around the school at night?”

“I do sometimes,” I told him.

“Really? Why?”

“Because it helps me to get to sleep. Don’t ask why, but sometimes if I can’t sleep I just go for a walk around the school for a bit and then go back to bed.” I shrugged.

Rob looked a little bemused by my revelation but passed no comment. We turned our attention towards a group of five teenagers sitting on the grass ahead of us.

“She’s fit,” Rob said. “The one on the right.”

I couldn’t see the face of the girl he indicated. She mostly had her back to me, but she certainly looked nice from what I was able to see. She had on a pair of white jeans and a small T-shirt, showing off her slender figure. Long blonde hair flowed down her back and over her shoulders.

“Think they’re students?” I asked. “Sixth formers?”

Rob nodded. “Definitely. Probably lower sixth, come to the park for lunch. That year is supposed to be a complete doss.”

I studied the group some more. There were three girls and two boys there. Good odds, I figured, if I was one of the guys in the group. The two guys and one of the girls appeared to be drinking from cans of beer, while the other two looked like they had soft drinks. I could see sandwich wrappers and plastic bags from the local supermarket billowing slightly in the breeze. I imagined myself in the same situation, having finished classes for the day that morning, not having any until the afternoon of the next day, and just hanging out with my friends in the park and having a few beers. Or perhaps heading off somewhere in a car. We obviously weren’t allowed cars at St Christopher’s; bikes were the closest thing we had to independent transport. We could take driving lessons while we were there, but I could say in all honesty that I wouldn’t want any of the other boys to see me bunny-hopping my way along a road anywhere near the grounds.

“I can’t wait to move up to the sixth form,” Rob said. “We finally get our own rooms and don’t have to share with first or second years.”

I found his enthusiasm somewhat amusing, but I said nothing. When I left the school (and I was going to make sure that I *did* leave), I would get my own room, anyway. Okay, sure, it would be back home with my mother and father, but it would be mine nonetheless.

“Does that guy you told me about still stink out your dorm?” I asked Rob.

“I think it’s gotten worse,” he said. “I’m glad to get away from that. I might actually buy him some deodorant on the way home and spray it all over him when I go back. Hey, did you hear about what Mr Rod did to Mario Daily?” Rob then asked.

“No?” I said. From the way he had phrased the question, it almost sounded as if it was some sort of physical assault.

“He called him up at home when he messed up his A-Levels and had a go at him over it.”

“What?” I said, flabbergasted. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Mr Rod told Daily that he wasn’t going to get anything higher than a D in any of his

subjects. He told him to give up one of his A-Levels and just do two. Daily refused and told him he'd get all As and Bs, but he didn't. So Mr Rod called him up to gloat."

"Bastard," I said. "How did you find out?"

"Daily's younger brother told me."

"Bloody hell!" I said. "I hope that doesn't happen to us. I don't want Mr Somers calling me up if I make a mess of my GCSEs. That would be a nightmare."

"I doubt he'd do that," Rob said. "And to be honest, Mario Daily was a bit of a prick anyway, so he sort of deserved it."

He reclined back on the bench, raising his arms in the air, stretching. "But no, sixth form's going to be great," he went on. "We'll also get to go to dances, get access to the Common Room, and get the bar. We'll have to start taking preps, though, which could end up being a bit shit. What are you looking forward to most?"

The question caught me a little off-guard, and I had to fumble for something to say that I would enjoy. "The dances," I said after quickly running through all the options in my mind.

"Hopefully all the girls will be as fit as she is," Rob remarked, looking at the girl again.

I nodded but didn't respond, my eyes moving once more over the five picnickers. Even now, I could tell that the benefits of being a sixth former at St Christopher's paled in comparison to what I imagined the lives of the five before me were like. Most likely one of them would have a car, or at least be learning to drive; the guy and girl sitting next to each other drinking the beer might well be a couple. The five would be enjoying going to pubs and clubs, and going around one another's houses after school for everything from homework, hanging out, partying, and ... well, shagging while their parents were at work. With all of that in mind, I found it difficult to get excited about things like dances and the Sixth Form Common Room.

When I was twelve, having completed my Common Entrance and moved to the senior school, the Sixth Form Common Room was the stuff of legend. There were supposed to be luxury sofas, pinball machines, dartboards, pool and table tennis tables, and a bar in there. All were maintained to the highest standard, unlike the ones we had to contend with in the rest of the school that were falling apart and had most of the accessories missing. The Common Room was also said to contain a huge flat-screen TV, hooked up to every Sky channel on offer, including the adult ones (I later found out that this was nonsense and just something that the sixth formers liked to tell the first years). The bar itself was said to be incredible, and I imagined that it looked something like a cut-out from a country pub, fireplace and all.

My illusions of all this were shattered the following year when I was collared into helping some workmen carry a new sofa into the place. Contrary to the images in my head, the Common Room was more like a poorly converted barn, dank and dark, with small, old windows through which not much natural light was able to enter. The carpet was horribly stained and in urgent need of being replaced, while the walls themselves were chipped and cracked, paint peeling off and gathering in small flakes on the floor, which no one had bothered to clean up in months. I never saw the bar, as it

was shuttered when I struggled inside the Common Room with the huge three-seater sofa. However, I was told that it wasn't anything like the country pub cut-out I was expecting it to be. It was more like a regular tuck shop that also stocked cans of beer. Disappointment all round.

I only got to stay for a few minutes, helping to position the sofa, before I was grabbed roughly by one of the upper sixth and frogmarched back out the door. I had seen all I needed to, though. The place was far from the utopia it had been made out to be.

"She is so bloody fit," Rob said again. "In fact, they all are, even if the other two are gingers."

Now that I could see the other two a little more clearly, it appeared as though they were sisters, possibly twins. The blonde had finished her beer. She put the empty can in the plastic bag she had used to carry her lunch in from the supermarket, along with the stray wrappers, before standing up and brushing something off her thin white trousers. I caught a glimpse pink underwear over the top of them, before she made adjustments and it was gone. Rob looked at me with a grin and raised his eyebrows.

"Which one do you like?" he said, sounding as though he was trying not to drool.

"I'd be happy with any of them," I admitted.

"Really?" Rob asked in surprise.

I only shrugged. Well, what the hell else would I say? I had been at an all-boys boarding school for six years. I rarely, if ever, spoke to members of the opposite sex. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Well, I suppose the gingers aren't all *that* bad. Still, I really hope they all look like the blonde at the dances."

I chuckled. "Probably not."

Dance Nights (essentially just a fancy term for a disco) were events organised by St Christopher's for the benefit of the sixth formers. Being populated by nothing but boys, the school had appreciated that, at some point, interaction with the opposite sex would become necessary. After all, it wouldn't help for all of us to leave and head off to university, only to encounter other human beings that had breasts and weren't obsessed with Baywatch, cars, video games, rugby, or cricket. To deal with this, St Christopher's had arranged with some local girls' schools (who would be suffering the same issue) to bring both sixth forms together for an evening social.

Though the dances were only for sixth formers, word of the impending event would send a ripple of excitement through the entire school; more so if the girls' school was considered to be of higher quality than the norm. The excitement would be most prominent with the second years, who would have survived their first three terms at the school and grown confident enough to hang around near the front entrance, to check out the girls as they arrived and find out exactly what the reward of a three-year tenure at the school might entail.

Sometime after seven in the evening on the night of the dance (always a Saturday), a coach would pull into the school grounds, transporting the aforementioned sixth form girls. A handful of sixth formers would meet them and take them into the refectory for dinner (or whatever passed for it). I imagined that apologies for the quality of the meal would be the first thing that many of the

boys would find themselves saying to the evening's guests.

I remembered that in my first year of senior school, there had been an oddly held perception that as the evening wore on, the dance would dissolve into some kind of messy orgy of beer and debauchery. Not that anything like that ever really happened. The teachers on duty would constantly walk around the couples to ensure things didn't get too out of hand.

The week following the night would then become a Chinese-whispered event in which we would hear about who pulled, who got a snog, who got a phone number, etc. That was all by-the-by, with some expressing their disbelief that some of the less attractive members of the sixth form had pulled a girl. There would also be much ridicule for any boy that ended up with whichever of the girls had been unfortunate enough to be deemed unappealing.

"Joe?" Rob said.

I snapped out of my daydream. "Eh?"

"I said, what do you think you're going to study at A-Level?"

Whatever the local sixth form college offers, I thought. "Oh, I don't know, I haven't really thought about it yet. I haven't decided what I want to do when I finish school or what I want to do at uni, either. How about you?"

"English, French, and maths," Rob said automatically.

"Oh? What are you going to do with those?" I asked. He had answered quickly; he clearly had everything all worked out.

"I don't know," he grinned, chuckling. "I just find everything else a bit crap. Art, crap. History, crap. Geography, crap."

"Economics?" I suggested. "You're doing maths, after all."

"Sounds boring. I can't think of what I'd do with that, except become an accountant or something like that. That would be dull as hell. Do you know that Stuart Evans isn't going to uni?"

"No?" I asked, picturing the often long-haired sixth former from the preps he used to take when I was in the second year. He was a nice guy, quite relaxed and enjoyed playing the guitar. I regularly saw him with a copy of *NME*. "Why's that?"

"He says he wants to focus on his band more," Rob said with a hint of scepticism.

"He's in a band?"

"With some people from home, he says. His parents don't care – they're rich as hell, and he could afford not to do anything for the rest of his life, to be honest. Lucky bastard."

"A bit like Timpson, then," I pointed out.

"Who? Oh, him. Yeah, probably. Just not such a little prick."

We watched as the group of five picnickers packed up and started off out of the park, before we left ourselves. Another attempt to get into a pub followed, before we each returned home.

Rob called me early the next day and invited me to come out with him on our bikes. He proposed we just go for a ride around the fields and countryside. It was a nice day out without any threat of rain, and so I went to collect my second, home bike from the garage.

Unfortunately, my good bike was still at St Christopher's. The other I had left neglected in the garage for far too long. Having not made an effort to maintain it over the past three years, the bike had rusted and the air had come out of the tires. I hunted around for a time, to see if I could find a way to fix the punctures and undo the damage the rust had caused, but I soon admitted defeat.

In the end, Rob went out on his own. I would catch up with him that evening, if my parents weren't too bothered about him coming around. After sitting about in my room for a time, dipping in and out of my book, I decided to go back into town and see if I could find any decent tapes or CDs for sale.

I skipped taking the bus, choosing instead to walk and extend the budget for my music purchase. It wasn't far, only about three miles or so, the same length as the Red Road. For some reason, I avoided looking into the foliage that ran parallel to the pavement, just in case I should see three sickly-looking, pale white fingers poking out of the bushes.

About three-quarters of the way into the town centre, I found myself passing the local sixth form college. Having taken the bus the previous day, I had failed to take notice of it. Now here, standing in front of it, a compulsion overcame me and I wandered inside. I knew what I wanted to do.

"Good morning," said the chirpy receptionist as I approached the desk.

"Hi," I nodded back at him.

"What can I do for you?"

"Er ... I, er ..." It had been so much better rehearsed in my head when I was walking in. "I was thinking of coming here next year, and I was wondering if you have a prospectus or something that I could look at?"

"We certainly do. Quite a few of them right here," the man said, standing up and starting to hand me a booklet from a pile just in front of him. He then hesitated, withdrawing the booklet as I made to take it from him. "Are you local?" he asked inquisitively.

"I am, yes," I said. "I live just up the road, Ropemaker Avenue, Wictedene, about two miles or so away?"

There was further reluctance from the receptionist. I then grasped at his reasoning. Most likely, he was wondering why I wasn't at school right now. With half term still several weeks away, he might be thinking that I was either skiving off classes or was having to repeat my GCSEs in my own time. The reception here both smelt and looked expensive. They likely had very high standards.

"I actually go to boarding school. St Christopher's, near Hallmouth," I further explained. "But they've had to close the school for a few days, due to an outbreak of salmonella from some bad chicken. It's affected about three-quarters of the pupils, including the staff, so they sent the rest of

us home until everyone is feeling better.”

“Oh dear.”

“Indeed,” I nodded. “I didn’t get it myself because I’m a vegetarian. It will probably only be a week or so, but I thought I should do something constructive and plan for my A-Levels while I’m here.”

Yes, I could bullshit like the best of them when I needed to. Besides, it sounded better than telling the man the school had been shut because one of the boys had been found murdered.

“Very wise,” the receptionist said, now handing over the booklet. “They didn’t give you much work to do, then?” he smiled.

He sounded as though he was teasing me, and so I grinned back. “I’ve already done it. Did it before they sent us home.”

The receptionist chuckled at that. “What courses did you have in mind to study?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” I said, casting an eye over the front cover of the prospectus. It was bland, but functional, white, with the letters B.S.F.C., the abbreviated name of the college, on the front as well as their emblem.

“I’m still trying to work out what would best suit my career choice.” *What career choice?* I asked himself. *Now you’re just babbling.* I hoped I wouldn’t come unstuck.

“You’re how old now?”

“Sixteen,” I said. I was actually fifteen. I wouldn’t be sixteen until February. Sixteen sounded better, though. More mature.

“Oh? So, you’ve already done your GCSEs?”

“Not yet, no,” I said. “I’ll be doing them in the summer. I was sixteen last week, but the school says that I needed to be sixteen before the end of the summer term to have done my GCSEs, otherwise I go into the year below,” I hastened to add. I really should stop lying now.

The receptionist nodded in understanding. “We have the same policy here,” he said. “Have you been predicted good grades? Because places tend to fill up quickly and so we only take the very best. I won’t lie to you – it can be tough, and competition for seats can be rather fierce.”

I felt a small stab of panic, as I saw cracks starting to appear in my escape plan from St Christopher’s. “I’ve been predicted mostly As and Bs, including English, French, maths, and science. Individual sciences, not combined,” I added.

“Oh, that shouldn’t be a problem, then,” the receptionist said. “Cs would probably earn you a rejection, but As and Bs are fine. The more As the better, of course. I would suggest you come in on one of our Open Days and speak to some of the tutors. You’ll find a list of our Open Days on the inside cover of the prospectus. In the meantime, have a look through that and see which courses you’d like to do. We’re looking to introduce a Computer Science course next year, although it might actually be the year after, depending on whether we can get the teaching staff and facilities.”

I smiled. I might not know what I wanted to do with my life, but at least I knew that I didn’t want it to involve me sitting in front of a computer for several hours a day. “Thanks. Have a good

day.”

“Have a nice weekend,” the man said as I departed.

*

The rest of the unexpected break passed slowly. Rob was around a lot of the time, but with little money to go and do things with, we would often walk the high street and discuss recent events. From time to time, we would throw an American football around in the park, but otherwise I found it strange how I couldn't actually wait to get back to St Christopher's, if only for something to do.

After ten days at home, the school called to say that it was re-opening; everyone was going back on Sunday night. Lessons would resume on Monday afternoon, after a church service for Scott Parker, the dead boy.

Yes, I was glad to be going back. Unfortunately, I discovered that the goblins had been waiting for me.

Chapter Five

Down the length of the darkened corridor I saw the shadowy figures of the stunted little beasts begin to elongate. Their shadows seemed somehow darker than they should be, as if they were consuming everything they touched and drawing it into an inescapable void. Their numbers, too, appeared to have swelled recently. I could hear their inhuman, bloodthirsty cries echoing down the passageway to my ears, almost threatening to shatter my eardrums. I turned and ran.

I could see the doors at the other end, not far from where I was, but my legs felt as though I were pulling them through treacle. There was nothing around me, save for the dimly lit corridor, and though I tried to leap free of whatever invisible force was preventing me from escaping, I made little progress towards the doors.

I looked about as the horde of goblins rounded the corner and came into sight. I caught snatches of gnashing yellow teeth as they howled, raised their little spears and charged after me.

Still unable to move, I tried to scream for help. I croaked the request, my throat completely closed up. The mass of goblins were then on top of me, dragging me to the floor as their numbers overwhelmed me. They immediately began stabbing their spears into my legs, my stomach, my arms, and my back. I could feel my blood beginning to seep out of my body, my hands and feet slipping in it as I tried to stand back up and somehow escape.

A tip of a spear was thrust into my ear, being forced deeper and deeper, as though trying to skewer my brain. I tried to pull it out, but my hands were being held fast by a number of the cackling little monsters. Claws were then in one of my eyes, digging in hard until they popped the eyeball and yanked out the fleshy remains, upon which the creatures began to feast.

I tried to cry out again, before claws began working their way into my mouth, the goblins' pale-white arms sliding down my throat, all the way into my stomach ...

*

The dream ended. I found myself outside the school's main entrance, standing in my dressing gown and slippers. How had I gotten out here? I must have been sleepwalking. I hadn't done that in years, not since I had first moved to the senior school. It was quite chilly out, most likely what had woken me up. I glanced at my watch. It was just after three in the morning. I had been asleep for about four hours or so.

I turned around and headed back through the door I supposed I had exited, actually the main entrance to the school. Someone had failed to lock it tonight. Either that, or I had somehow opened the door myself.

I was surprised to discover how dark it was inside. Apparently, I hadn't switched on any of the lights. How I had managed to negotiate the Marble Stairs and the near pitch-black corridors I didn't know. That was dangerous; I could have fallen and broken something.

I paused then, not certain I wanted to walk any further into the school. What if I was still dreaming? Would the goblins be waiting for me? *No*, I told myself. *They're not real*. Even so, I walked stealthily through the school, making for the west wing, where Butcher was located, and looking for the elusive light switches as I went. I failed to find any until I was back at my dormitory. No one else was awake. I got back into bed and lay down, but I didn't sleep.

I wondered how often I had done that. I could well be doing it a lot, but just never waking up. Now I had an idea of how the mud and dirt had gotten on my slippers. It wasn't the first time I had noticed it, and I had often dismissed it as having been trodden in on my everyday shoes and spread about that way. Perhaps not.

I found that troubling.

*

"You were sleepwalking?" Sam asked.

"From my bed, down the Marble Stairs, and out the main doors," I said. "In the dark."

"How the hell did you not break your legs?" Baz wanted to know. "I couldn't walk down those in the dark if I was awake."

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I somehow did, though."

"And you went outside?" Sam said.

"Woke up just outside the main school entrance."

"Why?"

"Because it was cold," I answered, a little incredulously.

"No, I mean why did you go outside?" Sam said.

"I don't know," I said. "I was sleepwalking."

"Were you having a dream?" Baz asked.

"Yes, I was," I replied, after a moment of hesitation.

"What about?"

I hesitated again at the question. I knew that even if I told them the truth, they would laugh at me. I didn't want them to know the details of the dream, let alone the fact that they were recurrent nightmares.

"I was being chased by someone," I said. "It was probably me thinking that whoever killed what's-his-name was coming for me next."

"Do you still think about that? Seeing the body, I mean?" Sam wanted to know.

"A little bit," I admitted. "But not all the time, no."

Sam and Baz nodded, and Sam was about to add something else when my dormitory door opened and Mr Somers entered.

"Ah good, there you are, Joe. Can you come with me, please?" my housemaster said, sounding practical and not inviting comment.

I glanced at Sam and Baz. “Is this about last night? Because I was genuinely sleepwalking,” I said to Mr Somers.

“No, nothing like that. Come on,” Mr Somers said, before coaxing me to follow after him.

*

Despite reassurances from Mr Somers, it certainly looked as though I was in trouble. I couldn't think of what I had done wrong, other than the sleepwalking. Sure, I had opened a door that might have been locked and, now I thought about it, hadn't locked it behind myself as I had come back in. But I had been sleepwalking. That was hardly my fault.

“Where are we going?” I asked my housemaster as we walked through Butcher and into the main school building.

“The headmaster's office. There are two police officers that would like to speak to you.”

I came to an immediate halt and began to back away quickly. “I didn't do anything wrong! I didn't kill him!”

“Joe, calm down,” Mr Somers said, clearly sure that any minute now I was going to make a run for it. “You're not in trouble; they're not going to arrest you, and you're not going to be expelled. They just want to ask you a few things. It's a routine thing under these kinds of circumstances. You're basically going to be giving a witness statement, that's all.”

The words did little to relax me, but I did stop backing up and reluctantly resumed following him. I wondered just what it was the police wanted to talk to me about.

I saw as we continued through the school how many of the other boys stared at me. Some, the sixth formers and members of the Clique, watched me with scowls, probably wondering why an often squeaky clean individual such as myself was being escorted in clearly what was the direction of the headmaster's office, by Mr Somers. Others were quick to avoid me.

I saw a police car parked out the front of the school through one of the windows I passed. My eyes locked on the back seats, and I did my best not to picture myself sitting there later.

We came to the headmaster's office, Mr Somers knocking hard on the thick wooden door before we were called inside. The headmaster was behind his desk, while two police officers were seated in chairs parallel to it. A third chair, opposite them, sat empty.

“Ah, that was quick,” Father Benedict smiled. “Come in, come in,” he added, as I hovered in the doorway.

Mr Somers pushed me forward, yet I walked only a few feet into the office. The headmaster's office was a place that I had only ever been in once before, and a room that most of the school preferred to stay well away from. The time before had been when I had been asked to talk about a very serious fight in the refectory one Sunday night, between two of the upper sixth. It was late in the evening, and many of the boys had already finished eating and left, meaning there were few to assist with breaking it up. It had been a particularly brutal attack, including hot black coffee in the

face of the victim, as well as at least two stabs to the torso with a fork. It had led to an immediate expulsion for the attacker. I hadn't seen everything that went on, but, along with several other boys, I had been asked to furnish the headmaster with as many details as I could. Being still in my first year of senior school, my responses had been intentionally woolly. I could do without making enemies.

Now it appeared as though I was going to be asked to provide another witness statement, this time with answers not quite as vague as before.

"Joe, this is Inspector Richards and Sergeant Jones from the Thames Valley Police," the headmaster said, indicating the two men.

The two officers rose from their seats, smiling and shaking my hand. While I might have felt quite intimidated by what was going on here, for these two men this was just an everyday part of the job.

"Have a seat, Joe," the headmaster said, his tone still warm and friendly.

I did so, seeing Mr Somers walk over to a corner of the office, getting out of the way. I caught sight of another man then, sitting on a sofa with a cup of tea in his hand. He was dressed far more casually than anyone else here.

"We just wanted to ask you a few questions, Joe," Inspector Richards said in a pleasant and cheery voice. I nodded and said nothing, suddenly dumbstruck. "Don't worry," he went on, "you're not in trouble or anything. We just want to ask you some simple questions about what you saw. Should only take about ten minutes at most."

I nodded again and answered the questions they asked me. They were as simple as promised – Did you know the victim? How did you find the body? Did you see anyone else there? What time was it? How often do you go down the Road? Can you think of any reason why the body might have been put there, rather than anywhere else? Are there any pupils at the school who you think might have reason to do something like this?

There were a few questions that set me a little on edge, however – Why do you think no one else saw the body as they went past? Had you ever seen the victim before? Had you ever been in contact with them before the discovery?

I looked at the headmaster as the questions began to make me feel uncomfortable, as if implying that I was the killer or in some other way involved. Father Benedict, however, said nothing, and neither did Mr Somers, leaving me to answer for myself.

"Sorry for the questions, Joe," Richards said as Jones finished taking down notes. "We're in no way implying that you had anything to do with the murder, but we need to ask these sorts of questions as a standard part of the investigation. I think we're done here now, Father," he turned to the headmaster. "We'll be in touch later on."

"Thank you," Father Benedict said, rising from his chair to shake their hands and show them out.

"Is that everything?" I asked the headmaster, keen to get away from the office and back to the

sanctuary of my dormitory as soon as possible.

“There is one more thing,” the headmaster said, indicating the man on the sofa behind me, who came over to where I was sitting. “Have you met Steve Martin, the school psychologist?”

Eh? I thought, automatically standing and shaking the man’s hand as he offered it to me.

“Ho ho, not *that* Steve Martin, I assure you,” the man said, wearing a beaming smile. “My stand-up career was quite short-lived, I can assure you. But no, I take my work seriously and don’t make fun of any of my patients.”

“Are you new?” I asked, wondering if the school had drafted someone new in, to help any of the boys traumatised by recent events talk about it.

“Mr Martin has been working with the school for quite some time,” Mr Somers informed me. “Luckily, he doesn’t have to make too many visits.”

“I know that what you saw couldn’t have been a very nice experience, so I’m here if you need any help coping, Joe,” Martin explained. “I thought I would come by today to see if there was anything you wanted to talk about?”

“Um ... no,” I said, looking to the headmaster and my housemaster. “I’m okay for the moment. Just want to focus on with my coursework and get ready for my mock GCSEs.” I hoped I wasn’t sounding rude by dismissing the man so quickly.

“Okay, that’s no problem,” Martin smiled again. “It’s good to carry on and focus on your assignments. I don’t work far away and can be here whenever you want. You need only let the headmaster or the nurse know if there are things you want to talk about.”

I nodded, but added nothing more.

“Well, okay, I think that’s all we needed you for, Joe,” Father Benedict said, moving to the door and opening it to allow me to leave. “Thank you.”

*

“Some parents obviously hate their children, as they thought they’d leave them here overnight, hoping they’d get fucking strangled, too.”

I knew to whom the obnoxious tone belonged as I made the return trip to Butcher, moving past the Marble Stairs that led to all five floors of the main school building. I tried to avoid making eye contact with the three sixth formers walking up the stairs to the same level as me, but sadly I failed. Craig Priest, Orson Bishop and Stefan Blanc. It was Priest that had made the earlier quip. I subconsciously quickened my step to get away from them.

“Oi, Crotty, was that police car for you?” Priest asked. I ignored him. “Oi, you stupid prick; don’t pretend you didn’t hear me.”

I scowled inwardly and turned to face him. “Not for me, no. They came to talk to the headmaster and just wanted to know what I saw.”

“Didn’t you tell them that it was you?” Priest asked.

I glared, but said nothing.

“Hey, Crotty, is it true that your parents never wanted you?” Priest asked then.

“What?”

“I’ve heard that they always leave you here on Exit Weekends and never want you home,” Priest said, looking to his two companions, who were grinning. “Did they have you by mistake?”

“No,” I said, starting to walk away.

“So why don’t they ever want you going home, or come and get you right away when Parker was murdered?” Priest asked, following after me.

What was the guy’s problem? Was he seriously *that* bored with his life that he had to make himself feel better by talking others down?

“Because they were busy working,” I said over my shoulder.

“No, I’m not sure that’s the reason,” Priest continued on in his mocking tone.

“Whatever.”

“*Le préservatif s'est déchiré,*” Blanc said in his thick French accent.

I had no idea what he had just said, but apparently Priest did, as he began laughing loudly. I ignored the three and carried on walking back to Butcher.

I would be glad when the year was over so I could get away from people such as Priest forever. He had been a blight on my life ever since I had arrived at the school. For a fleeting moment, I found myself wishing it had been someone like him that I had spotted in those bushes. I pushed the thought aside quickly. I wasn’t that sort of person.

Chapter Six

It didn't take long for the school term to settle down again. Less than a week by my estimation. I already had coursework and projects coming out of my ears, as well as an enormous and almost unfathomable amount of prep to do.

It took me a little while to adjust to working in my dormitory. Unlike prep in classrooms, where we would be made to sit in silence, my third year saw plenty of opportunity for procrastination. I was able to listen to music as I worked, as well as read books and magazines that took my fancy. I could also sneak into Sam's and Baz's dorms when they were working for a chat. We were rarely ever caught either, the eternal excuse being that we were working together on a project.

I also had the chance to witness the results of the first years' first experiences of the *Murga*. Three from my dorm were made to attend the punishment the first Friday it happened, likely for no other reason than the school prefects wishing to break their spirits, and not because they had actually done anything to warrant it. I heard them getting up at five-thirty when one of their wristwatch alarms went off. They crept quietly out of the dorm to change into their tracksuits and made their way down to the main school gates. They came back in around seven-forty, just as I was returning from my morning shower. One of them, Gregory Miller, stank, apparently having been made to roll around in something deeply unpleasant. I sent him to the changing rooms immediately, so as not to dirty up the dormitory, promising to bring his towel and wash bag down to the showers for him. I found him crying as I did so, quite rattled by the whole experience and never ever wanting to go through it again.

Only if you leave now and don't come back until you're a sixth former, I almost told him. I knew I would be seeing a lot more grim faces in the weeks to come; even more so when the winter set in proper.

As well as dorm prefect duties (which essentially meant ensuring that the younger boys were in bed on time, didn't fight, or continually lamppost or apple turnover one another's beds) my third year in the senior school also opened up a new realm of other responsibilities and opportunities, taking charge of and proposing optional activities within the school, some of which could turn out to be quite financially lucrative when done right.

Probably the most profitable activity in the school was dealing with one of the tuck shops. There wasn't any real trick to be had for making money there. It basically boiled down to selling overpriced crisps, chocolate, and drinks to the younger boys, and getting to travel out to the wholesalers with the teachers once in a while, to buy up a load of sweets at knocked-down prices. This was largely the realm of the sixth formers, who would delight in charging two pounds for a can of Coke and a (small) bag of Wotsits. Naturally, I avoided shopping there as much as possible, unless someone I trusted was working the window (and even then, the 'discounts' were rare). I tended to bring my own treats in from home, locking them securely in my own trunk, which lived under my bed. Sometimes I even sold what I had to the other boys if they were feeling hungry.

The second best activity to therefore get involved in, as far I was concerned, was the so-called “World Film Club”. The idea behind this was simple – every other Tuesday night a foreign film would be shown, picked by the boys that ran the club. The club would have three main draws – first and foremost, it took place during evening prep, meaning that instead of studying, we were permitted to go and watch a film. Secondly, the film was shown in a building that was somewhat detached from the main grounds of the school and wasn’t frequented by the teachers all that often. The film would be set up, and the teachers on duty, having made sure everything was okay and we had everything we needed, would then leave us to it. And the third reason? It was world cinema. Non-English. Underground art house stuff. And to a group of thirteen and fourteen-year-old boys, that basically meant porn.

Sign-ups for the World Film Club at the start of the year would be huge, about thirty or forty boys parting with twenty pounds each to join. These came mostly in the form of the first years and any new arrivals to the second year. For the price, the attendees would get to watch the film and enjoy complementary snacks. The snacks rarely happened, and while some likely expected bottles of Coke, popcorn, crisps and chocolates, what got laid on was more like boiled sweets and mints.

I didn’t get a chance to run the club myself. Two boys, Rory Smith and Marvin Trent, took charge from the previous administrators, choosing as their first film a movie called *Delicatessen*.

The initial turnout was huge, more than forty boys cramming themselves into the television room. The number halved within the first hour as people described the film as both boring and total crap. Some were also put off by the subtitles, an objection I found totally baffling given the name of the club they had joined. English might be widely spoken, but that didn’t mean every film would be in that language. In fact, few were.

Hoping that some sort of pornography (or at least a naked woman or two, coupled with an explicit sex scene) might still be on the cards, the second film was attended by just eight, including myself, Rory and Marvin. Luc Besson’s *Le Grand Bleu* was the next film that Marvin chose, though despite this being an English-language film it still failed to convince most to stay. Out of the initial fifty or so boys that had signed up for the club, only two returned regularly.

Oddly, no one asked for their money back. And after the numbers had dwindled sufficiently, we would indeed start to rent out the more sexy stuff.

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“Three tubes of Pringles?” I asked, as Rory began setting up.

“No, just two; I’m keeping one of them,” Rory said. “The Barbecue ones,” he added, as I reached for the tube. That left the Original and the Sour Cream. Not to worry, I liked both. There were only five of us here tonight, three third years, one second year and one first year, so there were enough Pringles to go around.

“What are we watching?” I asked. “Not another horror film, I hope.”

“Are you still freaked out from *Hellraiser*?” Marvin chuckled.

“Okay. One, that attic scene was gross. And second, I did see the dead body of a murdered schoolboy,” I reminded them.

“Get over it,” Rory said, attempting to tune in the video that had, for some reason, been dismantled from the last time. “And, no, it’s not a horror film. We’re not getting anything else in English for a while. Handjob had a fit that we weren’t watching something in another language. ‘It’s world cinema,’ I said, ‘which means we can also get stuff made in *England*. And it was Halloween, too.’ He said it didn’t actually count. Best not to risk it again. I don’t want the club to be shut down.”

“So, what are we watching?” I asked.

“*Spoorloos*,” Marvin said. There was a twinkle in his eye.

It was quite possibly one of the most harrowing films I had ever watched, much worse than *Hellraiser*. That the lead character was buried alive at the conclusion by the killer, suffering the same fate as his former girlfriend, was certainly not the happiest of endings.

“Enjoy that, Joe?” Marvin asked, once the credits had started rolling.

“Yeah, thanks, Marv,” I said. “That was precisely *not* the kind of film I wanted to watch tonight.” Marv and Rory only laughed. I wondered if they had chosen it on purpose. It was a pretty good film, I admitted, just not the sort I would have picked to show at this moment in time.

“What did you think of the film?” Marvin asked of the first and second years. I forgot their names. They were both in Enfield House, though. I could tell by the colour of their ties.

“It was good,” they nodded, though they didn’t add anything else. I got the impression that they came to the club both to watch the film, enjoy a few snacks, and listen to us talk about things going on in the school.

“Hey, did you hear about Will Preston?” Rory said, moving to the video to start rewinding the tape.

“No,” I said, detecting immediately from the tone that this was a piece of derogatory gossip.

“He’s gone to Cambridge University and joined the gay society.”

“No way!” I said. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” Rory grinned. “Within the first couple of days, apparently. A lot of people do that because it’s a new place and a new start and very few people know them.”

“Yeah, but what’s-his-name’s gone there, too.” I clicked my fingers as I tried to remember his name, failed, and gave up. “The head of Enfield House. They know each other.”

“Sure, but university’s not like here – there are thousands of people there. If they’re not in the same college and not doing the same classes, then they might bump into each other randomly, but no one would ever know.”

“Well, we found out,” I said, looking at what remained of the tube of Pringles. A few at the bottom, mostly broken. “So, it’s not entirely secretive.”

Rory then began laughing. “Marvin’s not saying anything, because Preston was his dorm prefect

when he was a first year.”

I chuckled and looked at Marvin, who just waved away the attention. “Whatever,” he said, crunching on a mint. “I don’t care either way.”

“Has anyone ever told anyone they’re gay while they’ve still been here?” the second year boy then asked.

“Don’t be stupid, Turner,” Rory said. “You’d get the shit kicked out of you.”

“I don’t think so,” Marvin frowned. “It wouldn’t be a very bright thing to do, but I wouldn’t be surprised if someone’s told a teacher sometime. But, no, I don’t think anyone’s ever said so.”

“Do you think maybe that’s what happened to Scott Parker?” Turner asked. “That he found out someone was gay?”

“Scott Parker?” Rory and Marvin looked at one another.

“The junior school boy,” I said. “No, I don’t think so. He’d have only been here for, what, four weeks?”

“Does anyone know how it happened yet?” Rory wanted to know, looking to the four of us. We all shrugged.

“Who do you think it was?” Marvin asked. “Someone local?”

“I bet it was Quasimodo,” Rory said. “That’s the hunchbacked gardener you sometimes see around the place, with the monks,” he explained to the first year, who nodded but said nothing.

“Rob Walker thought the same thing,” I said. “I doubt it. Quasimodo seems pretty harmless to me. A bit weird, but harmless.”

“No, he’s weird,” Marvin said. “I remember when I was in my first year, and he was always trying to talk to us and stuff. There was one time when he was helping me fix my bike, and he kept touching me. Not in an obvious way, but he always liked making physical contact. It made me feel really uncomfortable.”

“Cambridge is nice, you know,” I said, changing the subject and not wishing to talk about the murder.

“You thinking of going?” Marvin asked.

“No,” I chuckled. “I don’t think I’d ever be able to get in there, but it’s a nice place to visit. My parents took me once.”

“It is a nice place, yes,” Rory nodded.

“Have you been to Oxford?”

“No, but Cambridge as a whole is still nicer from what I’ve heard. Have you decided where you want to go to university yet?” he asked openly.

“Give us a chance to do our A-Levels first, Rory,” Marvin said.

There was a knock at the door, a teacher stepping into the television room directly after. It was Mr Finn, one of the history teachers and my assigned personal tutor. He was the acting duty master at the school for the evening. I liked Mr Finn. He was very easygoing and tolerant.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” Marvin said. “The film’s just finished, actually.”

“Ah, good,” Mr Finn said. “Could you pack everything up, lock the VCR away, and put all your rubbish in the bin before you go? Oh, and return the keys to the staff room.”

“Joe, have you got ten minutes? We were meant to have our one-to-one sometime this week, but we might as well do it now, since it won’t take long.”

“Sure,” I said. “Are you guys okay with everything?” I said to Rory and Marvin.

“No problem,” they replied, leaving me to depart with Mr Finn.

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We walked back to the classroom block, Mr Finn taking me to the staff room and offering me a seat at a table, where he had been marking pupils’ work.

“Would you like some water?” he asked, refilling his own glass from a jug. I told him I would, and so he poured me some. “How’s everything going, Joe?” he asked, pleasant and cheery as always.

“All okay,” I said. “Nothing major.”

“None of your classes giving you any trouble?”

“No.”

“Good. Your grades don’t seem to suggest so, either. Your housemaster hasn’t told me that you’re struggling anywhere, so I guess everything is all good.”

“Cool,” was all I said. There wasn’t much more that really needed adding.

“And you’re all recovered from the incident on the Road?”

“Yes,” I nodded, keen to move the conversation on from that particular subject as quickly as possible.

“Good. I won’t talk to you any more about that, then. Now, I know it’s early, but have you given any thought to what subjects you’d like to take at A-Level?”

“I’ve ... not really thought that hard about it,” I said. It seemed that some were a little ahead of me in that regard. Both Rory and Marvin had an idea of what they wanted to do, and Rob had pretty much decided on his subjects for next year already.

“Probably want to get your GCSEs out of the way first, I imagine,” Mr Finn smiled. “But you might find it easier after you’ve done your mocks and can see what subjects you’re excelling in.”

“The mocks are still next term?” I thought I would check.

“Still next term. Starting within the first three weeks, which unfortunately means you’ll have to revise over Christmas.”

“At least we never have to revise over the summer,” I said.

“Yes, that wouldn’t be fair to anyone,” Mr Finn chuckled. “Okay, so you don’t know about A-Level subjects yet, but have you thought about what you would like to do as a career?”

“No,” I said, chuckling. “I’ve got absolutely no idea.”

“Fair enough. I thought maybe if you had an idea of that, I could suggest appropriate A-Levels and degree courses. What do your parents do?”

“They work in the pharmaceutical industry,” I said.

“Oh, really?” Mr Finn’s face brightened. “That sounds interesting. Do they work where you live? Or in London, or..?”

“All over,” I said. “They work abroad a lot, too, which is why they sent me here.”

No, it’s because they don’t want you at home, getting in their way, Craig Priest’s slimy voice suddenly crept into my head. I ignored it.

“That sounds exciting,” Mr Finn said. “You would get to travel a lot, meet lots of different people, work in different places, and see a lot of the world. Have you thought about perhaps doing that as well?”

“No way,” I said automatically.

“Why not?”

“Because my parents are workaholics,” I blurted out. “They hardly have time for me and mostly just focus on their careers. They were a little annoyed about me having to be home for two weeks if I’m being honest, since one of them always had to be keeping an eye on what I was doing.”

I realised as I said it how it sounded extremely bitter. It was true, however; my mother and father had never had that much time for me in recent years.

“Is everything okay back home?” Mr Finn asked. His face had fallen a little, and he was starting to look somewhat concerned.

“Oh, it’s fine,” I reassured him. “Nothing bad happening.”

“I can understand what’s happening with your parents,” Mr Finn said. “Some people put an exceptional amount of effort in with their schooling and training, and work hard to get where they want to be. It can then be hard for them when they have to put their lives on hold on a time for other things. It’s nothing personal, it’s just that they feel that they aren’t making the most of all their skills, and that they might have worked hard for nothing. Do you see what I mean?”

“I guess so,” I said. I understood what he meant. It must be frustrating when you had worked hard towards something, to become a great success, and needed the validation that all the time and effort had been worth it. Even so, I didn’t really get the live-to-work mentality that some maintained. I was certain I was a work-to-live kind of person.

“My parents have always been like that,” I told Mr Finn. “I’m not sure how they’ll feel about me being back at home when I’m doing my A-Levels, but it’s something they’ll just have to get used to ... oh.” My ears caught up with what my mouth was saying well after I had let Mr Finn in on my little secret.

“Ah, you’re not planning to stay here after you’ve done your GCSEs?” he asked, putting everything together admirably quickly.

“I haven’t told anyone yet, but no,” I said, after gulping down a good mouthful of water to prevent my mouth from drying out completely. I felt as though I had just confessed to a murder.

“No one at all?” Mr Finn asked.

“No, not even my parents. You’re the first ... well, second person I’ve told.”

“Any particular reason you want to leave?”

“I’m worried that I’ve been in this environment for too long, and it won’t prepare me for real life,” I said, after pausing for a short time to consider how to consolidate all my rights-of-passage desires into one semi-diplomatic sentence.

“I see. How long have you been here?”

“Since I was nine,” I said. “This is my seventh year at St Christopher’s.”

“So, you were in the junior school for four years, rather than the usual three?”

“Yes. I repeated the first year.”

“That is indeed a long time,” Mr Finn nodded in understanding. “Okay, well you can trust me not to say anything to anyone. But I’d suggest you talk to your parents about it sooner rather than later, so they can inform the school. The headmaster would also appreciate knowing closer to the time.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Anything else you wish to talk about? Are you taking a dorm this year? Everything okay there?” he asked as I nodded.

“No problems. First years, so easy to deal with. For now,” I grinned.

“Yes, for now. They’ll probably gain some confidence after Christmas,” Mr Finn laughed.

“Okay, Joe, thank you. It’s nearly time for evening prayers, so you had probably better get back to your house.”

Chapter Seven

As well as inter-house competitions (mainly sports, but occasionally music and singing!) we would also engage in inter-school sports matches. These would involve us either hosting or guesting at other schools, the matches taking place on Wednesday or Saturday afternoons.

When hosting, we would await the arrival of the rival schools' teams outside the main school. On some occasions, two or three coaches would arrive, the fixture calendar meaning that one school would uproot over half of its pupils to face us that day. We would greet them as they arrived, not only to be courteous to those we were to be playing against that afternoon, showing them to the changing rooms and seeing to any needs they might have, but also to size up the competition. Back when I had still been ten years old, this never made too much of a difference to the match. At that age, some boys might be an inch taller and maybe a little fatter. They certainly weren't built like brick shithouses or possess thighs like tree trunks, as one might see on televised matches.

Approaching your mid-teens, however, it became a whole other ball game.

I was a little over average height and in good shape for my age, the other boys in my year varying as much as one might expect. Some were shorter, but a lot more nimble on their feet when on the field. In games of rugby, they would form a part of the backs. Others were taller, stockier and overall more beefy. They, of course, would play as the forwards and involve themselves in the scrum. I, myself, played in the backs, usually the inside-centre. I sometimes swapped with the outside-centre, depending on who the fly-half was. Though I was tall enough to play in the forwards, I hadn't done so since my first year, mainly because I had never gotten on very well with the scrum and often caused it to collapse. For this, I was glad. The sight of the opposition that sometimes departed the coaches of the opposing schools would often make me wonder what on earth those boys were being fed. Such a thing was quite typical of schools' 'A teams', where only the highest calibre players would do.

"Christ, those guys are huge," I would hear my team-mates mutter after we'd shown the visitors where to go to change and prepare for the game.

"Fucking hell, that guy is going to flatten you," another would say to our captain, whose opposite number may as well have been a foot taller and wider than he. The captain often lost his nerve a little at that and began snapping at the rest of us, suggesting that if anyone was going to having any bones broken that afternoon, it wouldn't be him.

Thankfully, only a few bones were ever broken during the matches, and these were very rare occurrences indeed. Not to say that some players didn't actually try. One of the problems with approaching your mid-teens, effectively locked away in a single-sex school without any significant female company to speak of, would be that testosterone would be running hot all the time. These hormones would fuel pent-up frustrations, resulting in them being released on the rugby field. I had learned in general studies how this had been a technique favoured by some ancient civilisations to make their warriors fight harder on the field, seeking a release. The same pretty much rang true

here, and some went out of their way to start a fight if they could, punching and kicking others in the scrum, where it would be too difficult for the referee to notice.

And woe betide anyone who should attempt to face-off against or tackle any boy whose girlfriend (a very, very, *very* rare thing indeed) happened to turn up for the afternoon, to watch their other half play. Glory Boys were bad enough at any time during inter-school matches; with a girl watching, the effects could be felt for a full ninety minutes.

Pass the ball? Not me, I'm the fly-half! I can charge straight through this line of six forwards, no bother. I would see the girl in question walking the sideline, clapping daintily whenever the team they were supporting either scored a try, performed a particularly noteworthy tackle, or successfully converted a kick. In the main, however, women (other than boys' mothers and sisters) were largely absent from the flock of parents and local people who would come to watch the match.

Except, of course, whenever we were playing against Mayfield College, a mixed-sex boarding school in Sussex. The boys there were good. *Very good.* They were our nemesis, our archrivals, both in terms of sport and grades. I use the term *archrivals* loosely, as I'm not sure it counts if you never actually beat them.

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"How are your fingers?" I asked Sam as I towelled off from the shower. They were nicer showers than the ones I endured at St Christopher's, the changing rooms here being part of a dedicated sports complex that Mayfield had constructed some two years previous. It made my own school's offerings look truly pathetic. Then again, Mayfield's fees were around one-and-a-half times those of St Christopher's.

"They still hurt," Sam said, awkwardly trying to use just his left hand to dry himself. "I think I might have broken the little one."

A few of our team-mates looked over as he held it up. I couldn't tell myself. It looked okay, other than Sam's hand quivering slightly. Even so, he didn't look as though he was able to flex his fingers very easily. That would make it awkward to hold a pen or do anything else come Monday, if they hadn't mended by then.

"I think that guy did it on purpose," Rory said. "They were trying to make sure we were playing with one less man on the field."

"Those twats were cheating like mad today," Ben Wild, part of the Tudor House Clique, frothed. "And what the fuck was with the ref? I had the ball down over the fucking line. That was a try! We'd have won if he hadn't disallowed it!"

"That was a rather convenient penalty next to our try line just before the whistle, wasn't it?" I added.

"But they do that all the time; that's why they win," Emilio Baxter, our captain, said, stuffing his boots back into his bag, along with his shorts and shirt, all of which were so muddy that the

original colours were largely lost.

Mine were in no better state. A light rain shower had been enough to transform much of the pitch into a mud bath. Usually, it was the forwards that came off the worst following matches, the backs far cleaner by comparison. Today, it had made little difference. The air in the changing room was thick and heavy with the stink of mud and sweat, the spraying of various deodorants doing little to mask it. I had looked forward to washing after the game had concluded, though despite using a generous amount of shower gel, I still felt dirty. Perhaps it was because I could still smell the mud. It would dirty up the base of my trousers between now and my return to St Christopher's, as it always did, and I would tread the caked-on dirt back into my dormitory for sure.

I looked back to Sam as he yelped, cradling his hand.

"You'd better tell Mr Hill when you see him," I said, as Sam continued attempting to dress without dirtying up his school uniform in the process. "If it's broken, he'll have to take you to hospital."

"Everything all right in here?" a voice came.

I looked around to see that the captain of opposing team had entered our changing room. He had a deep voice and was quite a tall guy, looking more like he was eighteen than sixteen. I swore that I could make out the hint of a five o'clock shadow on his chin.

"All good, thank you," Baxter said in his practised diplomatic tone.

"Good, good. Are you guys all nearly ready to go to tea?" the opposing captain enquired, looking around.

I looked about the changing room as Baxter did. The last of the team was out of the shower, most of the others having already dressed and were now sitting around on the benches lining the wall. The derogatory remarks about the other team's performance on the pitch had stopped abruptly at its captain's appearance, and everyone was now waiting for the prompt to leave.

"Yes, we're all ready. Just a few still changing," Baxter confirmed, his eyes flickering to Sam and a couple of others.

"Good. When you're ready, I'll be waiting for you just out the front," the opposing captain said, before departing.

"Um, Joe," Sam said. "Could you help me with my tie?" He held it out to me to fasten, unable to do it himself with one hand.

"I'd leave it off if I were you," I said. Tying someone else's tie felt weird to me for some reason, and I preferred to avoid doing it. "But let me get that for you," I offered, picking up his bag.

"Thanks," he said. "What do you think they'll give us for tea?"

"Judging by the cost of this place, I'd be hoping for either a steak or a big rack of ribs, with all the trimmings. But they'll probably just give us hamburgers and chips," I smirked.

We started off away from the sports complex, across the grounds of Mayfield College, a couple of members of the opposing team joining us and engaging in friendly conversation. I saw Ben Wild fall to the back of the line, walking with Rupert Daniels, one of the boys on the fringe of belonging

to the Clique, where he continued to chew on the bone of our defeat. I made no comment. The game was done, and it mattered little to me whether or not we won or lost. Winning was always good, of course, and there was a great feeling of returning to St Christopher's and telling everyone that you beat your opponents on their home turf, but it wasn't the end of the world if we didn't. Instead, I listened to what the other boys were saying, as well as taking the opportunity to look around the grounds and see how everything differed from what I was used to.

There were certain aspects that always remained consistent at other boys' schools – the division in the junior and senior school, the ten, eleven and twelve-year-olds living and studying in separate buildings to those in the senior school, including their classrooms and dormitories. Our escorts to the post-match tea would usually answer questions that we had about the campus and the lifestyle, posing their own about what it was like studying at St Christopher's.

Today, however, my attention was on something else all together, as was everyone else's – the girls.

I passed several groups as we made our way to the coach, to offload our kit, before heading to the huge dining hall to eat. This wasn't my first time at Mayfield, and I knew what to expect. I would often hear the girls before I saw them, their giggles and voices catching my ear well before they came into view. None of them were ugly; all goddesses in my eyes. Not even the act of regularly indulging myself in the beauties that adorned the pages of *FHM*, *GQ*, *Club International*, *Penthouse*, or *Playboy* had raised my expectations unduly. I tried not to stare. Failed. But there again, so did everyone else.

Some of the girls waved and said hello to us as we passed them, the captain of the team we had played (and lost to) receiving the most attention. He was being earmarked to become a prefect when he moved to the sixth form, that much was clear to me, most likely also being considered for either head of house or head boy. I generally cared little for the power and purported grandeur that usually came with such a position. Here, however, I could appreciate the attention it would bring with it. To wear that scarf and badge that were presented to the head boy would surely prove a tremendous draw to the opposite sex.

But there again, I intended on having my own attention-grabbing item once I left school – a car.

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“Are there only sixth form girls here?” Jeff Armitage, our fly-half, asked as we tucked into the hamburgers, chips, and beans that we had been served for tea. I saw too late that there were cheese slices available. Halfway through my burger, I would just go without.

“No,” Tim, a redheaded Mayfield boy sitting opposite, said. “They're here from the same ages as the boys – six till eighteen.”

It was usual for us to sit mixed in with the team we had just played against, the teachers likely expecting us to talk about our studies and what we were aspiring to become when we eventually

completed our education and embarked on a career. Talking shop, basically.

“You start here at six?” I asked.

“Yep,” Tim replied.

“Damn, that’s a long time,” I said.

“Some of the parents send their children here when they’re still only five,” Roland, a blonde, chubby-faced Mayfield boy, added with a chuckle. “Can’t wait to get rid of them, apparently. No, it’s mainly because of if their parents are in the army, who actually pay most of the fees.”

I appreciated what was being said. There were several boys at St Christopher’s whose parents were in the army. The fees were paid in full by the service every term, leaving the family with but a small bill for any optional extras. Such as the World Film Club.

“But some just send their children here early, so they can get back to work,” Tim said.

I nodded at that. That had been my parents’ own reasoning.

“What’s happened to your fingers?” Tim asked, looking at Sam, who was attempting to eat and cradle his hand at the same time.

I glanced at Sam, and then to the boy who had apparently carried out the deed, a thick, stocky-looking guy. He was sitting on another table, with his back to me. I could hear his booming chuckles from across the spacious dining hall. I got the impression that he had almost certainly done it on purpose. He looked the type.

“Oh, I think they might just be badly bruised,” Sam said, sounding reluctantly dismissive of the injury. “Just got bent in the scrum.”

“Look broken to me,” Tim said. “Do you want me to take you to the nurse?”

“No, it’s okay,” Sam said. “I showed it to our coach, and he said it wasn’t anything bad.”

“If he’s anything like ours, then he probably hasn’t got a clue,” Roland commented. “Show it to your nurse or sister or whoever when you get back. They’ll probably have more of an idea.”

“Thanks,” said Sam.

Tim saw me once again glance in the direction of the apparent perpetrator. A few others on the table who had been paying attention to Sam’s injury also looked in that direction, Wild included.

“Yeah, Bullock does that,” Tim said. “Doesn’t care as he normally gets away with it. Openly punched a guy in the face the other week, caused a nosebleed and everything. Said he was going for the ball.”

“While playing against another school?” Wild asked.

“No,” Tim shook his head. “During training.”

“Jesus, what a twat.”

“Are there more girls here than boys?” I asked, deciding to change the subject in case it should unexpectedly become heated. Wild could sometimes be true to his name and was something of a hothead. I had known him in the past to quite happily seize on the chance to start something.

“A few more,” Roland answered. “There used to be more boys, but I think it’s about fifty-five to forty-five in the girls’ favour now. All the parents want to send their girls here now, and some of the

boys' dorms have become girls' dorms as a result."

I saw the intrigue in my fellow team-mates' eyes. Likely, they were thinking the same as me – more choice. While the idea of being in the presence of so many girls was novel to us, our hosts spoke as if it were quite normal. They seemed almost quite indifferent to be studying with girls. With all the questions we had been asking so far, we must have seemed quite desperate by comparison.

"Do you all have girlfriends and that?" Wild wanted to know.

"Some of us do," Tim said.

"Are you dating one of them?"

"Sort of," Tim said, again with the same air of nonchalance. "But it's not really going anywhere. I'm leaving next year, too, so it's sort of pointless."

"Why?" Wild asked, a little aggressively. "Why on earth would you leave here?"

"I've been here since I was eight, and I want to go somewhere else. Oh, don't get me wrong – it's a good school, a very good school, but I just don't want to be here any more," Tim said with a shrug.

I nodded again. I could tell that he and I would probably get along quite well if I had been at Mayfield.

"What benefits do you get when you move into the sixth form?" I asked.

"Probably the same as you," Roland said. "Separate room, later bedtimes, an exclusive social centre, use the computers, that sort of thing." He looked to my team-mates, who nodded.

"The dormitories aren—" Armitage started.

"HA HA! HO HO HO!" came the sound of Bullock's booming laughter from the other table, drowning out what he was saying.

"Sorry," Armitage said. "So, are the dormi—"

"HA HA HA HA HA!" Bullock's laughter came suddenly again, the already loud noise added to by the boy slamming his hand down hard on the table he sat at, drawing the attention of all.

Tim rolled his eyes. "No, the dormitories aren't mixed," he said, correctly guessing at what it was that Armitage wanted to know. "Girls and boys sleep separately. Although they're mixed at Stormbridge ... have you heard of Stormbridge? Well, anyway, they're mixed there until they're twelve."

"Just before the girls start getting tits," Roland grinned.

We all laughed at that.

"Do you play Stormbridge at all?" Tim asked.

I looked to the others at the table, seeing the uncertain expressions on their faces. I had never heard of Stormbridge.

"I don't think so ...?" Armitage said.

"They're in Kent," Roland said.

"Oh, I don't think we travel that far for our matches," I said. "Usually just Sussex, Surrey, and

Berkshire.”

“So, it’s okay for you to get into a relationship, then?” Armitage asked.

“Sure, as long as it doesn’t interfere with your work, then you’re okay.”

“And the teachers don’t mind you snogging or anything?” Wild asked.

Tim frowned, thinking of how best to answer the question. “Yes and no. As long as you’re not doing it where it’s obvious, if that makes any sense? They say the last thing they want is to be showing prospective families around the school and seeing us with our tongues stuck down each other’s throats.”

“And your hand up her skirt,” Armitage smirked.

“That’s a definite no,” Roland said, finishing what was left of his chips. He glanced in the direction of the servers, trying to get an idea of what was left and considering going up for seconds, if he was allowed.

“You been caught?” I asked.

“Not me,” he answered. Tim remained suspiciously quiet on that point.

“Being seen snogging out in the open is bad for the school’s rep,” Roland finished.

“That’s the same reason we get given for not smoking,” Sam said.

“What happens with you if you get caught smoking?” another of the Mayfield boys, who had, up until that point, been concentrating on eating, asked.

“We get fined about twenty-five quid, and they send a letter home to our parents,” Wild said bitterly.

“Same here,” our hosts said, nodding to one another.

“Actually, I think it’s thirty-five or forty now,” the previously silent one added.

“Not sure,” Tim said.

“It’s worse if we get caught with a porno,” Kerry Oldman, one of our team’s wingers, said.

“They fine you, and then send a letter *and* the magazine home.”

“They send the *magazine* home?” our hosts exclaimed. “Shit! That’s not good! I don’t think that’s ever happened here. Has that happened to you?”

“Several times,” Oldman chuckled. “Not that my dad cares; he’s just happy to get back the part of his collection I nicked off him.”

I chuckled while our hosts gaped, as they tried to fathom what Oldman was openly implying. Kerry often made me laugh. He was the self-confessed Porn King of St Christopher’s, having smuggled enumerable quantities of magazines and films (in one case hardcore) into the school, ever since the summer term of his first year. He had no problem with other boys knowing about his habit, but would attempt to keep it well hidden from the teachers. I was sure they knew about it, too, but they apparently always had problems catching him. The times he had been caught, he was exceptionally blasé about it. Despite the quip, I had to wonder what his parents really thought about him. Hell, for all I knew, perhaps they actually worked in the adult entertainment industry.

“So, do you do dance nights with girls’ schools?” Tim asked. “One of the other schools said that

they do.”

“We don’t get to do that until next year, when we get into the sixth form,” Sam answered. “We get to drink beer then, too.”

“But when you do get the dances, the teachers practically walk around with a metre stick all night and make sure you stay a certain distance apart from the girls,” Wild added bitterly. “I think Handjob gets really pissed if he sees you so much as holding hands, too.”

“Wait, you get to drink beer next year?” Tim asked. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen, sixteen,” Sam said.

Tim looked a little baffled. “How are you allowed to drink beer when you’re sixteen?”

“Oh, it’s a special agreement with the local council when we get into the sixth form,” I informed him. “We can’t actually drink until we’re seventeen, and even then we’re not allowed to buy it. We have to get someone who’s eighteen to do it for us.”

“But how?” Roland asked, still understandably confused. “You’re under eighteen.”

“Oh, it’s completely legal,” Sam said. “You’re not allowed to buy beer in this country until you’re eighteen, but they let you drink it when you’re seventeen. They give us cider at house parties when we’re sixteen, too.”

“You’re American?” Tim asked Sam. He had clearly picked up on Sam’s subconscious insertion of the phrase ‘this country’ into what he had said.

“From Texas,” Sam nodded.

“You can’t drink until you’re ... twenty-one over there, right?”

“Really?” I asked. It was the first I had heard of it.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “That’s why I’m glad to be over here. I’m not going to go back home if I can help it.”

“So, what happens here if you get caught fucking?” Armitage finally asked the one question that was at the forefront of all of our minds.

“We get expelled,” the once-quiet boy said bluntly.

“What?” the St Christopher’s side of the table erupted at once. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” the boy said, finishing his plate and pouring himself some orange juice, offering the jug to everyone else after he had done so. “They don’t like that at all. They tell you when you start here not to do it. ‘Sexual practices between pupils are forbidden and will result in immediate rustication’,” he added, taking a gulp of his juice and sounding like he was quoting the school rules precisely.

“What if you’re doing it outside of term?” I asked.

“Oh, well that doesn’t matter,” Tim said. “They can’t tell you what not to do when you’re at home. They just don’t want you to do it when you’re here.”

“Has anyone been caught? Recently, I mean?”

“It doesn’t happen as often as you’d think,” Tim said, looking to the two others at the table, who shook their heads. “I seem to remember it happening a lot when I first started, but that could’ve just

been something said to scare us. One of the sixth formers got caught early last year, though. I remember that a girl got pregnant once and had to leave. One of the third years left around the same time, so we think he might've knocked her up. That was ages ago, though. But otherwise, no. I think only two or three have ever been expelling for it since I've been here. Just don't get caught."

"I'm not sure where you could go to do it, to be honest," I said, my mind wandering and thinking back on all the places we had passed. Of course, there would be plenty of places that I didn't know about, having only seen a fraction of the school and what the grounds had to offer. I was still somewhat staggered by the size of the place. It was easily twice as big as St Christopher's.

"Classrooms, after midnight. The sports complex, if they've forgotten to lock it," Tim said.

"Some of the science labs," Roland said. "The woods, if it's not too cold. Your own room, if you're a sixth former and a lot of people are away for the weekend, so no one can hear. Well after midnight is a good idea, in that case, too."

"Sometimes even if you're not a sixth former, your dormitory is empty and you can get across the quad without being seen," the previously silent boy said. "Sometimes even if the dorm isn't that empty and you won't wake anyone. The toilets, if you're sure no one is going to come in ..."

I sat there in silence for a moment, as did all my team-mates, slightly flabbergasted by what our hosts had just said.

"You seem to know a lot on the subject," Armitage eventually grinned at them.

Our hosts said nothing, and merely grinned back.

*

The conversation eventually transitioned to more routine shop talk – comparing facilities, subjects, rules, teachers, and other such things. Usually, I would pay little attention, more interested in filling my belly that would be growling out for food after finishing a game. But today felt different somehow.

I discovered that Tim was planning an escape much like my own, planning on attending a sixth form college in London, so he could concentrate on his preparations for his law degree. He figured that he would establish better contacts in London, and that would springboard him higher and faster towards achieving rapid success. I made a number of mental notes as Tim spoke, and by the time everything was done and we were getting back on the coach, I had a slightly better idea of what I wanted to do with my life. All I had to do was get through the next two and a half terms at St Christopher's.

Something told me, however, that it wasn't just my GCSEs that I would need to survive.

Chapter Eight

The autumn term continued at a steady pace, the discovery on the Red Road that day in late September fading into the background as we all focused on our coursework and preparations for the mock GCSE exams, coming the next term. The last I heard of the murder incident was that the police were following up on certain leads, but the case wasn't linked to anyone or anything in particular. No motive had been established, but it was unlikely to ever occur again. Don't worry about it, we were all told. I had long since decided not to.

Other than planning on working somewhere in London and doing my degree there, I still had no idea of what I wanted to do for a career, or at university, or even A-Levels for that matter. I knew I should get a handle on that soon, or else my dreams of living at home and attending a sixth form college would remain just that – dreams.

As the autumn turned to winter, the clocks went back and the temperature began to plummet, I found myself spending more and more time inside, either hanging around with Sam and Baz in the dorms they were looking after, or visiting friends in other houses. Not all were as welcoming as others, especially if a large number of the Clique had decided to congregate there for the evening and find obnoxious ways in which to entertain themselves. And while St Christopher's did offer a number of common rooms and TV rooms, these would offer little privacy for talking. Thankfully, I had other avenues of retreat.

Carson Young was one of the lower sixth with whom I got on fairly well. I don't remember exactly how we met, since we were both in different houses and different years, and Carson hadn't attended the junior school. It may have been due to us both being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being caught doing something that we shouldn't have by a teacher and being given a ludicrous punishment to perform together. It could even have been because we had both been on the *Murga List* and had bonded over the experience. I doubted that, however. Whenever I had had to endure that grossly sadistic punishment, my focus had always been on keeping my profile low and getting it over and done with as soon as possible.

Carson was something of a loner in his year, not really seeming to fit in anywhere in particular and generally enjoying his own company. This was somewhat reflected in the room he had been assigned for his time in the lower sixth, being partway up one of the disused bell towers in the school. The bell itself had been removed, an array of electronic devices put in its place, accessed via a stairway in the corner of his room, leading up to a locked door. What the devices did I had no idea, and neither did Carson. He told me that on occasion some of the staff or workmen would enter his room to inspect the devices, before locking up again. I had only seen past that locked door once, sneaking up behind one of the workmen. I had been shooed away quickly.

Carson's room was enormous, two to three times larger than any of the other sixth form rooms in the school. Even the head boy's room, which I had only ever glimpsed once or twice, wasn't quite as big as this. It was nice, as there was plenty of space to accommodate those who came to

visit.

*

“The Belfry’s got a full house tonight, then?” Sam said, as he came in. I had told him I was heading to Carson’s room earlier. He had stayed behind in Butcher to finish some work, before joining the rest of us.

There were six of us in Carson’s room that evening, scattered about in a number of different places – Baz and Dave on chairs; Rory on the stairs, leading to the locked door; Carson himself on a sofa chair, that had apparently always lived in the room; and Rob and Marvin on his bed. Sam looked about for a time, trying to decide where to settle, before sitting down on Carson’s desk, pushing some of his work aside.

“Sam, I’ve just been telling these guys that you can’t all skive off here after prayers tonight,” Carson warned him.

“Why not?” Sam asked.

“Haven’t you heard? Benny’s really pissed off today. One of the newspapers has reported about the murder.”

“Shit, how did they find out? They’ve been trying to keep that quiet.”

“Well, how do you think? Someone’s parents told them,” Baz said.

“Yes, that’s obvious, Baz, mate,” Sam responded in his best attempt at a cockney accent. “But who would’ve said that?”

“Doesn’t really matter, does it?” Carson said. “It was bound to come out sooner or later. Basically, if you see the headmaster, don’t talk to him and avoid making eye contact.”

“Have you got a copy of the newspaper it was in?” Sam asked.

Carson produced the newspaper. He had a lot of newspapers in his room, mostly broadsheets, as well as the *Financial Times*. Despite him telling me about the report, I hadn’t asked to see it. I joined Sam as he took the newspaper from Carson, seeing the article. It wasn’t a large piece, only a few paragraphs and taking up a small section of a page. It was something that could easily be missed, as it did not draw a lot of attention. The most important thing for most papers at the moment was the recession, which had started late last year. Some were predicting that it would end sometime around Christmas next year, but others were figuring that it could last until at least 1993. Unemployment, depression, rioting, and substance abuse were still on the rise.

“It says it was a *suspected* murder, though,” Sam said. “Not an actual murder. The school are still playing the accidental death card. At least that’s what my parents believe. So, what are you all talking about?” he asked, putting the paper to one side.

“What we’re going to do career-wise when we finish university,” I said. “Carson’s thinking of working in the stock market.”

“Really?” Sam asked. “Why?”

“Because they make a shitload of money,” Carson said bluntly.

“How much?”

“Millions, every year in bonuses.”

“Is that like that place we went to last year, with all the escalators and the weird lifts on the outside?” Rob asked.

“Didn’t they ring a bell or something whenever a ship sank?” Rory added.

“Nah,” I said. “Handjob was just making that up.”

“No, it’s true,” Dave said. “But they don’t do it any more. They used to ring it when a ship was late to port and presumed missing. And that was Lloyd’s of London we went to; they do insurance. You’re getting mixed up with the London Stock Exchange.”

“Are you sure?” Rory insisted.

“Yes,” Dave said. “My dad works at Lloyd’s.”

“Doesn’t your dad work there too, Baz?” Rob asked.

“No,” Baz said.

He was lying. I didn’t say anything.

“I bet he does,” Rob continued on. “I bet Dave’s dad is his boss and Baz’s dad is his bitch.”

“Fuck off,” Baz said.

“Anyway, whatever,” Rob said. “That place was really boring. Why did they take us there on a day out, when we could’ve gone somewhere more interesting, like Thorpe Park or the British Museum?”

“*The British Museum?*” I couldn’t help but start laughing.

“Dinosaur skeletons,” Rob said. “Dinosaurs are cool.”

“True,” I admitted.

“They probably took us to Lloyd’s and the Stock Exchange to get us interested in stuff like that,” Sam said.

“And to let us know how much we could make,” Carson said. “You can make a packet working on the stock market.”

There were clearly pound signs in Carson’s eyes. I wondered just how much he had looked into this, and where he was getting his information from. I couldn’t recall any of the teachers giving us specifics on the salaries the traders commanded.

“I still think that’s bullshit,” Rory said. “*Millions*. That can’t actually be cash. It must be shares or something, or you don’t get it all at once.”

“It’s not,” Dave said. “Have you heard of the Stockbroker Belt?”

Shakes of heads all round. It sounded like a ring around London or something. I imagined it to be a little like the M25.

“You mean the London commuter belt,” Baz said.

Carson shook his head. “The Stockbroker Belt is a different thing – it’s more like a circuit of mansions that they live in—”

“Mansions?” Rory began to laugh.

“I’m serious,” Carson said. “They make so much money on the stock market that they can afford to live in houses worth millions. All paid for, too. No mortgage,” he added.

“Does your dad live there?” I asked, looking at Dave. It was somewhat rude to ask, I knew, but I found myself being swept up in the current of the conversation. I was probably disbelieving everything I was hearing and wanted closure on it.

“No,” Dave started. “He lives in Hampstead.”

“Fucking hell! Seriously?” Baz said.

“In a mansion in Hampstead,” Carson grinned.

Dave remained silent, as did Sam. Sam had been to Dave’s on a few occasions, the longest being the break we had following the murder. He had clearly been asked by Dave not to say anything.

“That’s one of the most expensive parts of London,” Carson supplied. “Does he actually live on the Heath?” he asked Dave.

Dave nodded, but still said nothing else. He was perhaps a little embarrassed that his dad lived in such an expensive place. I wondered where his mum lived.

“Where have you been reading this?” I asked Carson, deciding to move the conversation on and not focus on Dave’s apparent incredible wealth.

“In the *Telegraph*,” Carson said.

“Ah, you mean the *Daily Torygraph*,” Marvin said.

“What?” Sam asked.

“The *Torygraph*,” Marvin repeated. “It’s what people call the *Daily Telegraph*, because they have strong links to the Conservatives and is read by a lot of higher earners.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Marvin said. “Well, I think so, anyway.”

“Who do Labour support?” Baz asked.

“All the poor people,” Carson poked more fun at Baz, who only scowled in response.

“The *Sun* and the *Guardian*,” Rory said. “My dad reads both of them religiously.”

“Mainly the *Sun* for the Page 3 girl,” Marvin grinned. “For a quick shuffle while he’s out there on the tractor.”

“Anyway,” Carson continued on before the bickering started again. “All the stockbrokers live in mansions, attend a lot of champagne parties, and are all retired by thirty-five or forty.”

“What?” the room chorused at once.

“Bullshit, Young,” Rory said.

“It’s hard work,” Carson said. “They start at about five-thirty in the morning and don’t finish till after eight some nights.”

“That’s usual for a farm,” Rory said.

“I forgot to ask you earlier,” I then said, looking at Rory and remembering what we had been

talking about before Sam had come in. “Are you going to go back to the farm when you finish here and work there?”

“No way,” Rory answered automatically. “It’s really hard work. Going home for a holiday is usually anything but. It’s practically a twenty-four-seven job. I’d only go back there if I messed everything up.”

“You’ve never told us that before,” I said.

“Well,” Rory said, shuffling a little uncomfortably. “It’s not like I don’t *like* going back home, but it’s just not something I want to do with life. My brothers and sisters *love* it, but I’d rather do something else.”

“Just want a bit of an easier life?”

Rory shrugged, as if a little ashamed to admit it. I couldn’t see why, given what we were talking about, champagne parties and all. “But you’re going to inherit the farm from your dad, right?” I asked.

“No,” Rory shook his head. “My older brothers will get it before me. I would only get it if neither of them wanted it. And they really want to work on the farm, instead of ‘for the man’, so I’m happy to let them.”

“When would your sister get it?” Sam asked.

“After me.”

“Really? But she’s older than you.”

Another shrug from Rory. “It’s just the way my mum and dad would do it.”

“So, if you’re not going to work on the farm, what *are* you going to do?” I asked.

“Politics?”

I heard the question mark drift about the room, visiting each occupant in turn, almost inviting each of us to pick up on Rory’s clear uncertainty. I made no comment, my focus mostly on what Carson had been talking about. I was certain that much of it was exaggerations and even lies, but there would be an element of truth to it as well.

“So, do you know anyone who works at one of these places?” I asked him.

“Well, no,” Carson said, sounding a little sheepish. “But when you’re at university, you can do a sandwich course and spend a year working for one,” he added, raising his voice as Marvin, Rory and Sam started to jeer.

“A *sandwich* course?” Rory started to laugh.

“Are you sure that’s not something to do with working in catering?” Sam asked, grinning.

“It’s a course that lets you do two years at uni, a year working for someone, and then your final year at uni again,” Carson said with a sigh. “It means your course is four years, instead of three.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Dave nodded. “My dad says that they get students in there from time to time. They’re there from the autumn until the following summer.”

“Paid?” I asked. I didn’t expect they would be. After all, you were a student.

“Yep,” Carson said. “At about two-thirds or so of what they would pay a graduate normally.”

“And how much is that?” I asked, still sceptical.

“About thirty grand,” Carson said.

The room exploded. “Thirty fucking thousand pounds?” we all breathed. “That’s tons!”

“Fucking hell, and I thought fifteen grand was a lot,” Baz said.

“Is that what they pay your dad?” Marvin smirked. Baz didn’t rise to it.

“Thirty grand when you’re on a sandwich course? So, what do they normally get?” I asked, my mind embarking on some mental arithmetic before the words had completely left my mouth.

“Fifty?”

“About that,” Carson said.

The explosion didn’t happen this time, and the Belfry fell silent as we all began to add up what that implied in the long term, what we would spend the money on, and how much the salary might actually rise to.

I was bowled over by what Carson had said. If he was being honest and wasn’t on a mission to wind us all up that night, it meant I could pull in more money in my first year of employment than my own mother did right now. Maybe even surpass my father’s after ten years. Thirty thousand pounds while still a student? My six years’ tuition at St Christopher’s had so far cost my parents something in the region of sixty grand. It suddenly sounded like nothing.

“See? You all thought I was making this up,” Carson smiled, taking the opportunity to defend himself now that he had everyone on the back foot.

“You could buy loads of cars with that,” Rob said.

“Or just one very flash one,” Marvin said, picking up one of the copies of *GQ* that littered Carson’s room and starting to thumb through it, Rob similarly pawing at the pages. It was obvious that he was already spending Carson’s salary in his head, looking at the watches, gadgets, and all else that were reviewed in the magazine’s pages, creating a mental shopping list of must-haves. “I’d go for a Lambo.”

“You couldn’t afford one of those on fifty grand a year,” Baz said.

“*You* couldn’t,” Marvin said, without lifting his eyes from the page, “not with your mum and dad being poor and living in a shoebox.”

“I’m not poor!” Baz glared.

“Yeah, okay,” I then said, looking back to Carson. “But that doesn’t sound like it’d make you a millionaire all that quickly. You’d need ...” I embarked on another round of maths.

“Around twenty years to make a million,” Sam said.

“And you’ve got to take the tax off and other things like that,” Rory added. “So it would take a lot longer.”

Marvin and Rob looked up from the magazine, both appearing a little deflated. The magazine was open on a double-page spread of a car they both had been gazing at, likely one that carried a six-figure price tag. It would take them both an age to pay for one of those, even if they combined

their salaries. It was already sounding like we had found a gaping hole in Carson's get-rich-quick scheme. Carson only started laughing.

"That's the *basic wage*, and you don't make the money that way, anyway," he said.

"How do you make it?" Marvin asked.

"Bonuses. Your basic salary is only about fifty or sixty grand—"

"*Only*," Rory snorted.

"—but you get hundreds of thousands at least a year in bonuses."

"Jesus!" I was unable to help myself.

"Really?" Marvin said.

"Really," Carson said, genuinely serious in both his tone and expression.

Marvin's eyes flicked instantly back to the magazine as Rob tried to yank it from his grasp, the two boys starting to fight over what had now become their fantasy shopping catalogue.

"Oh, fuck off, Young, you're so full of shit," Rory then said angrily. "Not even doctors get that much."

"I'm not making this up," Carson said. "That's what they get. The CEOs of the banks get tens of millions in bonuses every year. Seriously, go ask Mr Davies."

"Who?" Marvin said, as the magazine continued to suffer the attention of Rob and his tussles.

"Mr Davies, the A-Level economics teacher."

I had never heard of the man before. Quite likely, this was because he only taught the sixth form, and so I would have no interaction with him. It was possible that I had met him on the odd occasion, but I suspected that he only visited the school on the days he taught. There were a handful of teachers at St Christopher's that could be described as part-time staff.

"So, do you already know who you want to go and work for?" Marvin said, finally losing the struggle over the magazine to Rob.

"I was actually thinking of working in America," Carson said with a glance in Sam's direction. "If I can get in."

"You'll need a work visa or sponsorship," Sam said.

"You can't just go?" I asked.

"No," Sam shook his head. "Employment laws in America are really strict. You can't just fly over there and ask for a job."

"That's the same with most countries, though," Marvin said. "Except Australia."

"*Except Australia?*" Sam asked.

"Yeah, there's no one there. They always want people to come over and work there from what I hear. Especially teachers."

"So why do they always come to teach over *here*?" I chuckled, along with everyone else.

"Because it's *boring* out there. There's nothing to do. *Neighbours* isn't true to life," Marvin said.

"Shame," Rob said, without looking up from *GQ*. "The girls on there are fit. I'd go tomorrow, if

I could.”

I motioned Carson to continue. “And if you can’t get into America?”

“I’d work for one of the banks in London,” Carson said. “I’d like to work for Goldman Sach, but apparently the interview process is really hard and takes forever; they want to see you about ten times before they’ll let you work for them. So, I think that either Lehman Brothers or Bear Sterns would be a safer bet. Lehman isn’t as big as Bear, so there’s plenty of room for growth. And if you get in there fast, you can get shares and options that could be worth a fortune in about ten or fifteen years’ time.”

Carson was sharing knowledge tonight of things I knew little or nothing about. I’d never heard of any of the banks he had mentioned, more common names to me being Barclays, Lloyds, Midland, TSB (the bank that liked to say *YES!*). I would just have to go with Carson’s explanation that they were safe bets. And if everything Carson was saying was true, then I knew I should take a serious look into this whole trading and economics thing myself.

“I’ll just get into either of those after I graduate and stay there until I’ve made enough money to comfortably retire,” Carson added, leaning back in his sofa chair.

“At thirty-five?” Rory joked.

“Maybe longer, if I haven’t made enough to buy a second yacht,” Carson said with a grin. Now he was being sarcastic.

There came a knock at the door, causing us all to fall silent. Only a teacher or a younger boy would knock. A prefect or other sixth former would simply barge in, not caring at all.

“Come in,” Carson said.

The door swung open and into the room stepped Father Thomas, ducking under the doorframe as he came. He was a tall man, originally from somewhere in Africa. He was somewhat intimidating to look at due to his height and what was often confused as a persistent scowl on his face. Speaking to him, however, one would discover that he was as harmless as a teddy bear. He also liked to laugh a lot. Most boys knew him as *The B.F.G.* as a result.

Father Thomas smiled warmly as he saw us all sitting about. “It sounds like you’re all having fun in here tonight,” he chuckled.

“We were just talking about careers,” Carson said.

“Oh, jolly good,” Father Thomas said. “Planning on changing the world?”

“Not as such,” I said as we looked from one to the other. “Making plans for the future, in case the recession never ends.”

Father Thomas nodded, then said, “I see it’s almost time for evening prayers. Given that the headmaster has received some rather unpleasant news today, I would suggest you get back to your houses on time, so as not to find any reason to further upset him.”

It was good advice. We left the evening there, heading back to our houses to prepare for evening prayers. Carson reminded us not to return, just in case we bumped into the headmaster on the way back. He also had work he needed to be getting on with. I chose to do some myself, spurred on by

new thoughts of success and potential riches to come. I slept well that night, dreaming of lying on a mattress stuffed full of fifty-pound notes.

Chapter Nine

It wasn't until late December that term ended, only a few days before Christmas. We would normally finish about two weeks before, but the discovery on the Road had pushed the end of term back a fair way.

Christmas at home was a short holiday, the spring term starting in the first week of January, meaning I only had ten days off. My parents weren't too inventive with their present that year, my mother quite proud of the new black shoes she had bought me.

"They'll look smart around the school, while you're sitting your exams," she said.

I forced a smile and thanked her. I had been hoping for a Game Boy, but I guess my parents didn't want me to be distracted from my studies. Next year, I would be asking for driving lessons as a combined Christmas-birthday present.

I was pleased to discover that my parents didn't appear to have ransacked my room since I had returned to school following the impromptu break. The prospectus from BSFC was still where I had left it under my mattress. I couldn't help grinning as I retrieved it. Most other boys my age hid porn there.

Recalling the advice Mr Finn, my personal tutor, had given me, I decided that now was the right time to tell my parents that I no longer wanted to attend St Christopher's. How to go about it, though? For a time, I mulled telling them directly – just walking up to them while they were drinking coffee and letting them know. It felt a little blunt, though, and that wasn't my style. But as I sat on my bed, trying to make up my mind as to how to approach the subject, my mother solved the problem for me.

"Joe, I'm just popping to Waitrose. What would you like for dinner?" she said breezily, coming in with a glass of orange juice. "What are you reading?"

At that moment, I felt that perhaps it would have been *better* if I had been caught with a copy of *Club International* in my hand. The feeling then passed, and I chose to state it as it was. "It's the prospectus for the local sixth form college," I said.

My mother paused as if not hearing me. "What for?"

"The prospectus for the local sixth form college," I repeated.

"Why do you have that?"

"Because I want to go there next year," I said.

Again, my mother said nothing, clearly trying to work out if she was hearing me correctly or whether I was joking.

"But you go to St Christopher's," she said.

"I know," I said, feeling a little more confident. "But I don't want to go there any more. I want to do my A-Levels somewhere else."

She came over, taking the prospectus from me and beginning to leaf through it, already appearing thoroughly unimpressed. She paused on the pages where I had made notes and circled

various items.

“Is this because of the murder?” she asked. “Because the headmaster has assured us that the school is safe.”

“It’s nothing to do with that, no,” I said.

“So why do you want to leave?”

“Because I’m bored of it.”

“Bored?” She stepped back as though I had slapped her.

“Yes, *bored*,” I said, a little more forcefully than I intended. “I’ve been there nearly seven years now, and I need a change.”

“Oh, nonsense,” she said, though she continued to flip through the pages, scanning the timetable and course list at the back. “Don’t be stupid, Joseph,” she eventually handed the prospectus back. “You go to a very good school, and you can’t leave.”

This was exactly the situation that I wanted to avoid – one where my parents wouldn’t *let* me leave. It wasn’t as though they could physically force me to attend St Christopher’s. They were hardly likely to bind and gag me, shove me into the boot of the car and dump me at the school gates, along with my possessions. But with my mother’s immediate refusal to entertain my desires to move on from the boarding school I had attended since I was nine, it sure felt like it.

“Catherine?” I heard my father then coming up the stairs. “Catherine, where are you?”

“In here,” my mother replied, doing little to disguise the irritation in her voice.

“Something wrong?” my father asked, as he saw the look on my mother’s face.

“Ask him,” my mother said, nodding to me.

“Joe, what have you done now?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“He says he wants to leave the school,” my mother growled.

“You don’t want to go back next term?” my father asked. “But we’ve already paid the fees. We’ve also been assured that that incident was a one off and won’t happen again.”

“No, not next term,” I said. “I mean after I’ve done my GCSEs.”

“After you’ve finished your exams?” my father said, looking to my mother.

“Yes,” I said.

“You can’t.”

“Why?” I asked, somewhat incredulously.

“Because you can’t.”

“That makes no sense.”

“If you quit school now, what are you going to do? Get a job working the tills in the supermarket? Because that’s all you’re likely to get at sixteen.”

“No, Dad,” I said, now offering the prospectus to him. “I want go here.”

The look on my mother’s face remained one that could sour her orange juice, watching wordlessly as my father took the prospectus and began to study it.

“Why do you want to go here?” my father asked.

“He says he’s bored,” my mother quipped.

“I *am* bored there,” I emphasised.

“You can’t come and live back here,” my father said.

“Why not?” *Why the bloody hell not?!* was what I really wanted to say.

“Look, Joe, we don’t have time to talk about this now. Your mother and I are very busy today. You’re staying at that school until you’ve finished your A-Levels.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not. I’ll have been there nearly seven years by the summer, and it’s about time I went somewhere else.”

“Joe, you’re staying at St Christopher’s until you finish your A-Levels,” my father repeated.

“No, I’m not.”

“Joe, yes, you are.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” my mother said before stomping out of my room. “I’m making pork chops for dinner,” she said over her shoulder. “Tough if you don’t want them because that’s all I’m cooking.”

“Thank you, Joe,” my father said, watching her leave. “Now it’s me that’s going to get it in the neck for the rest of the day.”

“I’m going to let the school know I’m leaving at the end of the year,” I went on. “They only need a heads-up at this point. At least half of the third years leave when they finish their GCSEs, too, so it’s not unusual.”

“You can tell them if you want,” my father said, handing back the prospectus, “but you’re not going to a different school, and that’s the end of it. Now, I have work to be getting on with.”

Do you never switch off? I wondered as my father left me sitting in my room by myself. It was Christmas week, and they were both ploughing on as if it would kill them to stop for just one day. That was about as much as I was going to get out of them for now, I knew. I chose to let the subject lie and not bring it up again while I was at home. Sadly, it had put my mother (and subsequently my father) in a bad mood for the remainder of my holiday, and, somewhat ironically, I couldn’t wait to get away from home and back to St Christopher’s.

Hilary Term

January 1992 – March 1992

Chapter Ten

I returned to St Christopher's in the first week of January, to spend the spring term in the third year dormitory along with Baz, Sam, Anthony Simmons, Charlie Smith, Darren Smith (no relation), and Sebastian Silverman. Simmons and Charlie Smith were part of the Clique, and I generally had little to do with them. Darren Smith and Silverman were on the fringe, but stayed decidedly neutral in the Clique's affairs. They were the type who would rebel in their own way, but were actually quite laid back. Simmons I was sure was in the school's sights for becoming head of house when the time came; both the Smiths and Silverman would become prefects for sure.

"How was Texas?" I asked Sam, as I made up my bed.

"Hot compared to here," he said. "About sixty-five degrees."

"Jesus!" Baz said. "That's hotter than the Sahara!"

"That's Fahrenheit, you dickhead," Simmons said. "It's about sixteen over here."

"All right, calm down," Baz snapped back at him.

"Eighteen," Silverman said, working out the difference as he continued toying with his scientific calculator.

"Was it nice to be home?" I looked back at Sam, keen to avoid any arguments from breaking out already.

"Cody was home," Sam said, fiddling around with an AC adapter, so that he could plug his bedside lamp into the wall socket. "Rare that he gets any time off right now."

"Are they going to send him back to the Middle East again?" I asked.

"Your brother's in the Middle East?" Simmons said, somewhat indignantly.

"Yeah," Sam replied.

"Why?"

"Because he's in the army, and that's where they've sent him," Sam said.

"Fuck that!" Simmons scowled, trying to plump his pillows as Charlie and Darren sat on his bed, getting in the way. "I wouldn't go."

"You can't really refuse unless you quit."

"All right, well he could just quit."

"He wants to go there," Sam tried again.

"Why?"

"To defend the country from Saddam Hussein," Sam replied.

I wanted to tell Sam not to bother arguing with Simmons, as it was clear to me that he was doing it just to wind Sam up. The Clique tended to have very high opinions of themselves, and generally considered things such as military service to be something that only stupid people did.

"By going over *there*?" Simmons said. "Saddam Hussein's not invading the US."

"Ant, give him a break," Silverman said without raising his eyes from his calculator, which he was feeding equations into to generate a graph for his own amusement. "That's his job and what he

wants to do.”

“Stupid job,” Simmons muttered. “Invading someone else’s country and getting shot at.”

“Did you get nice presents?” I asked Sam, eager once more to change the subject. I didn’t want to put up with twelve weeks of tension on account of Simmons’ lack of appreciation of other people’s views, cultures and politics.

“A Discman,” Sam said, picking up the device off the bed and offering it to me to look at. “It’s got an ESP of ten seconds and has a bass boost.”

“ESP?” Baz asked.

“Electronic Shock Protection. It means that if you jog it, it won’t skip.”

“Cool,” I said, handing it back.

“It’s sort of pointless given that I’ve got a stereo here that plays CDs,” he admitted. “But it’s what my folks bought me.”

“Sure, but you can listen to it in the library, and it’s easier than stretching the headphone cord from your stereo to your bed,” I said, nodding to the distance between them.

“So, they’re definitely sending your brother back to the Gulf?” Baz then wanted to know, realising too late as I shot him a look to say it was a subject we should avoid for now.

“My folks don’t want him to,” Sam said. “But he wants to go. He says he misses all the other soldiers when he’s not with them. He says he does get a little bored when he’s out there though, but he doesn’t really get on with being back in the everyday world right now.”

“There’s a term for that, I think,” I said, clicking my fingers to try and remember. “Stockholm Syndrome?”

“That’s the hostage thing,” Silverman said, without looking up from his calculator.

“Institute something,” Baz ventured.

“Institutionalised,” I said.

“I’m not sure it’s that,” Sam shook his head. “Anyway, my mom and dad don’t want him going back because they say it’s far too dangerous out there. He’s been shot at a few times and was quite near an explosion that went off late last year.”

“Did you tell your parents about what happened here? I mean, what *really* happened?” I asked.

“They already knew, and they weren’t too keen on me coming back here this term, to be honest.”

The statement got the dormitory’s attention, Simmons and the two Smiths paying Sam some attention, even Silverman looking up from his calculator.

“Really?” I asked.

Sam nodded. “They said they didn’t want me to be over here if that sort of thing was going to be going on.”

“Yeah, but it was probably done by someone who likes little boys. Not something that’s going to bother us,” Simmons said, though he glanced to the two Smiths as he spoke.

I found it odd how some talked about the murder as if it wasn’t a big deal, especially those in

the Clique. That was the problem with those sorts of people – so long as it didn't directly affect them or anyone close to them, they didn't care; it was more of an inconvenience than anything else.

“Do they know who did it yet?” Charlie Smith then asked, as Simmons turfed him and Darren Smith off his bed, so he could finish making it.

“I don't think so,” Darren Smith said. “I don't think they've even got a suspect.”

“Can't they just use DNA testing?” Baz wanted to know. “They could get it from his clothes and find out who did it that way, easily.”

“It's not something you can just do overnight, you pleb,” Simmons once again took a jab at Baz's cockney background. “It's not like on TV where they put it in that spinning thing ...”

“Centrifuge,” Silverman supplied.

“... whatever, and get the results,” Simmons finished.

“And even if they could, they would need everyone's DNA on record, and that would take ages to go through,” Darren Smith said.

“Yeah. And besides, he wasn't *wearing* any clothes. The pervert had stripped him naked, probably to fiddle with him before he killed him.”

“Maybe even after,” Charlie Smith said.

“After?”

“Some people are into that sort of thing.”

“What the fuck is wrong with some people?” Simmons asked angrily.

“So, your mum and dad wanted you to stay in America?” I looked back to Sam.

“I think they were just saying that,” Sam said. “Cody is going back out to Iraq soon, to help with the no-fly zone stuff that's happening over there. It's still really dangerous, though.”

I understood what Sam meant without him having to explain further. Sam's parents already had one son who was of great concern to them, putting his life on the line in a foreign country and fighting a war. They didn't want their other son to be in danger of losing his life, too, should another murder take place. Should the murderer strike again, would they pick a larger target this time? I briefly recalled the sight of Scott Parker, lying face up in the bushes. He had been a small boy, quite thin, even for his age. Had that been why he had been picked, because he had been easy to grab and carry? Sam was hardly thin or small, but still ...

The dormitory door then opened and in walked Brian Donald and Terry Lindsey, of Tudor House, another two members of the Clique. They looked briefly around the dorm, glancing over to Sam, Baz and I, before focusing on Simmons.

“Alright? What you doing?” Donald asked.

“Not a lot,” Simmons said.

“Want to come to our dorm, instead? Or we can chat in the Tudor common room.” I could hear the forced disgust in his voice that Simmons might be sharing a dorm with people such as Baz, Sam and I, those Donald considered beneath him.

“Sure,” Simmons said, picking up his wallet and keys and starting out immediately.

“Wait for us,” Darren Smith said, he and Charlie Smith following quickly after them.

“You two dweebs aren’t allowed; you have to stay here with Crotty’s gang,” Lindsey joked, to laughter from the group as they departed, the dormitory door slamming behind them.

“Nice people at this school,” Baz commented. “Did you get anything good for Christmas?” he asked me.

“Oh, yes,” I said, lifting a CD case off my shelf and handing it to him.

“*Red Blood?*” Baz looked confused.

“*Red Hot Chili Peppers,*” I said. “*Blood Sugar Sex Magik* is the name of the album.”

Sam looked over Baz’s shoulder, the pair screwing their faces up as they looked over the cover and track listing. “Never heard of them,” Baz said. “Is it any good?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, grinning. “You’re going to love this.”

Baz and Sam both did, and so I made them copies on tape, something to listen to as the term commenced and we continued to revise for our mock GCSEs.

Chapter Eleven

Being a Catholic school, we were expected to attend Mass every Sunday, at ten. Most went along with this without fuss, although others attempted to get out of it by hiding in various parts of the school – their dormitories, their rooms, in little known places around the campus, and sometimes even the classrooms themselves.

Though Mass lasted only an hour, we were required to arrive at the church at least fifteen to twenty minutes before, and be on our best behaviour while there. The teachers and monks would watch us like hawks, knowing that here, in full view of the churchgoing public, we were representative of the attitudes of the pupils at St Christopher's. The church, St Christopher's Catholic Church, was also *our* church, and so we were expected to show the utmost respect for it and everyone who graced its doors.

The abbey itself was enormous. Being one of the few places of worship for Catholics for many miles around (others were apparently just small chapels, considered satellite buildings to the main abbey), it attracted a great number of parishioners. Because of this, the church would often recruit a handful of school pupils to help perform various duties – handing out newsletters, helping the old to their seats, making sure people had hymnbooks and sheets, preparing the tea afterwards, performing altar service, and handing out communion. The latter two were fairly uncommon, usually being handled by parishioners themselves or laymen.

I was never bothered about having to attend church, quite indifferent to it, but I would prefer to avoid it where possible. Even so, hiding out in the school during the service carried a number of risks. Staff (and sometime even monks!) would regularly patrol the grounds to ensure that stragglers made it in on time, and to also catch those who had decided not to attend. The punishment for being caught could involve anything from a Sunday detention to being put on the *Murga List*. Neither of those were at all appealing. Therefore, the best thing to do was often to volunteer for the duty of handing out the hymnbooks and newsletters to parishioners as they arrived. Owing to its size, the church featured a number of different entrance hallways, meaning it was easy to perform the job of handing out the various books and sheets of paper, before then fading away either to the very back of the church (and then making a sneaky exit in the latter half of Mass) or not going in at all.

On this particular Sunday, Sam, Rob, and I had decided to slip away from church during communion. Not as early as we would have liked, but we had seen too many teachers and monks patrolling the grounds today for us to risk disappearing any sooner.

"Are you going to go to church when you're at university?" Rob asked in a whispered voice. I could tell he was being extremely sarcastic.

"No, I think I've had enough church to serve me for one lifetime," I replied, just as quietly.

I watched the parishioners a few rows in front of me, to see if their ears were twitching as they picked up on our conversation. I had found the best time to talk was either during hymns, readings, the Gospel, or any other time someone was speaking over the microphone, the sound effectively

preventing my voice from carrying too far. It could also help to hold a hymn sheet in front of your face to prevent anyone from seeing your lips moving during the non-singing periods, too.

“I get the whole religion thing, anyway,” I carried on. “It’s just about love and respect and not doing harm to others. That’s all that God wants us to do. It’s not hard. I’ve learned the lessons.”

Rob turned to me with a look of disdain. “Yeah, whatever,” he said. “I only come here because we’re made to. It’s all nonsense really.”

Nonsense? I made to say something.

“Oh, stand,” Sam interrupted.

We did so, looking to the Order of Mass we had been handing out and putting in an effort to make it look as though we were singing the next hymn.

“What do you mean nonsense, Rob?” I asked. “You think this is all a waste of time?”

Rob didn’t answer me. Either he didn’t hear me or he was choosing not to respond to the question right now.

I cast an eye over the others in the church. We were typically seated in our houses when we were here, dozens of black suits sporting a variety of coloured, patterned ties to distinguish ourselves. Butcher’s was red, Tudor green, Enfield purple, Cookson grey, and Martin a sky blue. The heads of houses’ ties added gold trims to various parts of the patterns, while the head boy’s tie was pure black and gold, regardless of the house to which they belonged. The order of seating was also determined by year. Older boys (that is to say the sixth formers) would sit towards the back, the younger years seated progressively closer to the front. Never right at the front, however, as those seats were reserved for the regular parishioners. A smattering of different clothes would break up the black blazers, the parents of some of the boys who would be heading home for the Sunday, or perhaps just being taken for a day out if their parents lived too far away to make the journey worthwhile.

I saw a few heads turning in our direction, other boys who would either be wondering why we were sitting so far back, so close to the doors, or would have worked out that we were planning to end our Sunday attendance prematurely.

At the same moment, I sensed the doors behind where I was standing open soundlessly, and I glanced around to see a man, dressed in his Sunday best, enter, who then, after a momentary scan of the seating, came to stand alongside us. Sam, Rob and I exchanged some bemused glances as he did so. There was plenty of other seating available in the church, so there was no need to join our solitary row. We said nothing, but just nodded to him as he made eye contact. I automatically passed him one of the Order of Mass sheets. The hymn soon ended, and we sat back down.

“Hiding at the back, eh, boys?” the man said after a time, speaking only so loudly that the three of us could hear him.

We started. Who was this man? Was this one of the sixth form tutors that we didn’t know about, one that only came to the school a couple of times a week to teach? Perhaps one of the laymen that worked and lived on the grounds? Or maybe even one of the regular parishioners, who was wise to

our game of dodging out of going to church and had moved back here to ensure we remained for the duration.

“Just making sure that any latecomers can get seats and know what the hymns are,” Sam supplied. His voice lacked conviction.

The man stifled a chuckle, smiling without showing any teeth. “Don’t worry, lads, I used to do the same myself. I’m an old boy.”

“Oh?” I asked, still keeping my voice low. “You used to come here?”

Everyone else was focused on the communion preparations that were going on by the altar. One of the sixth formers was performing altar service duties for the first time, and a number of the boys were keen to see if he dropped anything or made a mess of the proceedings as his nerves got to him.

“In the seventies,” our companion said. “I was in Churchill House. What houses are you in?” he wanted to know, glancing to our ties.

“Butcher and Martin,” I said.

“Ah, Martin was still being built when I was here. My name’s Adrian Willis, by the way. Nice to meet you,” the man introduced himself.

I had never heard of him. I wondered whether he had once been head of school or head of house. They tended to make more regular return visits to the school than most others, mainly to meet with the teachers they had once known and sometimes to give talks on post-school life, careers, and that sort of thing.

“Were you head of Churchill?” Sam asked, thinking along the same lines as myself.

“No,” Adrian said. “I never made it that far.”

“Decided to get out while you could?” I joked.

“No,” Adrian said, still maintaining the smile. “I was expelled.”

“Really? What happened?” I asked, a little louder and more excitedly than I meant to.

Expulsions were rare at St Christopher’s and only happened under very exceptional circumstances. Mostly, boys were rusticated for a few weeks as a warning that their behaviour was not acceptable. From what I understood, expulsions were avoided to save face and maintain the school’s reputation. St Christopher’s would rather avoid the school gaining a reputation that it was full of bullies, and rebellious and uncontrollable students. Although I was sure that recent events would give any such reports a good run for their money.

“Some messy business to do with drugs,” Adrian said. “A false accusation I should add, but due to some mitigating circumstances, I was never able to fully prove otherwise.”

“How come?” I asked.

Adrian didn’t answer that, paying attention to the service. “Is that Father Benedict leading the Mass?”

“Yes,” I said, watching as Father Benedict raised the communion host. “He’s headmaster, but might be retiring soon to become the Abbot, instead.”

Adrian nodded but said nothing else.

“When did you leave? What year?” Rob then asked.

“Lower sixth, just as I was preparing for my A-Levels,” Adrian said. “Made my life more than a little complicated, I can tell you.”

He was still smiling, but I couldn’t quite understand why. Being expelled due to drugs wasn’t something that I would be happy about. But maybe it had been that long ago that he was now able to look back on it and laugh.

“So, why are you back here?” I asked. I would never return to a school that I had been expelled from. I assumed that I would probably never return to a job that I had been fired from, either.

“I heard about the problems the school has been having recently, and it reminded me that I’ve not been here for a while. I thought I’d pop in for a visit and see how everything was going, and see what had changed.”

He, of course, meant the murder. I remembered the newspaper article Carson had shown me, that let all the details out of the bag. Adrian had clearly read it himself.

“Did any of you know the victim?” Adrian asked.

We admitted that we didn’t.

“Shame for it to happen to someone so young, in their very first term. His parents must have been devastated. That sort of thing never went on when I was here. We had it a lot tougher then, I can tell you, but never anything as grotty as this. I read about it in the *Evening Post*. It was the only paper that seemed to actually know the full details of what happened, rather than just speculating on it.”

I knew that the school hadn’t publicly admitted to the murder, only the parents of those attending the school needing those sorts of details. The public had likely been told a different story, something about Scott Parker having a heart condition that had caused him to collapse during a run down the Red Road. Even so, I wondered just how many Q&A sessions the headmaster had had to field with the parishioners here over the exact details of the event. I glanced to the parishioners close by, wondering just how many of them might actually know the real story and were staying mum for the school’s sake.

“So, what are you going to do today?” I wanted to know, deciding to move on to another topic.

“Take a walk around the grounds, talk to any of the staff that I still recognise, perhaps get some lunch down at the White Horse. They do a fantastic roast down there. Or at least they did the last time I was here.”

“No, they still do,” Rob said. “Better than the slop they give us here at any rate.”

“Wafer thin beef, watery gravy, and undercooked potatoes?” Adrian asked, with the same irrepressible smile.

“Spot on,” I said.

“A lot of things have changed at this school over the years, yet the one thing that always stays consistent is the awful quality of the food,” Adrian said, chuckling.

Communion was starting, the bowls of hosts and chalices being handed out to the servers. Sam,

Rob, and I would be making our exit soon, amongst the long lines of parishioners and boys queuing to receive the offering. With so many people moving about all over the place it was the perfect cover.

“Shall we go?” I asked Sam and Rob.

“I’m not bothering,” Rob said. “It’s just bread and wine.”

I was going to remind Rob of the importance of the symbolism, but I bit back my words.

“Sam?” I asked. “We’ll get out when we’re done. Best we go now, before the line gets too long and people see us leaving.”

“Sure,” Sam said, getting to his feet.

“Are you coming, Adrian?” I asked.

“No,” Adrian said, nodding in Rob’s direction. “I’m in agreement with your friend here.”

I started up with Sam, when I became aware of a shape looming close to us. Ah, hell. It was Mr Hancock, otherwise known as Handjob, the housemaster of Tudor. He always looked to me that he should be working the door at some exclusive nightclub, picking the riffraff up by the scruff of their necks with one hand and tossing them away. Even more so today, dressed in one of his best suits for church. He crouched down behind the chairs, clearly wanting to make sure that none of the parishioners watching could tell that we were in trouble.

“Boys, as you’re obviously not participating in the Mass, could you all make your way to the tearoom and help to set up after you’ve had communion?” he rumbled, the light glancing off his totally bald head.

“Yes, sir,” we all said.

Damn, I thought. Now I was going to be stuck here for longer. Providing the post-Mass tea did give us the chance to get stuck into the tea, coffee, biscuits and occasional chocolate rolls, but it could also mean that we didn’t get to enjoy our Sunday freedom until almost midday, especially if we got collared into having to clean up.

“Good,” Mr Hancock said, nodding towards the ever-lengthening line of those queuing for communion. “Off you go.”

“I’m not going,” Rob said.

“Go, Robert,” Mr Hancock ordered, his tone not inviting argument.

We started up, queuing up to receive communion, before we all headed for the tearoom. I saw Mr Hancock meet the eyes of our short-term companion as we did so.

“Morning, Dean,” Adrian said with a smile and a nod.

“Morning, Adrian,” Mr Hancock replied. There was no warmth in his voice.

*

The hot water urns were huge great containers that had to be filled from a hose in the kitchens of the church. The resulting contents were then so heavy that it took two of us to hoist them onto the

tables, only a little over three feet high.

We commenced setting out the cups with the help of some of the regular parishioners that liked to involve themselves with such things. Mr Hancock put in an appearance just as Mass was ending, to ensure that we hadn't skived off halfway through the task, and soon enough the boys and churchgoers were filling the back hall, asking us to prepare them a cup of either tea or coffee. I obliged without a grumble. I had hoped that perhaps there wouldn't be too many staying for tea and biscuits, meaning that I could escape at a more reasonable time. Sadly, we were still in the grip of winter, and so there were perhaps more than usual, everyone keen for a hot drink before venturing back outside. The snows would be coming soon, I was sure.

The crowds thinned after about forty-five minutes, and another ten minutes later we were finally able to start packing up. Mr Hancock continued to watch the three of us. An hour of my Sunday gone. I wouldn't be able to pull the sneaking-off stunt for another three weeks at least now. I then saw a man hovering, recognising him as Adrian Willis. He met my eye and came over, still wearing that same smile.

"Doesn't work every time," he said.

"No," I answered, finding myself grinning. "Though I don't normally get lumbered with tea duty. Usually, they just catch up with me as I'm sneaking out, tell me that Mass hasn't ended and to get back inside."

"I always used to hide out in Churchill. I knew all the secret hiding spots, and every way in and out of that building, without getting seen."

"I'm not sure Butcher has anything like that," I said. "If it did, I probably wouldn't have lost an hour of my Sunday doing this."

"Probably the worst bit about providing the tea is that you're not allowed to eat the biscuits," Adrian said.

"Absolutely, and lunch is probably going to be shit today, too. Oh, sorry," I corrected.

"Don't worry about it," Adrian waved away the apology. "I'm not offended, and there's no one up there to hear it, either," he added with a glance to the ceiling. He then looked about himself, before reaching into his pocket and presenting me with two packets of biscuits – custard creams and chocolate digestives. He must have taken them off a table before they were unwrapped and put on plates, to be walked around the hall and offered to the parishioners.

"Thank you," I said.

"Because lunch probably *will* be shit, eh?" he winked.

"So, if you don't mind me asking, what exactly happened with your expulsion?" I asked as I began to stack up the used cups.

"I was believed to have been dealing drugs," he said quite matter-of-factly.

"Really? Dealing?" I repeated a little softly.

"*Believed*," Adrian said, putting emphasis on the word.

"Heroin?" It was the only drug that immediately came to mind.

“Good lord, no!” Adrian laughed. “That would be understandable.”

And dealing some drugs is okay? I wondered.

“No, I was expelled by the school because they found a certain amount of weed in my room – cannabis, I mean – and believed that I had been supplying it to other sixth formers. I denied it, of course, as I didn’t bring any drugs into the school. But they then made us all take a urine sample test, and a number of the sixth formers, including myself, came up positive. One of them must have planted the weed in my room and then ratted me out as the supplier.”

“But you did smoke it yourself?” I asked.

“Yes, but just not at school,” Adrian said, his smile now faded. “On weekends with friends back home and during the school holidays. I’m not sure how the plant sussed out that I was a smoker, too. Maybe I just seemed far too relaxed most of the time, or perhaps he could just *tell*. I may have even mentioned it without meaning to,” he shrugged.

I didn’t know what to think. Cigarettes and porn were banned at the school and taken very seriously, fines and letters being sent home to parents. Expulsions were also in place for sustained bullying. Adrian, on the other hand, had been regularly smoking cannabis. Whether on school grounds or not, I found that pretty serious.

“So, they expelled me at the end of the summer term of the lower sixth and sent out information about it to all the parents, to make an example of me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Adrian only nodded.

“What did you do?” I asked. “Did you go somewhere else? A sixth form college or something?”

“I couldn’t. After I was expelled, the police got involved and I received a criminal record.”

Adrian shrugged.

“Oh,” was all I could find to say. “That was unnecessary.”

“It messed my life up, to be honest. I couldn’t get into medical school and no decent college would take me. My dreams of becoming a doctor were pretty much destroyed. I then just worked temporary jobs until I eventually managed to get some journalism skills and was able to become a freelance medical journal editor.”

“Well, at least you got to work in medicine,” I offered as a condolence.

“Yes. I can work from home and be my own boss. It doesn’t pay as much as I’d like, and, of course, I would have preferred to have been a doctor. But, *c’est le vie*.” He shrugged again.

“What happened to the other boys? Did they get expelled, too?” I asked.

“No. The school classed them as the *victims* and let them off.”

My jaw became slack. They let the other boys off? Was this another case of the school being scared of the sixth formers? Or perhaps the others were prefects, heads of houses, or even the head boy? Favouritism was most likely the cause, whatever it had been. Expelling boys in positions of authority, who were meant to be role models for younger pupils, wouldn’t look very good. I formed a hunch that the cannabis had perhaps belonged to the head boy. Of course, I had to take Adrian’s

word for it. It was possible that he actually *had* been dealing and just told people the story about being set up to make himself feel better about his own decisions in life. I felt sorry for him, though. The result of his expulsion was far worse than I thought he deserved. He seemed like a nice enough guy.

Adrian looked about, seeing that most of the parishioners had left and that only a handful of regulars, monks, and school staff were still milling around.

“I’d best be going,” he said, offering me his hand. “Nice to meet you ... er ...”

“Joseph,” I said, realising I had never introduced myself, and shaking his hand.

“Do you prefer ‘Joe’ or ‘Joseph’?”

“Joe.”

“Okay. Have a good Sunday, Joe. Enjoy the biscuits,” he said. I was glad to see him smiling again.

“Made a new friend?” Sam asked as we finished stacking cups and carried them through into the kitchen, to be taken care of later by the catering staff.

“I found out what he was expelled for,” I said.

“Oh, what?” asked Rob, who was making room on the worktop for more dirty cups.

“Dealing drugs.”

“Seriously?” Rob started.

“Yep.”

“Shiiiiiiit!” Sam said.

“Yeah, that’s not good, is it?” I said. “It screwed things up pretty badly for him, too. He wasn’t able to finish his A-Levels or get into medical school or anything like that.”

“I’m staying well away from all that stuff,” Sam said. “I’d rather not end up doing some crappy job because I got caught with a little bit of weed.”

“Hmm,” was all I replied. I then saw Rory step into the kitchen. I had seen him milling around the hall earlier, seemingly so with purpose.

“Alright?” he asked us, though he didn’t seem to care for our responses.

“Hey, Rory,” Sam said, “Joe, Rob, and I are going to have a game of touch rugby out on the playing fields after lunch. You coming?”

“Sure,” Rory said absently. He then tugged at one of the cupboards, finding it wasn’t locked. Several boxes of biscuits resided within, a couple of them open.

“Where’s Handjob?” he hissed, looking around at us.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t see him.”

“Go look.”

I did, seeing no one coming near the kitchen. “All clear.”

“Quick!” Rory said, pulling out one of the boxes and starting to liberate a good number of packets of biscuits, stuffing them into the various pockets of his suit.

I did likewise, as did Sam and Rob, until we felt we had taken enough. We had emptied about

half of what remained in the box. Not that anyone would notice hopefully.

Finishing up in the kitchen, we headed back to our dormitories to offload our stash, change into our casual clothes, and then do other things until lunch. I decided that I wouldn't be eating all the biscuits that I had stolen at once and would probably save them for later in the week. I ate one packet as I changed, followed later on in the afternoon by the custard creams Adrian had given me, my stomach rumbling like mad after our game of touch. The hunger was of no surprise to me, since, as predicted, lunch had indeed been shit.

Chapter Twelve

The next weekend was an Exit Weekend. My parents were away (again), and so I had to remain at St Christopher's. Sam had chosen to stay as well, not too bothered about escaping the grounds. I was glad for his company, as the Saturday and Sunday might have otherwise been quite boring. Somewhat ironically, I decided to help out that Sunday with the post-Mass tea, if only for something to do. Otherwise the day dragged, and I was glad when the evening meal rolled by, meaning that the other boys would soon be returning. I had other problems to deal with first, though.

*

“Here for another whole weekend, Mistake?”

Craig Priest was walking towards me, coming down the Marble Stairs of the main school as I ascended them. I walked along with Sam, choosing to ignore the obnoxious sixth former. The problem was that Priest hadn't decided to ignore me.

“Oi, Mistake, don't fucking ignore me when I'm talking to you,” Priest said, stepping in front of me.

I tried to walk around him, but he moved in my way. I refused to make eye contact with him.

“You've been here every Exit Weekend this term. Have your parents now decided to abandon you here? Let the monks look after you?” he said once again.

I had no idea what I had done to offend Priest and why he thought that verbally abusing me at every opportunity was within his rights. Perhaps it was just the way he was wired.

“Oi,” he said, pushing me.

“Craig, what's your problem?” I asked, finally meeting his eyes.

“Joe, ignore him,” Sam urged.

“I don't have a problem,” Priest said. “Except you.”

“Why?” I asked. Seriously, I wanted to know.

“Because you're a mistake and a loser.”

“What has that got to do with you?”

“Everything. You're a dweeb.”

The logic baffled me. He was attacking someone just because he found them different? I could never wrap my head around that concept. Did it unhinge people like Priest that not everyone was the same as he? Did it make him feel insecure?

“Why are *you* here?” I asked.

“I'm revising for my mocks,” he replied. “I *chose* to stay here.”

“How do know I didn't, too?”

“Because you didn't.”

He was half-grinning, half-scowling. Was he just bored? Was it because the sixth formers felt the need to assert some sort of dominance over the younger boys, no matter how they did it? Was it that I wasn't a part of the Clique? Whatever it was, I didn't care. I took Sam's advice and quickly sidestepped him, starting up the stairs again. Priest gave me another shove as I did so, but I ignored it.

"Not going to defend your parents, then?" he asked. His eyes then locked on Sam, following me. "Ah, I see. You're in a rush to get back to your dorm with your boyfriend."

Sam heeded his own advice and said nothing.

"My parents are working hard," I told Priest as I continued up. "That's why they're not at home a lot. Not all of us have the benefit of being children of millionaires."

"My parents aren't millionaires, but they don't refuse to let me go home for the weekend," Priest said. "The problem is that you're a dweeb and a pain in the arse, and the only reason your parents had you is because the condom broke."

"What?!" I stopped and rounded on Priest, glaring at him, my nostrils flaring.

"Oh ho!" Priest chuckled, feigning fright. "Look whose balls just dropped."

A handful of boys had gathered around the stairs, watching the scene unfold. I shouldn't really have been giving them anything to watch, but I had to make a couple of things clear to Priest.

"My parents are out of the country a lot and can't always be here for Exit Weekends. They work hard to send me here so I can get a good education, so stop dissing them. And also, don't *push* me," I said, giving Priest a shove on the chest with both hands.

I shoved a little too hard.

Priest took a step back to steady himself. He failed to do so, misplacing his footing and slipping on the stair below. He turned to try and reaffirm his balance, before tumbling down the Marble Stairs. He didn't cry out or shout as he went, the shock of the fall muting him.

"Shit," I said.

"Fucking hell, Joe. What did you do?" Sam asked.

I made to run down the stairs and see if Priest was okay, but I was suddenly quite bothered that this was the wrong thing to do. Priest was pulling himself to his feet, his limbs shaking. His face was red and he was gritting his teeth.

The Marble Stairs, as their name implied, were made of marble and I wondered just how much the fall had hurt. It was fairly uncommon for people to fall on the stairs, but any time it happened the results were always rather painful. Those falls were typically not as severe as this one had been, either.

Priest failed to stand and instead sat leaning up against the wall, rubbing his legs and arms. He certainly looked to be in pain. He also looked to be crying a little, too.

"You're DEAD Crosthwaite!" he screamed at me.

"Craig, are you okay?" I asked with genuine concern.

"FUCK OFF!" he shouted back at me. "YOU'RE DEAD! YOU HEAR ME?!"

It being a Sunday night and an Exit Weekend, there normally wouldn't be lot of boys around. Sadly, it was dinnertime, and so those who were still here were concentrated around the Marble Stairs, leading, amongst other places, to the refectory. A number of boys were already gathering and looking from Priest to me. I wasn't sure just how many of them had seen what had happened, but there was little doubt in my mind that the rumours wouldn't begin immediately. No doubt it would come out that I had beaten up Priest and thrown him down the Marble Stairs. Crap, this wasn't good.

"Let's go, Sam," I said.

I made my way back to Butcher, feeling my heart thumping quite hard in my chest. Mistake? I hoped that I hadn't just made a really big one.

Chapter Thirteen

When the time came for the mock exams, we made our way to our classrooms as normal; though now, instead of regular lessons, we were treated to extended periods that would run under exam conditions. Computer print-out notices were stuck on the doors of the classrooms and the entrances to the various corridors, warning that mock exams were in progress and to keep quiet. I remembered seeing them when I was a first year and had kept my head down as I had walked about the classroom block, making an even greater effort than ever to avoid eye contact with the older boys.

The last time I had sat a proper exam was Common Entrance, back when I was just twelve. Those exams had covered mostly the same subjects as my GCSES – English, maths, science, French, geography, and history. I had scored a string of As and a few Bs in those exams, though I had heard that a tremendous number of other boys had actually failed. Though the Common Entrance was supposed to govern pupils' entry into the senior school, and subsequently permit them to go on to take their GCSEs, it was said that the school had decided to save face and allow those that had failed the exams to progress to the senior school, anyway. It would be quite embarrassing for St Christopher's to deny half of their own pupils access to the senior school, on account of them being too thick to earn a place. Later investigation actually revealed that the exams had been too hard, a number of schools up and down the country facing similar failure rates, so it was likely that they would have been allowed in at any rate. Whether my near straight As meant that I was smarter than most others was only a fleeting thought in my head. I was more bothered about the transition to senior school and the fear of being beaten up after moving to Butcher House.

My first mock GCSE was geography, a subject that I was fairly nonplussed about, but suffered my way through without fuss. With all my classes having been cancelled for the duration of the mocks, I had spent the morning in the third year dorm, making a small effort to do some last-minute revision with Sam and Baz, testing one another with quick fire questions and going over some essays we had written over the past three years. Baz was in the B stream for geography, it being one of his weaker subjects, while Sam and I studied in the A stream. C streams existed, but only for certain subjects. Despite this, I actually found geography rather boring and couldn't care less about glacial erosion, oxbow lakes, and how to read the gradients on an Ordnance Survey map.

I set my pens and pencils down on the desk where I always sat during classes, Sam occupying the seat next to me, and we waited for Mr Hancock, the geography teacher, to give us a rundown of what would follow.

"Now," he rumbled his address to the classroom, "this being the first Monday of the first week of your mocks, I'm guessing that this is your first exam. Has anyone had any exams before this?"

"No, sir," came the prompt reply from the class. Most boys found the man quite intimidating; I was glad he wasn't my housemaster.

"That's what I thought," Mr Hancock said. "In that case, I will give you a brief explanation of how this week is going to run. These exams are going to operate under strict conditions. You will

not talk while the exam is in progress, nor may you leave if you finish early; you are to remain in your seats until the time is up. You are not to talk to anyone you are sitting next to, and if you are seen to be copying from them or anyone else, or passing notes, then you will fail automatically. You may also be banned from taking the actual GCSE next term, *so don't do it!*"

His eyes flickered over each boy in the classroom, ensuring that we had all heard that last part. He continued on, "Paper will be provided for you, but you must provide your own pens and pencils, so make sure you have enough. You will not be allowed to get any more if you run out."

I saw others starting to immediately check their pens to ensure they were full, as well as ensuring they had adequate spares. Sam laid out a number of ink cartridges for his fountain pen, far more than were actually needed. I had stopped using fountain pens myself the previous year. In my opinion, they didn't last as long as ballpoints. I also found that the ink was often too wet and fresh, dramatically increasing the smudge potential while writing. They also made my lettering come out a little too thick for my liking. But then, maybe I was just holding the pen wrong. It mattered little – ballpoints served me just as well.

"If you need more paper, hold up your hand and ask," Mr Hancock went on. "Please submit all the paper you use, even if you were just writing on it to make notes. It could be the case that your final answer is wrong, but your working out was partially correct. In some subjects, you would receive credit for that. Questions?"

Anthony Simmons raised his hand. "Are we allowed to go to the toilet?"

"I would suggest once only," Mr Hancock said, with an edge of finality to his voice. "If you go too often, then you might be deemed to be cheating and fail."

"That's not fair," Simmons said, already with a trace of arrogance to his voice. "What if I have a weak bladder?"

"Do you?" Mr Hancock growled.

"Well ... I might do from nerves."

"As I said," Mr Hancock reiterated, "you should go to the toilet only once. I would suggest that you go now if you need to, so that you don't have to go at all during the exam."

"How long is the exam?" Ben Wild asked.

"An hour and a half."

At that, a number of boys – mostly the Clique, I noticed – pushed back their seats and started out of the classroom. "Going to the toilet," they all muttered as they went.

"Can we bring our own notes?" Sam asked once everyone had returned.

"No," Mr Hancock said.

"Can we use calculators in any of these exams?" I asked. Such things could come in handy when working out gradients.

"Only if it says so on the paper. And you can't use one today. If any of you have brought notes or calculators with you today, please hand them to me now. Again, if I see you with them after the exam has started, you will fail."

“What if we just leave them in our pencil cases under our desk and not use them?” Simmons asked.

I wondered if he was attempting to wind Mr Hancock up and be awkward on purpose. Perhaps he was feeling exceptionally nervous.

“As I said,” Mr Hancock rumbled, “if you do not hand them over now, you will fail. It doesn’t matter if they are in your pencil case or not.”

At that, a number of boys began to unzip and open pencil cases, handing over their calculators and notes to the teacher to hold on to. A handful of other questions followed, before Mr Hancock prompted that it was time to get things underway. He handed out the exam questions, telling us not to turn them over until we were ready to begin. He then took his seat at the front of the classroom, declaring the exam start and end times, before finally telling us to start.

I turned the paper over (more a booklet of about twelve pages, in actuality) and started to read. There were three sections. The first was a series of multiple-choice questions, something I hoped would prove a breeze. The second section contained a number of short questions. I caught a sample of an Ordnance Survey map, as well as the questions below:

A) What is at grid reference 212452?

B) How high is the highest point at grid reference 2043?

C) What is the relief at grid reference 2244?

D) What do grid references 2145 and 2341 tell us about the past activity in the area? Explain your answer.

The final section was a choice between two different essays:

1) Discuss the positive and negative impacts of tourism on an area.

2) Describe the two main types of ecosystem, illustrating your answer with examples.

I had a feeling I already knew which essay question most in the classroom would be answering. I cast my eyes briefly in Sam’s direction, seeing him looking fairly confident with what we were being tested on. At least one boy in the room, Francesco Reed, didn’t look at all confident, though. This didn’t surprise me. Despite it being his best subject, he had still always struggled with geography, being threatened with being lowered to the B stream a lot of the time. In fact, the poor guy seemed to struggle with *most* subjects.

I knuckled down for the next ninety minutes, getting the multiple-choice questions out of the way, before plunging on into the second section and finally starting on the essay question. I finished about ten minutes early and sat spinning my pen around my fingers. I heard loud voices out in the corridor as a trio of sixth formers passed by. Two of them stopped to look through the window into the classroom, and I made eye contact with Craig Priest. He glared as he saw me.

“You’re dead,” he mouthed through the glass.

I made no reaction, even though I felt my stomach knot.

*

“Who did you have for your French oral?” Baz asked me as we jogged along together.

“Mr Bertrand,” I grated.

“Oh, bad luck,” Baz said.

“Yeah, he was being an even bigger twat than normal. I hope I don’t have him for the actual bloody thing. I swear that he speaks fast on purpose, just to piss us off.”

“He’s actually French, isn’t he?”

“They all are,” I puffed.

“No, Mr Morin—”

“Ha. It always sounds like you’re saying ‘moron’ when you say his name,” I laughed.

“He is a bit thick though, isn’t he? How the hell is he a housemaster? Anyway, he’s not French. He can just speak it fluently.”

It was surprisingly mild for January, I thought, many degrees higher than was normal. Hardly a freak heat wave, but a lot warmer than it rightly should have been at this time of the year. The snows that usually came with the season, blanketing the school with several inches of white, were notably absent. Being in the middle of the countryside, it was normally a lot deeper than in towns and cities, too.

But no, the temperatures were apparently on the up, so much so that the teachers had decided that the running season could begin again. The afternoon’s rugby training had been cancelled in favour of the term’s first jog along the Red Road. The mocks had left me hungry for some reason, and so I had had a big lunch. I therefore wasn’t running too quickly as a result. It mattered little, as today I didn’t care for the time I made.

“Who did you have?” I asked Baz as we passed by a number of second years who had shot past us earlier. They clearly didn’t have the stamina to maintain the pace.

“Mr Lambert,” Baz said.

“Bastard. Easy?”

“Very.”

“Gave you several attempts to get the answer right?”

“Yep.”

“I hate you.”

Baz laughed.

I looked around as I sensed someone moving up behind us and saw one of the sixth formers passing us by at quite a pace. For an instant, I thought it was Priest. Repercussions for the incident on the Marble Stairs were to come, I was sure. Thankfully, I found I was mistaken. I recognised the

sixth former, but didn't know his name or even the house he was in. Cookson, perhaps. He carried on past us without so much as a sideways glance. Maybe he was keen to get back to studying for his A-Levels. Or maybe he just wanted to get this over and with done with, so he could make the most of the free time that would follow.

"He's going fast," Baz quipped. "Do you think that Neo Sesay has finished yet?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," I said. "All the African guys here run bloody fast. I heard he finished the whole thing in twenty minutes the last time."

"Three miles in twenty minutes?" Baz spluttered. "Bollocks! No one can run that fast!"

"He can," I answered. "He can do the hundred metres in under eleven seconds."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Shit. How fast is the world record?"

"About a second faster than that, I think."

"I wish I could run this thing that fast."

We continued on and soon passed the part of the Road where I had first seen the body of Scott Parker. I looked to it as we approached and over my shoulder as we went by. Baz looked to me as we did so, but I made no comment.

I wondered how much further we had to go to reach the end. I had never really used any landmarks to help me measure the distance, and most of the Road looked the same to me. All I knew was that it ended in a steep incline. We overtook and were overtaken by other boys, some looking to be struggling with the task, others walking. Gradually, I began to see more and more boys coming in the opposite direction, indicating that they had reached the end. It wouldn't be too much further for Baz and I from here, I was sure.

"Hey, can I tell you something?" Baz then asked as we came to an empty stretch of road, no one in front or behind.

Oh, Christ, I thought to myself. *You're not about to tell me that you think you're gay, are you?* That would be all I needed after being stressed out about my mocks.

"Sure," I said.

"I'm probably going to be leaving at the end of next term," he answered.

"Really?" I said, automatically starting to slow.

"Hey, don't stop," Baz urged. "I want to get this thing finished."

I picked up the pace once more, though I felt absurdly annoyed. One of my closest friends had just told me that he was planning on abandoning me. I knew I had no right to feel this way – I had been planning to do pretty much the same thing to them. At least Baz had had the dignity to tell me now. Though I had planned on doing so, I had yet to inform Mr Somers or the headmaster of my plans. I also wasn't planning on telling anyone in my year until my departure was set in stone, which probably wouldn't be until the summer term at the earliest.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked.

“Shhh!” Baz said, as Rupert Daniels came running in the opposite direction. The end was close, I was certain. If the often-laidback Daniels was more than halfway done, then we couldn’t have too much further to go ourselves. Baz didn’t say another word until Rupert had passed us.

“Because I don’t like it here any more,” Baz resumed. “I want to do my A-Levels somewhere else. I want a car and to have more freedom. I also don’t want to do the lower sixth here because that year’s supposed to be a complete doss, and it absolutely won’t be if I’m here. Most importantly, I don’t think staying here is going to prepare you for the real world. We’re pretty sheltered.”

True that. Other boys might rip into Baz for ‘being a thick cockney boy from South London’, but I often thought he was quite clued up about real life. Maybe that’s why some didn’t like him, because he wasn’t so deluded about what the real world was like.

St Christopher’s was indeed like living in a bubble. We were told where to go, where to stand, *how* to stand, what to say, *how* to say it, *when* to say it ... All our meals and laundry were prepared for us, our shirts, socks and underwear ironed, sorted and brought to our dormitories, placed on our beds for us to collect. Sure, if I was living at home, then my mother would probably be doing largely the same thing, but still ...

“Do you see what I’m saying?” Baz asked, picking up on my silence.

“Yeah, yeah, I do,” I said.

“You don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

“No, not at all. What did your parents say? Were they okay with it?” I asked more for my own benefit than his. My initial confrontation with my parents over the topic had resulted in a cold shoulder from my mother, one that was only just beginning to turn. Phone calls home would result in reluctance from her to speak to me. She would have to get used to the idea, though.

“It was my dad that suggested it,” Baz answered.

“Really?” I said, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah. He said that he went through the same thing and regretted not leaving after his O-Levels. He said that he had trouble adjusting to life outside boarding school and thinks we should only do it for a few years. He says it helps you to focus initially, but you shouldn’t do it for too long.”

“Was he there for the same number of years as us?”

“No, longer. He was there from when he was eight and didn’t leave until he was eighteen.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Tell me about it,” Baz puffed. “But you’ll have been here for almost that long when you’re done with your A-Levels, won’t you? This is your ... seventh year now?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“See? You should consider it, too.”

I nodded but said nothing. We continued on in silence for a time, and I considered briefly if preparing for the real world was the real reason Baz was leaving. We were still in a recession, and St Christopher’s fees could be deemed an unnecessary drain on most families’ finances, no matter what the long-term gains of such an education might offer. Two boys had departed at the start of my

third senior school year – Gareth and James Moyles. Gareth would have been in my year, James, the year below. The two had simply failed to show up for school, and Mr Somers, clearly tired of Butcher House’s constant nagging, had eventually informed us that Gareth and James were now attending a different school. Various theories were banded about by pupils, though all finally settled on the same conclusion – the Moyleses simply couldn’t afford the fees any more.

“What do you think? Are you going to stay?” Baz asked.

“Um, I don’t know,” I lied. “I’ve not really given it any thought. Hey, is it much further to the end?” I then asked of a boy coming the other way, keen to change the subject.

“Just around that corner,” he said.

We rounded the bend, and I saw at long last the hill leading up to the finish. Or rather, the halfway mark. We jogged up the hill, struggling a little with the incline and taking a short rest at the top. Mr Falcone ticked off our names and urged us to carry on instead of standing around. We headed back down.

“What did you think I was going to tell you earlier?” Baz asked, as we started the long run back towards the school.

“Er ...” I started.

“You thought I was going to tell you I was gay, didn’t you?” Baz grinned.

“No,” I said. I swear I heard a cockerel crow at that moment.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gay. I’ve heard that Damien Sanderson is, though.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Uh huh,” Baz just smirked.

“Who told you that?”

“No one in particular; I just heard it mentioned a few times. It’s pretty obvious, though, he’s really camp. You can tell that he’s going to come out the second he gets to university. He’s always using loads of stuff for his skin, and he speaks really softly. He also *looks* gay.”

“How can you ‘look’ gay?” I asked incredulously.

“Oi, Joe, wait for us.”

So busy had I been talking to Baz that I hadn’t seen Sam and Dave coming towards us. Dave’s knees were somewhat dirty and a little blooded. Baz and I slowed our pace, so that the two could get their names checked off and catch us up.

“What happened to you?” I asked, looking at Dave’s knees.

“Tripped,” Dave said.

“No one punched you?” I asked again. It wasn’t unusual for boys to be attacked and roughed up on cross-country jogs. Here, on this secluded run, surrounded by woodland and away from the main roads, was an ideal place for a spot of bullying or revenge that would go unnoticed and unreported.

That and other things.

“No,” Dave repeated. “I just caught my foot on a rock. I almost face-planted. Let’s keep going. I think it’s going to rain in a bit.”

“Are you okay, Sam?” I asked.

Sam nodded, but said nothing. He was panting quite hard. Usually fine with these runs (never one to ever complain, unlike most others), today he looked as though he was struggling with it quite a bit. I would let him puff his way to the end.

“Hey, Dave,” Baz grinned, as we picked up the pace once more. “Do you think that Damien Sanderson is gay?”

“Sanderson?” Dave asked. “Definitely! He’s joining the gay society of whatever university he goes to, for sure. He’s going to be the bottom of the couple, too.”

“The what?” I asked.

“The bottom,” Dave repeated. “There’s always two types with gay men – the top and the bottom.”

“You know how with lesbians there’s always the butch one and girly one?” Baz added, seeing the bemused expression on my face. “Well, with gay men the bottom is the effeminate one, and the top is the big beefy one.”

“Guys, that’s a stereotype,” I said. “I don’t think it’s actually like that in real life.”

“And the girl in the couple is always the one that gets fucked,” Dave chuckled. “Damien is clearly the girl.”

“I don’t really what to know,” I said, looking to move the conversation on to different subject. “Who did you have your French oral with, Dave?”

“Why did you suddenly think of that?” Dave laughed.

“Ha ha,” I answered sarcastically. “No, seriously, who?”

“That bastard Bertrand.”

“Ah. Me too. Spoke really fast for you too, eh?” I said.

“Couldn’t understand a damn thing he was saying. I swear he only does that with people he doesn’t like. He’s a real cock. He wouldn’t repeat anything he said either, even when I asked him to.”

“Did you ask him in French?”

“Yeah, and he ignored me.”

“Wanker,” I said. “Just as long as I don’t have him for the actual exam next term.”

“You probably will,” Dave said, dodging around a group of first years coming the other way, who looked as though they were about to pass out from the stress of the run at any minute.

“Apparently, they like to keep the teacher the same, so you can know what to expect.”

“Oh, Christ,” I said. “Well, that’s my French exam failed.” In my mind’s eye I saw my application to BSFC being rejected due to the D grade sticking out on the paper like a sore thumb.

We continued on, Sam causing us to have to stop a couple of times. He looked as though he was going to vomit. Despite the stops, I was quite surprised to see that there were still a number of boys yet to complete the first leg of the run. Baz and I had clearly been making good time when we started. Most of those yet to reach the checkpoint were first and second years though, so perhaps

not.

“What mocks have you got left to do?” Dave asked.

“Just chemistry,” Baz said. “I’ve got that tomorrow afternoon.”

“Me too,” I said. “I’ll get some revision in when we get back.”

*

Someone had taken my towel. I thought that was a trick only played in the first and second years of your senior school. I peeked out the shower room, looking about the changing rooms to see if I could find where it had gone. Perhaps someone had taken it in error and, realising their mistake, had just dumped it out there to save themselves embarrassment. Nothing. It had likely been taken intentionally.

I didn’t think that Baz would have moved it; he was beyond doing stuff like that. I would have asked someone else to go to my dorm and bring me back a spare, but I was alone. I considered staying in the shower a little longer until another boy showed up, but there was a distinct lack of hot water. It was tepid, and I was starting to feel a little cold. I wondered where Sam was. Probably still passed out on his bed. There was only one thing for it – I was going to have to run for the third year dorm with my hands covering my crotch. I made to do so when the door of the shower room was shoved open and three fully-clothed boys came striding in. Sixth formers.

“So, you think you’re pretty fucking cool, do you, Crosthwaite?” Craig Priest asked. “Attacking me in public like that?” He was flanked by two others from his year, Justin Murphy and Orson Bishop. Bishop made a show of cracking his knuckles.

My stomach flipped, and I felt a spike of adrenaline rush through my body, my heart rate increasing. I had never found myself in such a situation before, though it was very clear what was about to happen. That was why my towel had gone missing, and also why no one else had come into the shower block. The three, perhaps even four, one more still standing outside, were preventing anyone else from coming in until Priest had had ‘a word’. They had most likely threatened one of the younger boys into taking my towel, to stall me for a bit. This wasn’t good, not good at all. I made to get around them, but the three were blocking the exit. Windows presented the only other way out, but high up as we were in the main school building, that meant a thirty or forty-foot drop to the ground.

“Don’t think you’re going anywhere,” Bishop said, grabbing me, turning me around, and shoving me back into the communal shower block.

“Do you like touching naked boys?” was the only immediate retort I could think of. “You can go to prison for that sort of thing you know.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Priest said, grabbing hold of my hair and jerking my head about. “That was a really stupid thing you did the other day, and you need to be taught a lesson!”

“Get the fuck off me!” I shouted at him, raising my voice enough to hope someone would hear

without directly calling for help. No one did.

Priest pulled my hair tighter, his face red, his eyes narrowed and fierce. “Do you think you’re hard, do you?”

“No, I’m not gay. You might be, though. Touching me has probably given you a semi already.”

I had no idea why I said that. Perhaps it was because of the conversation I had had on the Road with Dave and Baz. The next thing I knew was that Priest had punched me in the face, hard. I cried out and scrabbled at his hands, to try and stop him from delivering another blow. Bishop and Murphy moved in to help restrain me, and, with my hands held behind my back, Priest punched me twice more in the face.

“FUCK OFF!” I shouted at him.

The three said nothing, and Priest punched me again in the face, my vision starting to blur, my head spinning. I slipped on the wet floor, lowering my head to try and avoid further blows, feeling my legs become wobbly. Another blow came, striking the left side of my face, followed by a punch to the stomach that immediately winded me. I then felt one of my arms slip free, whichever of the sixth formers holding me unable to maintain a grip on my wet skin. The second arm followed, and I leapt out of the way, stumbling and skidding along the floor. A kick meant for my groin missed, the shoe scraping up my thigh and razing the skin there, leaving a dirty black print in its wake. I could have made a run for the door, but instead I rounded on the three. My face was burning, blood running down my nose and out of my mouth, where I had split and bitten my lip. Anger had made me choose fight over flight.

“Get him!” Priest instructed Bishop and Murphy.

At that moment, I pounced directly for Priest, knocking him down. His head smashed against the wall of the shower, with a loud crack.

“Arghh!” Priest cried.

I was on top of him the next instant. He appeared dazed for a moment, only just focusing on what was happening.

“Get the fuck off him!”

“Come here, you prick! We’re going to fucking kill you!”

I felt Bishop and Murphy again trying to grab hold of me, but they were once more struggling to maintain a purchase on my skin. It wouldn’t be long before they did, however. I looked down into Priest’s face. If he was going to leave me bruised and bloodied in the shower for the rest of Butcher House to find, then I was at least going to give him a bloody nose for his trouble. I drew back a fist to do so, when something else overtook me, and instead of punching him in the face, I drew back both hands and brought down two fingers each directly into his eyes.

The effect was immediate.

Priest screamed in agony, and before I knew what had happened, I had thrust my fingers into his eyes once more. Both Bishop and Murphy stopped clawing at me and instead jumped back, shock clearly registering on their faces.

“Arghh! My eyes! My eyes!” Priest started, covering his face and trying to escape. “I can’t see! Help! Help!”

Bishop and Murphy remained rooted to the spot for a moment, unable to speak or do anything. Bishop then moved forward, pushing me aside and starting to sooth Priest.

“Craig, are you okay?” he asked.

“I can’t fucking see! Help me!” Priest responded.

I watched as Bishop helped Priest up, only vaguely aware that I was lying on the floor of the shower block, bruised, naked, and with blood still running down my chin.

“I’m going to take you back to Tudor,” Bishop said, starting out the shower.

“No! Take me to the nurse! Quickly!” Priest wailed, his hands still covering his eyes, his voice quivering.

“You took it too far, Crosthwaite,” Bishop said, looking back at me before he and Priest exited the shower block.

“Too far?!” I spluttered, feeling the rage starting to return.

“Yeah, you took it too far,” Murphy said. “We were just going to knock you about a bit.”

“So, you guys you were going to knock me out or break my nose or my arms or whatever, and now that I defend myself, I’ve taken it too far?!”

“You could have blinded him,” Murphy started.

“Like I fucking care!” I shouted at him, getting to my feet, pushing him aside and starting back towards my dorm.

There was a gathering of other boys just outside the shower room, mostly first and second years, who had been disallowed entry while the three sixth formers corrected the case of insubordination.

“What’s happened?” I heard someone ask as boys looked from me, to Orson, Priest and the expected fourth sixth former, hastening to the school nurse.

“Just teaching someone an important lesson,” I responded, not caring that I was marching stark naked down the corridors of Butcher House. “A lesson in life.”

*

I expected repercussions in the hours that followed from a group of Priest’s friends, who would have decided to finish what he had started. Repercussions came, but not in the manner that I had expected.

“So, what was this all about, Joe?” my housemaster wanted to know.

I looked to Priest, sitting next to me in Mr Somers’ office, his hands near his eyes. They were extremely red, and the pupils were wandering a little. Every now and again, he would touch gingerly at the swollen area and rub the eye socket itself very gently. I could appreciate how much it probably hurt. I had been hit in the eye by the tapered end of a rugby ball once. It had been painful for several days after, and I had been barred from contact sports for two weeks.

“He attacked me in the shower, sir,” I said. “I defended myself.”

“It doesn’t look to me like you were defending yourself,” Mr Hancock rumbled, eyeing Priest once again. The man was standing to one side, arms folded across just chest, just like a nightclub bouncer.

“Sir, they attacked me and threatened to knock me out,” I countered, looking to both men.

“I don’t think that’s what they would have done,” Mr Somers said.

What? “Sir, look at my face!” I said, pointing to my swollen nose and the bruising that was still quite prominent there, it only being four or five hours since the incident. “I’ve got more on my legs and stomach if you want to see,” I added, making to stand.

“Sit down!” Mr Somers snapped at me. “Joe, what you did is very serious. You could have put Craig’s eyes out and blinded him.”

“Aren’t you going to ask him why he attacked me?” I snapped back. “Don’t you *care*? I didn’t *do* anything!”

“Don’t answer back,” Mr Hancock warned me.

“I will get to that in a minute,” Mr Somers said, seeing me glare at Tudor’s housemaster. “But right now, I need you to understand the seriousness of your actions. You pushed both your fingers into this boy’s eyes. That could have left him blind for the rest of his life. You might think that you were just defending yourself, but what you did was totally and utterly inexcusable.”

“I did what I had to do,” I said.

“No, you didn’t. There was no need for this.”

“Yes, there was! There were *three* of them. They practically had me pinned to the floor.”

“Joe, you’ve been warned already not to answer back.”

That was a typical response from a teacher who could see they were already losing the argument. I looked at Mr Hancock, not finding him quite as intimidating as usual. “What would you have said if Craig had broken my nose and my arm? Would you have just let him off?”

“We’re not here to discuss what I may or may not have done in a hypothetical situation,” Mr Hancock said. “We’re just here to deal with the facts.”

Another damn typical response. The teachers were infallible in their decisions as always.

Mr Somers looked to Priest. “Craig, why did you attack Joe?”

“He attacked me first,” Priest said.

I forced myself to remain mute. I swore that he was making himself sound a great deal more miserable than he was actually feeling.

“When and where?”

“The Marble Stairs, two weekends ago.”

“That’s because you called me a ‘mistake’ and that my parents didn’t want me,” I retorted. “I only pushed you, too. It’s not my fault that you fell down the stairs because you’re so mal-coordinated.”

“Joe ...” Mr Somers warned me to be quiet.

“I thought there was a misunderstanding, and I was worried that Joe was going to attack me again, so I thought I’d go and clear the air.”

My jaw flapped open. I couldn’t believe my ears. “No, you didn’t!” I glared at him, ignoring the gestures of silence from Mr Somers and Mr Hancock. “You were embarrassed that you fell down the Marble Stairs and started crying in front of the first years, and you thought you would come and ‘teach me a lesson’, as you put it.”

“I didn’t say that,” Priest said, looking wounded between Mr Somers and Mr Hancock.

“You did, and you brought Justin Murphy and Orson Bishop with you, too, to make sure of it. Why aren’t they here, too? They hit me as well.”

“Joe, don’t sneak,” Mr Somers warned.

“What? Sir, *they attacked me as well*,” I emphasised.

“As far as I’m concerned, this is just between you and Craig,” Mr Somers said, as if not hearing me. “Now, is this all resolved? Because I don’t want to find you two back in here ever again, and neither does Mr Hancock want to find you in *his* office, either. The pair of you have both got very important things happening this term and next that you need to concentrate on. Joe, your GCSEs; Craig, your A-Levels.

“I’m also still waiting on your UCAS application,” Mr Hancock reminded Priest.

“I’ll give it to you when my eyesight is better. I’m going to have trouble doing some of my coursework and concentrating in class for a couple of weeks, I think,” Priest said.

He was exaggerating, as the bullies of the school always did as soon as they turned victim. I wondered whether Mr Somers and Mr Hancock had seen through the feint, quite aware that he was clearly faking it, and were merely humouring him. Mr Hancock nodded but gave no comment.

“Do you both understand what I have said to you?” Mr Somers asked.

“Yes, sir,” we both mumbled.

“Good. Now, Joe, apologise to Craig.”

This man could not be serious. Priest had attacked *me*, yet I was expected to apologise to *him*?

“No,” I said defiantly. “Not until he apologises to me first.”

“Joe, I am this close to taking you to see the headmaster and recommending that you be rusticated for the next two weeks,” Mr Somers said, pinching his thumb and index finger close together, his tone growing angrier as the last thread of his patience threatened to snap. I could understand. Mine was nearly all gone, too.

I looked at Priest, seeing him rubbing at one of his eyes and feeling sorry for himself, begging for sympathy. The act was lost on me, as it always had been; he would be struggling to contain a grin of satisfaction, I was sure.

“Sorry,” I managed with all the sincerity that I could muster. I added nothing else. Both he and the housemasters looked to be expecting more. I wasn’t sorry to disappoint them there.

“Okay, thank you,” Mr Somers said. “Anything you wish to add, Dean?” He looked to Mr Hancock.

“No,” rumbled the big man.

“Good. Okay, in that case you can go, Craig.”

“Thank you, sir.”

No apology to me for having to go around the school for the next few days with a swollen nose and a puffy, black and blue face, then. I watched as Mr Hancock walked with Priest out of Mr Somers’ office, closing the door behind them. Mr Somers then looked back to me.

“Joe, you’re one of the brightest pupils in your year, and I would hate to see things such as this tarnish your reputation. I’ll be honest with you. Up until today, I was strongly considering you for a prefect when you reached the upper sixth. I thought you could be a great role model and inspiration to others. After what’s happened, I’m not so sure.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not planning on staying anyway,” I blurted out immediately.

“Pardon?”

“I said, I’m not planning on staying after I’ve finished my GCSEs. I’m going to do my A-Levels at another school, a sixth form college near home.”

My housemaster looked a little taken aback. “Your parents haven’t mentioned anything to me about it.”

“That’s because we’re waiting on the results of my mocks,” I said, telling a white lie.

I then found some of my anger for Priest turning to anger at my parents for not being fully onboard with my plans to leave St Christopher’s. I wondered whether or not they would care about this little incident, should I tell them about it. Probably not. It was to be expected and came with the territory, they would no doubt say in their diplomatic fashion. Now that I thought about it, they had hardly battered an eyelid about Scott Parker’s murder.

“I see,” Mr Somers said. “Well, I will have a chat with them about it, then.”

Probably to convince them to keep me here, so the school can wring a few thousand more pounds out of them, I thought bitterly.

“Can I go?” I asked.

“Yes, Joe. And I would suggest you stay away from anything to with Craig Priest for the rest of term, if not the rest of the year.”

Gladly, I thought as I got up. I paused with my hand on the door handle to the housemaster’s office.

“So, I don’t get an apology from him?” I wanted to know.

“As I said, I think it’s best that you keep away from Craig from now on,” Mr Somers said dismissively.

I bit back the immediate fiery response, counting silently to five in my head as I let my temper cool.

“Sir,” I said, once I felt I had my angry under control, “are you scared of people like Craig Priest?”

“Just get out of my office, Joe,” was all that Mr Somers said.

That basically meant yes. I added nothing more and returned to my dorm.

Chapter Fourteen

I found myself standing in a near pitch-black corridor. No elongated shadows, no shrieking voices, no goblins. I wasn't dreaming, I was awake. I had been sleepwalking again. As with the previous times, I had somehow managed to put on my dressing gown. I was also wearing slippers on my feet. It took me a little while to work out where I was – Tudor House. I had entered through one of the side doors that apparently hadn't been locked. I wondered if I had checked all the other doors first before coming to this one, or had just made straight for it. Whatever had happened, I shouldn't be here.

I made to leave, when I saw something moving in the darkness, a shadow elongating in the moonlight seeping in through the windows. The shape halted as they saw me, giving a start. They then came a little further forward, hesitated and stopped completely. Not a goblin, but a boy.

"Who's that?" the boy asked. They appeared to be a first year, wrapped in a dressing gown and wearing slippers. They were most likely on their way to the toilet. I had clearly scared them.

"It's Joe," I said.

"Joe?"

"Crosthwaite."

The hesitation continued.

"Did I scare you?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Don't worry. I was just visiting someone," I explained. "Go back to bed. Or the toilet, or whatever you were doing."

I started off myself, leaving through the door I had entered by and beginning to make my way across the ground, back to Butcher. I figured that the boy, whoever they were, would discover sooner or later that I wasn't in Tudor House and would begin to question why I was there. I didn't want him doing that, as I didn't exactly know why I was, either.

I had a hunch, though, and I didn't like it one bit.

Chapter Fifteen

Aside from the sleepwalking, I was a good sleeper in the main, albeit a light one. I generally had few problems getting to sleep, my habit of reading a book before switching off my light calming me enough to allow me to sleep well. Some of the other boys would talk after the lights were out, but I would ignore them. I sometimes even found the whispered conversation that went on helped to lull me off even quicker.

Tonight, however, I was unable to drift off. I wasn't sure why. Maybe I was feeling anxious about the results of my mocks, which had now concluded, and my ongoing desires to see the back of St Christopher's as soon as possible. Even more so after my bust up with Craig Priest. If I didn't get good grades in my mocks, then I might not be admitted to the college I so desperately wanted to attend. Regular classes had resumed this week at school, and I had tried to tell myself that what was done was done.

But my insomnia could perhaps also be attributed to my fight with Priest. Though we had both given each other a wide berth, and making only the briefest of eye contact if we did happen to pass one another (which was thankfully rather infrequent, due to the two of us being in different houses), I could still feel hatred for me radiating from both he and his friends. Would they act on it again, or were they simply hollow threats?

I looked at my watch. The illumination on the hands wasn't working very well, and I couldn't tell the time. I drew back the curtain above my bed to let in a little light. Twelve minutes past one. Damn. I was useless on less than six hours sleep, and it was looking as though I would struggle to get that. I would probably fall asleep around four and then be a zombie for the rest of the school day. I knew what I needed to do to get some rest, something I hadn't done for a long time. Well, not intentionally at any rate.

Slipping out of bed, I pulled on my dressing gown and slippers and crept over to the door, planning on taking a walk around the school for ten or twenty minutes, to calm myself down. I wasn't sure why it worked, but I found that after a little stroll I was more settled and would then fall asleep quite quickly. Perhaps it was because it was cooler than in my bed and helped my body to slow down.

I hesitated as I made to pull the doorknob. As this was a rare occasion, and after everything that I had been through in the past couple of weeks, I decided that I may as well indulge myself in another one of my casual activities.

Returning to my bed, I pulled open my bedside locker's drawer as quietly as I could, picking up my keys from within and using them to unlock the tuck box that lived under my bed. I held the padlock as I did so, so that the sound of the mechanism releasing wouldn't wake the others. Open, I felt around inside, moving stuff about until I found what I was looking for. There were five cigarettes left in the packet, as well as a nearly full lighter. I locked the box again and made my way from the third year dorm.

*

I wandered the dark and desolate corridors of the main school randomly for a time. I glanced into the shadows as I passed, weary of ... something. I had no idea why they bothered me. There would be nothing lurking there.

The corridors were cool, cooler than I had actually expected. After the mild weather we had experienced a couple of days before, the climate had righted itself and the temperature had plummeted from its fifteen degrees, back down to three. My parents had been amused to hear about the freak weather we had experienced in Wessex. Surrey was still as cold as it had been at Christmas, and even Baz's and Dave's parents had confirmed that London wasn't nearly as hot as we had had it, even with all the smog and the inner city temperature gains.

I guessed the little taste of spring must have been localised to St Christopher's. That didn't surprise me, as odd things happened here all the time. It was sometimes as if the school wasn't connected to the real world and would flux into parallel realities as and when the fancy took it. I felt a radiator as I passed. The heating was on, but had been turned down after eleven p.m. Most would fail to notice, as they would be tucked up in warm beds.

I discovered that the exit door I had been heading for was locked. It was a simple bar lock, however, and was easy to open. I would lock it again once I was done. I stepped outside, the cold air hitting me immediately and making me instantly appreciative of the warm bed I had recently left. With what I was wearing, I would probably only be able to tolerate the cold for about five minutes. My bare ankles would suffer the most.

I didn't walk far outside, only a few metres from the door, slipping around a corner and hiding in an alcove, where I lit the cigarette. I took a drag, enjoying the taste and the warmth that came with it. I could already tell that after my night-time expedition was done with I would sleep well.

I looked about as I smoked, seeing a light on, high up. Was it coming from one of the toilets? I wondered. Probably not, the window frame was all wrong. It looked more like a boy's room. I knew that some of the sixth formers stayed up late to get work done, especially those preparing for Oxbridge exams. St Christopher's was trying to put a stop to that, insisting that they get to sleep at a reasonable hour and get up for breakfast. Some would choose to skip breakfast, staying in bed longer, either getting up just in time for a nine a.m. class or having a lie in if they didn't have to be up for anything. Oddly, some sixth formers chose to eat in their own rooms, bringing in cereal, bread, milk, and spreads from home. Crazy, I thought, when the school was already laying on food. Why pay for something twice? Maybe by that age they simply didn't wish to sit in a refectory full of rowdy thirteen and fourteen-year-old boys ...

"And what do you think you're doing up at this hour?"

The cigarette flew from my hand as my heart leapt into my throat, and I began choking profusely. I looked about to see that a tall, black-cloaked figure had arrived by my side. I prepared

to run, fearing that on tonight's little venture outside I had finally been discovered by little Scott Parker's killer. I then realised who was actually standing before me – *The B.F.G.*

"I ... I was just out for a walk," I stammered, my heart still beating furiously in my chest. "I couldn't sleep and thought that a walk around the school would help me to relax."

"Hmm," Father Thomas said, his eyes moving to the cigarette on the ground, which still burned where I had flung it. "You do know that smoking is against the school rules and leads to fines and a letter of warning home to your parents?" he asked, his breath visible in the cold night air.

"I ..." I couldn't think of any excuse. It was clear that the monk had seen me smoking from a long way off, the hot red glow of the end of the cigarette as I took each drag acting as a beacon of sorts. He had then made his way over, sliding as silently as a ghost, only revealing his presence when he was right next to me.

He held out his hand. "Give me the rest of them, Joe," he asked.

I did so, parting with the four cigarettes that remained, as well as the lighter, my eyes moving to the one that still burned on the ground. Father Thomas' foot moved to it at the same moment, and the man crushed it under his shoe.

"What are you doing up so late, Father?" I asked. "Couldn't sleep either?"

"I'm keeping boys such as yourself safe, Joe," Father Thomas said. "We patrol the grounds at night, to make sure the school is secure."

We? He must have meant the other monks. They led peculiar lives down in that monastery. "Have you just started doing so recently?" I asked.

"We've always done so."

"Always?" I asked.

"Always. More of us do it now after Scott's death."

I had never known. I thought back to a few nights ago, when I had walked all the way from Butcher to Tudor without being seen. Was he making this up perhaps? I hadn't seen any sign of monks or staff, either. I wondered next how Scott Parker had been murdered? How had they failed to spot something like that? Had the killer watched and waited patiently? Or was the killer actually one of the monks themselves ...? The fleeting thought left my head as quickly as it had entered.

"You shouldn't have opened that door," Father Thomas said, nodding back to the way I had left the main building. "It's locked for a reason – to stop anyone from getting into the school."

"I would've seen them going in," I said, trying to reassure the man.

"That's not the point, Joe. You're not to open any doors after they've been locked at night." The monk looked at the cigarettes in his hand and then back at me. "I didn't know you smoked," he said, sounding both surprised and disappointed.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "And I suppose you have a list of everyone at the school who does?"

"Actually, we do," the monk answered, his expression deadpan. "The trouble is that you need to catch them in the act, and it's not always that straightforward. Otherwise, you're just making false

accusations.”

True. “I don’t smoke very often,” I said. “That’s the first one I’ve had this year, and I can’t remember the time before that. I wasn’t sure if the cigarettes would’ve even lasted to be honest.”

“That doesn’t excuse you, and most parents don’t like finding an extra twenty-five pounds added to their bill at the end of term, on account of their son breaking the rules.”

My heart sank. I was hoping Father Thomas might actually just confiscate the cigarettes and let me off with a warning. “I know, I’m sorry,” I tried. “It’s not like I do it a lot.”

“Again, that’s not the point,” Father Thomas said, “and, as I’ve already told you, you shouldn’t be out of bed. So that’s three things you’ve done wrong in my eyes. I’ll have to have a word with your housemaster in the morning. Could you remind me what house you are in again, please?”

I considered lying, but what good would that do me? “Butcher,” I admitted.

“Thank you. I expect Mr Somers will have a word with you tomorrow. Now, please get back to bed. I don’t want to catch you out of your dorm again tonight.”

Great. I could end up being gated, I knew. I didn’t relish the thought of sitting in a classroom all Sunday, in detention, a second blow after having to endure church in the morning. I walked back through the door I had unlocked, Father Thomas following me in and securing it behind us.

“Joe, just a moment,” the monk then said. “Weren’t you recently involved in some trouble with a couple of sixth formers?”

“Three sixth formers,” I said. “They attacked me in the shower. Completely unprovoked.” Not entirely true, as I had provoked one of them.

“Hmm, I heard about that. Didn’t you also find Scott Parker when you were out running on the Red Road, last term?”

“I did. I was the first to find him and reported it to Mr Rod. I had to see the headmaster and give a witness statement to the police, and have a chat with a psychologist,” I added.

I knew I was playing the sympathy card pretty strongly now, but I would rather avoid a letter home to my parents reporting my misbehaviour. That would practically seal my fate to remain at the school, my parents not trusting me to live at home. To my relief, Father Thomas’ face took on the sympathetic expression I had been seeking.

“Hmm,” he said. “That couldn’t have been a very nice experience. You’ve not had an altogether pleasant year so far, have you?” He looked at the cigarettes and lighter in his hand. “Okay, I won’t report you to your housemaster ...”

Excellent, I thought, unable to keep my smile down.

“... but, instead, I will recommend you be put on the *Murga List* this Friday.”

Oh, holy fucking shit, no! That was worse!

“Uh... couldn’t we just forget the whole thing?” I ventured, my heart thumping just as hard as it had when Father Thomas had first loomed up beside me.

“No, Joe,” Father Thomas said. “I’m sorry, but I need you to learn that smoking and walking around the school at night are against the rules. Now, please go to bed before I change my mind.”

Like I was going to sleep now. I said nothing further and trudged back off to Butcher, making my way up the Marble Stairs and wending my way along the various corridors. The darkness and the shadows no longer bothered me, as I was now about to experience something one hundred times more terrible.

*

I came to my dormitory, opening the door quietly and padding softly over to my bed.

Click!

I spun about as the lights came on, seeing Anthony Simmons standing by the switch, grinning. Most of the other boys were awake, too. Only Sam was still asleep, stirring slightly in his bed. The opposite of me, he had always been quite a heavy sleeper.

“What are you doing?” I asked absurdly. “Why are you all awake?”

“Ha, ha! Busted!” Simmons cackled.

“What?”

“Where’s the tape, Crotty?” Charlie Smith, sitting up in his bed, wanted to know.

“Tape? What tape?” I genuinely had no idea what either of the two were on about.

“Kerry Oldman’s porno tape!” Simmons said excitedly.

“Everyone knows about it,” Darren Smith said.

“What?” I asked, completely baffled.

“The porno that Oldman brought in from home. Where is it?”

I had no idea what the three were on about. “From what I’ve heard, Kerry Oldman has a copy of *Return to the Blue Lagoon*,” I said, looking between the three grinning boys, “but I’ve not heard about anything else.”

“No, not *that* shit. A proper porn,” Simmons repeated. He was actually starting to sound a little frustrated that I wasn’t forthcoming with all the details he wanted.

“Someone stole it from Oldman’s dorm,” Darren Smith jumped in.

“And why do you think it was *me*?” I asked incredulously.

“Because we heard you get up and open your tuck box! You’ve obviously been hiding it in there and went to watch it and have a wank!” Simmons said.

“What? No!” I spluttered. It was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard.

“So, what were you getting from your tuck box?”

I hesitated at that point. They had heard me open my tuck box and retrieve something inside. I couldn’t admit to them that I smoked, as that would lead to all sort of complications, including being pestered constantly for cigarettes. Sure, I might now smell vaguely of smoke, but no one seemed to have noticed.

Simmons looked about my person. “Where is it, Crotty?”

“I don’t have it,” I said, shrugging and patting at my clothes to prove I wasn’t concealing

anything.

“It’s under his dressing gown,” Charlie Smith said, clearly unconvinced.

“Yeah, take off your dressing gown, Crotty,” Simmons ordered.

“Okay, fine,” I growled at them, taking off my dressing gown and throwing it on the bed, standing before them in my pyjamas and showing everyone in the dorm that I truly had nothing concealed.

“He probably knew we’d be waiting for him and hid it somewhere else, so he can get it tomorrow,” Darren Smith remarked.

“Where did you put it?” Charlie Smith wanted to know.

“Did you go to the classrooms?” Simmons said.

“No, he’s left it in the film room, where they have the World Film Club, because he knows only the saddos go in there,” Darren Smith then theorised.

“Guys, seriously,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything about a tape. I went for a walk because I can’t sleep. I took a torch out of my tuck box so that I wouldn’t have to turn on the lights.”

“Where is it, then?” Simmons said. He was absolutely insistent that I had somehow acquired Oldman’s porno tape and would stop at nothing to get it. It was becoming increasingly clear to me who it was that was desperately in need of masturbating.

“I threw it away because it’s crap and doesn’t work any more. But I was just caught by Father Thomas, who’s doing the rounds.”

“What?” Simmons asked. The three members of the Clique suddenly looked a little concerned.

“Father Thomas is patrolling the school grounds. He’s going to report me to Mr Somers in the morning for being out of bed. The teachers and monks now patrol the grounds in shifts at night, apparently.”

“Really?” Simmons asked.

“Yes, really! After what happened to Scott Parker, the school—”

“Parker?”

“The boy from the junior school,” I informed him. “After they found him dead, the staff have decided to turn this place into Fort Knox. Now, switch off the light before we all get into trouble. *The B.F.G.* is probably going to come up here in a minute, to make sure I’m in bed. Seriously, turn off the light!” I said as I got into bed, pointing at the switch by the door.

Charlie Smith and Simmons looked to one another before the two got into bed and Darren Smith made his way over to the door, to turn the main lights off. The dormitory door opened a minute amount at the same moment he reached it, a black hand snaking in through the gap, and groping around until it located the switch.

“Go to sleep, boys,” Father Thomas’ voice came before he clicked the light off.

Darren quickly returned to bed, and through the darkness, I could see all eyes on me.

Told you so, my own answered them.

Chapter Sixteen

“What did he say?” Baz asked as I returned to the third year dorm.

“He said no,” I grated.

“He’s still going to make you do it?” Sam asked incredulously.

“Yeah, the bastard,” I said.

“Make you do what?” Brian Donald, an uninvited member of the Tudor House Clique, asked. He was sitting at Simmons’ desk, copying some of Simmons’ CDs onto tape.

“Father Thomas put me on the *Murga List* for being out of bed on Monday night, and Mr Somers is refusing to let me off,” I told him.

“He put you on the *List* for being out of bed?” he asked.

“Yeah, apparently we’re not allowed any more.”

“Shit,” Brian said, stopping the CD from playing so he could turn the tape over and resume copying onto the other side. “Why didn’t you tell him you were just going to the toilet?”

“I was outside.”

“Why?”

“Long story,” I said dismissively.

“Because he went to watch Oldman’s porno tape,” Baz chuckled.

I shot him an annoyed look. I didn’t want *that* conversation to start up all over again.

“How have you got it?” Donald wanted to know. “I heard that Goodman confiscated it off some of the second years, who he caught watching it.”

“Seriously?” I said.

Donald nodded. “They’re all going to get gated for it, apparently. They want Oldman to fess up, but he just keeps laughing about it. He says it’s not his.”

“They’d have a hard time proving it, I guess.” I looked at Baz, whose bed and desk area was a complete mess, drawers, binders and textbooks all over the place. “Still not found your *Tricolour*, then?” I asked.

“No,” Baz said, a little angrily. “I think someone’s nicked it.”

“Did you put your name in the front?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, but they’ll probably just rip the front page off. I wanted to start writing that essay on La Rochelle, too.”

“You can borrow mine,” I said. “You’ll probably find it later on.”

“Is La Rochelle a real place?” Sam wanted to know.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I think it’s just been invented for the book.”

And at that time, I didn’t particularly care, either. I was still seething from Mr Somers’ refusal to drop my punishment. The dormitory door then opened and Simmons came walking in. He stared at the person at his desk for a moment, appearing quite offended that someone was in his seat.

“Alright, Ant?” Donald said, looking around.

“Oi!” Simmons said. “What are you doing? Are you copying my CDs?”

“Sorry, I didn’t think you’d mind,” Donald said, without so much as a care.

Simmons picked up the CDs and cases off his bed, where Donald had discarded them a little carelessly. “For fuck’s sake put them back in their cases when you’re done, or you’ll scratch them! What are you copying?”

“*Guns and Roses*, and *Nirvana. Use Your Illusion I and II*,” he clarified.

“So, what have you got that I can copy?”

“Nothing you haven’t already got, just some tapes.”

“I don’t want to copy off tapes,” Simmons growled. “It’ll sound shit.”

“Have you already done your geography coursework?” I asked Baz, turning away from Donald’s musical dilemmas and focusing on my schoolwork-related ones.

“Finished it ages ago,” Baz smiled proudly. “I wanted to get it over and done with. I hate geography; it’s so boring.”

“Which one did you do?”

“The study of the local shops versus the town centre.”

“Can I see your results?” I asked.

Baz hesitated. “To copy them?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Sam immediately jumped in. “There were two guys who did that last year, and they were caught cheating. They were then banned from taking the geography GCSE.”

“Woah! Seriously?” both Baz and I exclaimed.

“Seriously,” Sam nodded. “You can get banned from taking French, too, because it’s the same exam board.”

I tried to speak, almost choking as I both gasped and too many words tried to force themselves out of my mouth at the same time.

“What happened? Weren’t they just told to do it again?” I said, finding my voice. I noticed that both Donald and Simmons were paying close attention to our conversation.

“No, they were just automatically failed for attempting to cheat. Mr Finn and Mr Hancock said that they couldn’t be sure of how much of their coursework was also fabricated, and so they were booted out of the classes.”

“That’s not good,” I said. I imagined myself being accused of doing something like that. I could kiss goodbye to my sixth form college dreams for sure. It would probably impact my choice of university, too, as well as my future career aspirations. I had been told they checked up on all that sort of stuff for the top jobs.

“Yeah, but that only matters if you get caught,” Simmons said.

“Have you copied yours?” Baz said.

“I just used my older brother’s results from a couple of years back. They won’t bother to check that,” Simmons said with a shrug.

“Ant, that is probably the *first* place they’ll check to see if you’ve copied anything,” I said.

“Fuck,” Donald said, looking very concerned. “I’m going to have to do mine again.”

“What? No, don’t listen to Crotty. They won’t check,” Simmons scowled at him angrily.

“Did you copy yours, too?” I said to Donald.

“Just changed some of Ant’s results,” Donald said, looking between me and Simmons.

I glanced to Baz and Sam. “Do them again,” all three of us chorused.

“I can’t believe you’re actually going to do it properly,” Simmons chastised Donald. “Anyway, move. I have some work to do. You can come back and copy these later.”

“Hey, wait,” Donald said, as Simmons stopped the CD playback and made to eject the tape. He did so a little too fast and the tape reel unwound, a long black trail leading back into the cassette deck. “Oh, fucking hell!” Donald said.

“Well it was your own fault for not asking me first,” Simmons said, without a care.

Donald carefully freed the tape from the cassette deck, getting up and standing aside as Simmons took his seat at the desk. As I watched Donald starting to make use of a pencil to wind the tape back into the cassette, I had to wonder how people such as that could remain friends. They seemed to treat each other pretty badly a lot of the time.

“Bollocks,” Donald tutted as he found kinks.

“Sorry,” Simmons said, looking over his shoulder. I wasn’t sure he really meant it.

“When are you going to do them?” Baz asked, returning to the subject of our GCSE Geography coursework.

“The next weekend I’m home,” I said. “I’ll just spend the Saturday in town. I don’t think I’ll get many responses from the corner shops near home, though.”

“No, you probably won’t,” Baz said. “I think I talked to one hundred times more people in the city centre than I did the shops near where I live.”

I nodded, forming a plan to follow Baz’s lead and get the coursework done and dusted as soon as I could. I had something more immediate to worry about before that, though – Friday’s *Murga*. With the winter winds having returned, I just hoped that between now and then it wasn’t going to snow.

It did.

*

The day of the punishment gradually approached, and the *Murga List* itself, several handwritten pages of A4 paper, appeared on the school’s main noticeboard on Thursday night, just before dinner.

Some would judge the severity of the misbehaviour throughout the school on just how many pieces of A4 were present, the number of names extending across two or three pages, sometimes even four. My years at St Christopher’s had taught me otherwise. The length of the *List* was always directly proportional to the conditions of the season – the worse the weather, the longer the list.

I only checked out the *List* briefly, hoping that I had received an eleventh-hour reprieve and not be on it. I saw 'Joe Crosthwaite' listed towards the bottom and huffed off back to my dorm, a number of first and second years quite bemused to see a third year's name there.

That night's sleep was broken and uncomfortable, but at least I didn't receive a visit from the goblins. Still, that might have gotten me out of the punishment had I suffered a freak out and gone rampaging around the school, screaming at the top of my lungs. Social consequences be damned.

As in the past, I had no alarm clock to get me out of bed, so woke up every few hours, checking my watch to see the time. I had to be down at the main gates of the school at five, an obscene hour at any time of year, but even worse in the winter. At four forty-five I got out of bed, leaving the dorm quietly and making my way to the changing rooms to put on my rugby kit, putting my tracksuit on over the top of it for good measure. I had decided to double layer, as I knew at this hour it was going to be bitterly cold. It always was when I was walking to the classroom block in the morning.

I saw as I opened the front door of Butcher that a great quantity of snow had been dumped on the school grounds. I commenced the journey towards the front gate, finding the snow easily covering my shoes and climbing well above my ankles. In places it was threatening to make its way up my calves. That wasn't even the deepest point, I knew. There would be areas of the school, most likely the playing fields, where it was truly deep, coming close to your knees. Falling down in any of this would mean soaking wet clothes in moments, and the need to go and take a hot shower as soon as possible. If there was any hot water, that was.

I passed a mound of snow that had built itself up around a car. I wished the owner luck getting that started later. Likely it belonged to one of the teachers who was staying at the school overnight, to act as duty master.

I considered what I might be in for as I walked. The punishments doled out on the *Murga* largely depended on the sixth former leading it. It was almost as much of a punishment for them as it was for us, the boy having to also drag himself out of bed at some ungodly hour, to fulfil the duty. If the guy was one of the few decent prefects that might be charged with 'supervising', then we might not actually start until six. Even better, the morning might involve nothing more than a game of football. That had happened to me once. The *Murga*'s participants had been split directly down the middle, leading to a ridiculous twenty players per side. We had then just played a football match until seven-thirty, when the punishment had concluded and we had been sent back to our houses for a shower. Some boys had been sent back early for scoring a goal, performing a commendable tackle, or otherwise playing a good game up until that point. I had failed to do either, football not being my strongest sport at all. Rugby was where it was at for me. Still, that had been a good morning and actually worked a lot better to encourage positive behaviour and respect (as opposed to fear) in the younger boys. The only annoying part of that *Murga* had been the need to get up for it. Yes, Peter Nurse (unfortunate name) had been well-liked for showing such solidarity to those he was charged with taking care of on Friday mornings.

Most others weren't.

In the main, the punishments ran like this: assembling wherever the notice board had designated, we would be met either by one, two, or perhaps even three prefects, depending on how much they despised the unfortunates that had been placed on the *List*. To begin with, we would be ordered to sprint (not jog, not run) several hundred meters, being made to do it again and again if we weren't fast enough. Which, of course, we never were.

After this, push-ups would follow, usually with one of the prefects standing on your back and demanding you raise him several inches off the ground before anyone else was allowed to stop. Being told to take a punch in the stomach without crying or else a group of others would be handed a secondary punishment was something grossly unpleasant that I had only been made to witness once. I had heard a rumour how, on one summer morning, a prefect had marched the group all the way to a pond and forced many to swim lengths. He himself had been punished by the teachers for that one, after most of the boys became ill. He hadn't cared; he had found it very funny.

The Murga punishment itself was something that actually never happened. Originating from South Asia, I had heard that it was a sitting position that was quite painful after a few minutes and had been used at St Christopher's many years ago, during breaks between classes. The offending group of boys would be made to carry out the punishment for the satisfaction of the teachers, to enforce correct behaviour. After either finding it too out of date or dissatisfactory, the punishment had evolved into what it was today, and it only retained the name because no one could be bothered to conjure up a new one.

*

Arriving at the main gates, I saw a great number of other boys standing around, looking cold, tired, and quite scared. I knew that a few of them had suffered this punishment before, some of whom had been in the dormitory I had been prefect of the previous term. To my surprise, I saw I wasn't the only third year boy present – two others were also in attendance. I wondered what the others had done to earn their place on the *List*.

My wandering eyes then came to rest on a figure, standing there in a thick coat and gloves, drinking a cup of something hot. Michael Lawrence, one of the prefects from Enfield. Of all the prefects, why did it have to be him? The guy was a complete idiot, the sort that relished this type of sadistic punishment. Everyone was beneath him, even some of those that he counted as friends. From what I understood, he had always been one to demand nothing less than an A+ or an A in every piece of work he delivered. An A- was the lowest he would tolerate. I once saw him throw a tantrum over receiving a B for an essay he had written during his GCSEs. He was on his way to becoming a doctor or a surgeon or something, definitely something to do with medicine. Being the only one in the school currently destined for such a career, he had a massive chip on his shoulder about it. I dreaded to think what he might have in store for us on this freezing morning.

“Are all you little cocksuckers here?” he asked, producing a copy of the *List* from an inside pocket. “I’m going to read off your names, and I want you to answer. If anyone is missing then you’re all going to start with a roll down the hill, without shirts on. Got it?”

No one answered, and so Lawrence started reading out names.

“Timpson,” he said, as he reached that part of the list. He looked around as no one answered, as did many others. I couldn’t see the second year anywhere.

“Timpson?” Lawrence repeated. “Where the fuck is Timpson? Does anyone know?”

“I think he’s been let off,” a voice squeaked up, one of the second years from Butcher.

Typical, I thought. He had probably bribed Kenji Suzuki, Butcher’s head of house, to pull some strings. That sort of thing had never worked for me in the past. It showed what having access to a vast fortune and being able to pass brown envelopes around could do for you.

“Fuck that!” Lawrence said angrily. “I never gave the little prick permission! Someone go and get him—”

“Good morning, boys,” a voice then interrupted him.

I turned to see Father Thomas approaching. He was wrapped in his signature long, black cloak against the chill of the morning, his hands hidden somewhere within. Damn, that cloak looked warm.

“I’m guessing that none of you have failed to notice the snow on your way over; it’s rather hard to miss,” he said somewhat cheerily. “We’ve had a lot more than the forecast said there was going to be, and so we’re not going to run the usual schedule this morning.” He cast his eyes along the road defined by the snow, the snowfall there lying a little shallower than that on the grass verges framing it.

“We need to get it all cleared, otherwise the delivery vans, cars, staff, and other visitors to the school won’t be able to get in,” he finished.

I felt my spirits lift. There wouldn’t be any torturous punishments to be had this morning. All we were going to be made to do would be to act as snowploughs, to clear the roads and paths. It would be hard work, sure, and probably quite tedious, but it was preferable to rolling down a snow-covered hill without a shirt on, as Lawrence was eager for us to do. The first and second years were still standing gloomily about, shivering and looking thoroughly miserable. They had no idea of how lucky they actually were.

“So, if you all want to come with me, we’re going to go to the gardeners’ lodge and get some brooms and shovels,” Father Thomas said, starting off.

“Father,” Lawrence called, “I think they could all do with a run before we start, to warm them up. A couple of times around the main drive.”

Shut the hell up, you prick! I immediately wanted to shout at him. He was clearly already bitter that he wouldn’t be able to order us to act out all the little schemes he had planned. I wondered if he had sat up the previous night with a few others, plotting out precisely what he was going to make us do. The sight of Father Thomas approaching must have really ruined his morning.

“No, no, Michael, there’s no time for that,” Father Thomas replied with a shake of his head. “We need to get started immediately, as there’s a lot to do. Even starting now, it could take us until seven-thirty at least, and the boys will need to get back to their houses, shower, and have breakfast before getting to class.”

I glanced over the main drive leading up to the school. There was a considerable amount of snow there, I saw. Even so, I was sure that Father Thomas wouldn’t stop at just wanting us to clear the drive; he would also want all the paths around the houses, classrooms, and other important places that teachers and pupils would need to get to cleared, so no one slipped over and broke something. He corroborated my thoughts as we arrived at the gardeners’ lodge.

“Right,” the tall monk said, starting his delegation. “If some of you want to take some of the shovels and brooms and come with me, we’ll start clearing the path for the junior school and the routes to the classrooms. In fact, I think it’s best that I take most of the first years with me,” he added as boys immediately lunged for the tools, all knowing very well that to be under the authority of Father Thomas would be infinitely more pleasant than Lawrence.

Even so, it turned into a bit of a free for all, boys arguing and fighting over who would get to do what, and so Father Thomas took to directing who was going to carry various buckets and pales that the snow might have to be scooped into, to be more effectively removed.

I saw Lawrence eyeing the number of available tools for the job. There was a significant amount, but still not enough to go around. He was probably thinking that he might be able to take some of those who were left with nothing to do on one of the sadistic alternative punishments that was festering in the back of his mind. I hoped he wouldn’t be given the chance. He might be smart, but he clearly had some deep-seated issues.

The tasks were allocated, and I was charged with working with Lawrence to clear the main drive, though I was thankfully handed a shovel by Father Thomas for which to perform the work. His plans thwarted, the seething prefect led us back down to the main drive to commence the snow ploughing operation.

Dammit, I realised as I took hold of the shovel’s handle. I had neglected to bring gloves. Walking from Butcher I had kept my hands in the pockets of my tracksuit, not thinking that I would at some point have to remove them. Now my hands would be exposed for however long this task took. Chilblains could well be on the cards for later.

The ploughing commenced, the boys in the years below working in silence, the only exchange of words being what was required to get the job done. I did likewise, concentrating only on shovelling snow. I was one of the two third years that had been sent back down here, the rather stocky Liam Duckworth of Cookson House having been taken by Father Thomas to help with some of the more challenging parts of the snow clearing at his end. The other, Jeff Barlow, also of Cookson House, wasn’t someone that I spoke to a great deal. He was quite tightly integrated with the Clique and so had little to do with me. Today, however, we were working side by side to get the task done.

“What did you do?” I asked as we scooped snow and tossed it in the general direction of the side of the road. One of the first years who had been allocated to the drive was using a bucket to shift the snow off the road. We were calling him over and dumping lumps of ice into it as we came across them.

“Told Mr Summers to fuck off,” Barlow said.

“Seriously?” I said, quite startled that he would do such a thing. “You told one of the housemasters to fuck off?”

“Not Somers, *Summers*,” Barlow repeated, shovelling a particularly large lump of ice into the bucket.

Ah, the English teacher. It mattered little who it was to be perfectly honest. The fact was that Barlow had sworn directly at one of the teachers.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“He gave me a B on my English Lit essay on *Great Expectations*,” he said. “It was worth an A at least, and I told him to change it, but he refused. We then argued about what the story was about, and he said that I hadn’t read all of it, so I told him to fuck off and he put me on the *List*.”

“*Did* you read it?” I joked.

“No,” he scoffed. “It’s fucking boring. I copied mostly off Doggy.”

The first year’s bucket was filled, and the boy headed off. A snowball struck him on the side of the face as he walked the short distance to dump it, making him drop the bucket, the snow and ice within tumbling out.

“Pick that up, you little shit!” Lawrence barked angrily, even though it was he who had just tossed the ball.

“Glad he’s not actually taking this thing,” Barlow muttered as we began to scoop and throw more snow onto the sides. “He’s okay most of the time, but he turns into a complete dick when it comes to stuff like this.”

I couldn’t say that he was *ever* a nice person. I continued shovelling, watching out of the corner of my eye as Lawrence began to roll up a new snowball, searching for another victim to pelt. With Father Thomas having taken the reins, the prefect had been relegated to merely overseeing and so would now be stood around for the next couple of hours with a face liked a smacked arse. I imagined he would find reason to put many of those here today on the *List* again next Friday, feeling that we hadn’t been punished enough.

Scoop, throw, scoop, throw. I began to worry if I was going to finish all this before seven-thirty. More likely, it would be around eight, perhaps even later. I didn’t have to hurry; I had a free period from nine until ten, which meant taking my time in getting breakfast. Even so, it would be good to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Paff! A snowball hit Barlow.

“Oi!” Barlow said, clearly forcing a jovial tone into his voice, even if his face was betraying it. He bent to respond to Lawrence’s attack in kind.

“Want to go on the *List* next week?” the sixth former threatened as Jeff made ready to throw the ball.

“Was only kidding, Mike,” Barlow grinned, throwing the snowball in the direction of one of the younger boys, missing by only inches.

“Good. Get on with it,” Lawrence pointed.

“Cock,” Barlow said under his breath as we returned to scooping. Another snowball hit him not long after that, but he didn’t respond.

With Barlow being so stroppy about his grades and Lawrence equally so, I would have thought the two would be getting on like a house on fire. Ah, fire. A nice hot fire. I could do with one of those right now.

Lawrence tossed a few more snowballs about before he started to grow bored. “Will you lot hurry the fuck up?” he shouted.

No one answered, all focusing on ploughing. We all knew better than to answer back.

“Oi, Jeff,” Lawrence then said, coming over to us. “I’m going for a fag. Tell *The B.F.G.* that I’ve gone to get a coffee if he asks, okay? I’m putting you in charge.”

“No problem,” Jeff said.

“And you,” Lawrence punched me on the arm, “work harder. I want more than half of this done when I come back.”

I turned to him, finding it hard not to glare. At the look, however, Lawrence took a small step back.

“Ah, it’s you, Crosthwaite,” he said. He struggled for something to add, then said, “Keep going, there’s lots of snow left.”

Interesting reaction, I thought as Lawrence headed down the drive towards the main gates, one of the many favoured smoking spots for those that did so regularly. The tall, thick bushes and trees there were an excellent place to conceal oneself, even more so now that they were covered in snow.

I heard one of the boys starting to sob as he continued to fill his bucket. Lawrence had earlier forced him to pack the snow in with his bare hands for a time, and I could see from here that they had turned a bright red. I had experienced something similar myself when I was younger. His hands would hurt like hell later on in the shower, if he didn’t warm them up slowly.

I recognised the boy as Gregory Miller, the first year who I had looked after as a dormitory prefect in the autumn term, the one who had stunk to high heaven after his manure and compost-rolling incident. He did like to make a fuss and was often picked on. I saw Father Thomas approaching then, bearing a steaming cup with him. Hot chocolate, I supposed – that was his favourite.

“Ah, now how are you two getting on?” he asked.

“Okay,” Barlow and I answered. ‘Can I borrow your cloak for an hour?’ I wanted to ask.

“Where’s Michael?” Father Thomas wanted to know, looking around for the prefect.

“He’s gone to get a coffee,” Jeff answered automatically.

“Hmm, he should be keeping charge down here, not leaving you alone while he gets himself a drink.”

“It’s okay, Father, he put Joe and I in charge,” Barlow answered once more.

Jeff Barlow, I knew, was eager to become a prefect when he reached the upper sixth, and as a result would big up any responsibility that he was given, no matter how small or trivial, to prove that he was worthy of the appointment. I didn’t know why he was trying so hard. Both his father and older brother had been made prefects when they had attended the school, making Barlow almost a shoo-in.

“Hmm, okay,” Father Thomas said, still disapproving of the decision. “But tell him to come and see me when he gets back.” He was then distracted by the sobs and snivelling he could hear and went over to investigate. “Now, Gregory, what’s all this fuss about?”

“My hands hurt, Father,” Miller sniffed.

The monk took the boy’s hands, examining them closely. “Have you been handling the snow with your bare hands?”

“It was the only way to get most of it into the bucket,” the boy whimpered.

“Hmm,” Father Thomas said, continuing to turn the boy’s hands over.

I saw that they were worse than I had at first thought, the redness spreading all the way up to his wrists. I suddenly knew what was about to come next.

Father Thomas manipulated his gloves and drew back a sleeve, looking at the time on his watch. “Okay, I think you’ve had enough down here. Take the bucket up to help the others clearing the path to Churchill House.”

“Churchill House, Father?”

“Sorry, not Churchill House. It hasn’t been called that for years. The junior school, I mean. You really shouldn’t have come out here without gloves. Let’s say just another half an hour, and you can go in. We don’t want your hands to get any worse and then need to spend the day in the infirmary. I’ll be back up in a minute to tell you when you can go.”

“Thank you, Father,” Miller said, still snivelling and picking up the bucket to start over to the junior school.

Barlow gave me an incredulous look. “Father, what?!” he said to the monk. “He’s only got to do an hour?!”

“Never you mind, Jeffrey,” Father Thomas said after Miller was more or less out of earshot. “Gregory didn’t have a very happy Christmas, so I don’t want to help compound his misery any further.”

Sure, I thought. I had a miserable Christmas, too. A massive argument with my parents about me wanting to get away from this place, but you don’t hear me bitching about it.

I continued to shovel, trying to disguise my obvious annoyance that the first year would be getting away at least half an hour before the rest of us, when I heard a cry go up.

Father Thomas, who had been standing around watching all of us shovel and apparently waiting

for Lawrence to return with his coffee, looked over to the cause of the distress. I watched as a stream of boys who had all taken the opportunity to down tools ran over to see what was happening. They were heading in the direction of the sandstone steps that led to the upper grounds, where the junior school, the science labs and some of the other houses were based. Father Thomas started over, at an unhurried pace. Barlow looked at me, before we both put our shovels down and made our own way over.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Barlow said as we both saw what had happened.

Gregory Miller had apparently slipped on the icy stairs as he had made his way up them, tumbling over backward and bouncing all the way back down. Blood was running from his nose, where it had met with the exposed concrete. I wondered if he had broken it. I also wondered if Miller was genuinely in that much pain or if he was taking the opportunity to now exaggerate.

“Come on, Gregory, let’s stop make so much noise,” Father Thomas said, helping him up and sounding at first irritated. “Oh dear, that doesn’t look very comfortable,” he then said, seeing the state of the boy’s face.

Miller fussed for a time, slipping once again as he got to his feet. He was trembling, likely a combination of the cold and the shock of the slip. Father Thomas appraised the injury for a moment, before declaring that the first year was no longer fit to continue with the punishment.

“Could one of you take Gregory to see Sister Mary at the clinic, please, as he might have to go to hospital if his nose is badly broken,” Father Thomas requested. The words had barely left his mouth when the volunteers were voicing their offers to escort Miller. The volunteer could be there at least half an hour, more so if the night sister wasn’t immediately available.

“Father, I share a dormitory with Greg,” a boy by the name of Ian Daniels said. “I could take him and collect any of his clothes and wash bag if he needs to go to hospital.”

“That’s a good idea, Ian,” Father Thomas said. “Well volunteered, thank you.”

Well volunteered? I cursed my luck. I had been both boys’ dorm prefect not one month earlier. Had it been this term, the escorting could have been *my* duty, and then I wouldn’t have to carry on with this ridiculous punishment any longer. Sure, it could have been a lot worse had Father Thomas not intervened with the need to clear the snow and left the *Murga* up to Lawrence to dictate as he pleased, but I would still seize on the opportunity to end it as soon as possible. I only wished that something else could happen to end the insufferable task sooner. Maybe one of the local farmers might show up with a real snowplough and help shift the drifts in a matter of minutes.

I knew that that was highly unlikely, however.

“Right, let’s get this shit done,” I said, stomping over to my shovel and trying to work faster. *Scoop, throw, scoop, throw, scoop, throw.* I knew I probably wasn’t clearing it properly, but I didn’t care. So long as it wasn’t too deep and the cars and vans could still get through. They would just have to go a little slower, that was all. Barlow was still working at the same speed, which riled me a little. I wished he would go faster. I intended this to be the last ever major punishment I received at St Christopher’s, and the sooner it was over with the better.

Lawrence reappeared not a short while later and was immediately confronted by Father Thomas. The monk seemed quite suspicious that the sixth former hadn't brought the aforementioned cup of coffee with him. He would obviously be able to smell the smoke on the prefect's breath. Perhaps Lawrence was going to go with the old chewing gum and *it wasn't me, it was someone I was standing next to* excuse. I couldn't see Lawrence chewing anything. Nor could Father Thomas.

"So, Michael, where exactly have you been?" the tall monk wanted to know.

I grinned evilly to myself.

"I—" Lawrence started.

"Arghh!"

"Oh, for God's sake," I growled as I heard the cry of another of the younger boys. "Is everyone going to start throwing themselves down those bloody stairs, just to get out of doing this?"

"Arggh! Father! Help! Father!"

"Oh my God! Father! Father!"

That actually sounded a little more urgent, and I felt my stomach involuntary tighten. The voices had an edge to them – one of fear and terror. I saw who was doing the shouting, two second year boys holding buckets and standing by the side of the drive that was dense with bushes. The two looked very upset, unmistakable signs of genuine distress on their faces. I once again dropped my shovel, running over to them, as Father Thomas commenced his trademarked unhurried, placid stroll to their side.

"Oh, Jesus!" I said as I discovered the source of the boys' anguish. There, lying in the bushes, was the naked body of a dead boy. And next to it, the fully clothed body of an older one. The younger one appeared to have been strangled. The older one had had his throat cut.

"What's happening?"

"Who is it?"

"Oh Christ, I can't look! I don't want to see it!"

"They've cut his throat!"

"That's disgusting."

"Ugh, shit, I'm going to be sick!"

The sound of heaving followed as one of the second years began vomiting into the snow. Another boy followed swiftly thereafter. Father Thomas raised his hands and began shooing away all those nearby, quickly summoning Lawrence over. The sixth former didn't look all that bothered until he was up close and personal to the scene. His face drained of colour. Maybe he had expected to see a dead fox or a pheasant.

"Okay, Michael, I need you to call the headmaster for me, immediately," the monk said, unfastening his cloak and spreading it as best he could in front of the bodies in the brushes, in an attempt to disguise them. "Quick as you can, Michael. Go."

"Yes, yes," the pale-faced Lawrence said, and darted away across the snow, towards the main entrance to the school.

“You two,” Father Thomas looked to Barlow and I, “get the boys back to their dormitories and then inform your house duty masters. Wake them if you have to. Don’t waste any time. Hurry.”

Barlow and I did so, Barlow hastening to go about the task. This, I knew, wasn’t because he wished to crow about the responsibility. He was clearly in shock and eager to escape the scene as soon as possible.

The news was going to spread around the school like wildfire. By eight, everyone would know. But what bothered me most wasn’t the discovery of the bodies, but the identity of one of them in particular – the older boy, the fully clothed one, the one who had had their throat cut. I had recognised them within seconds, even if no one else had.

It was Craig Priest.

Chapter Seventeen

A school assembly was held the morning of the discovery on the main drive, and in a repeat of the previous term, parents arrived that day and the next to take boys home. The school was to remain closed until further notice.

Initially, I expected both my parents to be annoyed that I was once again being made to return home when I should be out from under their feet. I was surprised then to see the horror on their faces when they arrived to pick me up. My mother even hugged me tightly as she exited the car. They wanted to know if I was okay and if I had seen anything. They were appalled to discover that I had been one of the first to do so, my mother whisking me into the car and setting off as quickly as possible. Even so, I couldn't help but feel that it would still not be a good enough reason for me to leave St Christopher's before I completed my A-Levels. I gave it only a couple of days for the shock to pass before they would discuss my possible return to the school, should it ever reopen. I had a feeling that this time it might not.

*

My mother and father had meetings and all kinds of other things going on the first week I returned to Baconsdale, and so they had little choice but to leave me at home on my own. They would insist that I spend as much time with Rob as possible, so that I wouldn't destroy the house. I looked on it in a different way, as a test of how I would cope at home the following year.

For the most part, I did okay. I did once succeed in burning baked beans when I left them too long on the hob. I had been distracted by a film preview show on Sky Movies, featuring an intriguing-looking movie called *Basic Instinct*, which was apparently whipping up a storm in America. I also broke various things around the house on occasion. Small things though, luckily. I tidied up quickly after myself in all instances. I even managed to mend a door handle that had come loose, raiding the garage for a screwdriver to do so.

After the first few days, my parents set me tasks, such as cleaning and doing the odd spot of food shopping. Mostly this was for milk and bread, the milk floats around our way not being able to traverse the roads that were still thick with ice and snow. The gritters had come nowhere near us.

The strangest thing then happened to me in the second week. I was visited by the goblins.

At home.

That had never happened before, and it startled me that the location of my dream had shifted to match that of where I was staying in Surrey. It scared me quite a bit, too, as it meant that the goblins were capable of pursuing me almost as much in real life as they did in my dreams.

In the dream, I found myself waking up in my own bedroom. The door was open. The upstairs landing of the house was gone, however, the door leading into a corridor that went elsewhere. I got out of bed and wandered into the corridor, discovering it to be a match for the one I would normally

materialise in during my encounters with the goblins; sterile and mute, plain walls, floor and ceiling, locked doors on the left-hand side, impenetrable windows to the right. The shadows of the goblins could be seen at the far end, around the bend, though here they appeared to be preoccupied. There was choking, sobbing, and evil-sounding cackles coming from around the corner. I made to return to my bedroom, but it had vanished, replaced by a dead end.

I walked the length of the corridor for the first time, rounding the corner and finding myself in my parents' bedroom. Several of the goblins were there, dismembering my father, who they had dragged onto the floor, staining the cream white carpet a dark crimson with his blood. He was dead already, his eyes staring blankly up at the ceiling. The choking was coming from the bed, where a number of the other creatures were amusing themselves by disembowelling my mother. She was being held there as they ripped out her entrails, thrashing and choking on her own blood, like John Hurt in *Alien*.

"Joseph ... Joseph ... Joseph," I thought I could hear her saying between the chokes.

The goblins cackled with glee as they continued their work, quite aware that I was watching from the doorway and knowing that I could do nothing to stop them. One of them picked up my father's severed arm, bending his finger into a V shape and waving it at me.

"You're next," it laughed in a scratchy, throaty voice. "Cut your throat, we will," it added, drawing a thin, bony finger across its own.

I had never heard them speak before and knew in the back of my mind that that wasn't a good thing. I only wanted to wake up.

I did so, finding myself standing in my parents' bedroom, the goblins gone, the scene one of normality. The lights were on, and my mother and father were watching me from their bed, softly saying my name. It was the first time they had seen me sleepwalk. I had never told them about the incidents at school in the past.

They walked me back to my bed, making sure I was settled in and comfortable before returning to their own bedroom. I didn't sleep.

*

I told them that it was probably a reaction to being dragged out of school at such a random point, my mind struggling to cope with the change to its regular schedule, as well as having to cope with everything else that was going on. They hadn't asked any other questions. Even so, I noticed after the incident that they took turns working from home, writing their reports and doing other duties that the job demanded of them. Initially, they seemed both a little put out by this, but eventually they grew to enjoy the lack of a commute, as well as the chance to stay in bed a little longer. I always thought that my parents worked too hard.

"If you worked from home a little more often or maybe even part-time, then you could get another cat," I told my mother one evening, while she was preparing dinner.

“Oh, I’d love to have another cat,” she said, her face and voice softening at the thought. “But I can’t; I’m not here enough, and it’s too cruel to keep animals if you’re not home all the time.”

“They can cope,” I said. “As long as they have a cat flap and food.”

My mother shook her head. “No. They need company. It’s even worse if you have a dog. The Turners have a dog that they leave on its own all day, except for the walker that comes at lunchtime. I couldn’t do that; it wouldn’t be fair. The poor thing must wonder every day if he’s been abandoned.”

I rarely saw my mother this way, acting a little more human. She was always stern and serious, blunt and to the point, so career-focused that I sometimes wondered if she had ever lived a real day in her whole life. Both she and my father truly were two people who lived to work. Craig Priest’s accusation of my being a mistake and an unwanted child fluttered into my mind a couple of times during those first two weeks, as I wondered if I was something of an inconvenience to them. But I was probably winding myself up needlessly. No more badmouthing would come from Craig Priest again. I felt oddly bad about that. Everyone wants to silence a bully, just not like that.

“I’ve decided what I want to be when I leave school,” I then told her.

“Oh? What?” my mother asked, sounding quite interested.

“A trader, at a bank.”

She stood there looking at me for a moment, to see whether I was being serious. I needed no effort to keep my expression deadpan. “You know that is very hard work, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “But the rewards are worth it.”

“And what rewards would those be?” Her tone was one of intrigue, but with a trace of condescension.

“Big bonuses, big houses, lots of fast cars. I’ve heard most of them have stopped doing it by the time they’re thirty-five, too, and are retired. You can do whatever you want with your life after that,” I shrugged.

My mother almost threw her head back as she laughed. “Only one of those is true.”

“The money?” I asked. It led to all the other things, after all.

“The quitting before they’re thirty-five.”

“No, not quitting,” I said. “Retiring.”

My mother laughed even harder. “Joseph, very few of them make it to thirty-five, and if they do, they don’t finish working there because they’re comfortable and ready to retire rich. It’s because they’re burned out from the work, and they can’t do it any more.”

“Yeah ... but they will have made a lot of money,” I said.

“Not necessary,” she said. She smiled warmly now, without mocking me. “What else have you heard?”

“Champagne parties—”

My mother almost dropped the packet of rice she was attempting to open, needing to put it down on the worktop and cover her mouth from the giggles. “Go on?” she beamed.

“Ex-models as wives ...?” I ventured.

“Gold diggers, more likely.”

I got the feeling that I had been grossly misled by the articles I had read in the men’s magazines. “I read about it in newspapers and magazines,” I told her.

“Joseph,” my mother said, still wearing a warm smile, “you have to remember that while that might be true for some, it won’t be true for everyone. There will be some that will rake in millions every year, but there will also be many others that will have to make do with a lot less, peaking at eighty or ninety thousand a year, including the bonus. I’m not saying that’s not a lot, but it’s a long way away from the millions.

“You need to keep in mind that people in the same job can be waged at different increments. Take professional footballers. The ones that play for the big clubs can earn upwards of ten thousand per week. The ones that play for the smaller clubs see only a few thousand per month. The same is true in banking.”

“Okay, sure,” I said. “But you just have to work your way up.”

“Yes. Yes, you do. It’s a very hard climb though, Joseph, and most fail. I’m not trying to put you off, but keep in mind that working seventy-hour weeks—”

“What?” Had she just said *seventy hours*? How was that even possible?

“Seventy-hour weeks,” my mother repeated. “Fourteen-hour days. Five in the morning until seven or eight at night, and that doesn’t take into account getting to and from the office. It could take over an hour, door to door. That’s an extra two hours of your day gone. That’s sixteen hours dedicated to your job. And then you have to find time to eat and sleep. The solution for most is to simply live near the office. Can you see where the burn out comes from?”

“Oh,” was all I managed to say.

“Still want to do it?”

I steeled myself. I could do this. There was no harm in setting your sights high. “Yes,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll get used to it.”

“Okay,” my mother said, and began measuring out the rice into a pot.

“And when I’m done, I’ll buy you and Dad a holiday home in the Mediterranean,” I said.

My mother smiled at me then, but said nothing else.

Dave called me towards the end of the second week. Sam had been staying with him in North London and wanted to know if Rob and I fancied joining them for the weekend. We didn’t have a specific agenda, but I knew we would find something to keep ourselves occupied.

*

“Four for *Basic Instinct*?” Dave said.

I tried not to hear the upwards inflection at the end of Dave’s sentence. It reminded me of how Rob had done a similar thing in the pubs back in Surrey, the previous week. It was almost as if he

was asking the teller if it was the right film for us.

“Um ... that film’s not out until May,” the teller said. “And you’re clearly not old enough, anyway.”

“Yes, we are,” Dave said.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Dave answered, far too quickly and automatically.

I tried not to look over to the Rob, Baz and Sam, who were hanging back, making out that they were more interested in the poster advertising the upcoming *Batman Returns*, rather than the prospects of full-frontal nudity, courtesy of Sharon Stone.

“Well, how about ...” Dave scanned the listings board above. “*Betty Blue*?”

The teller suppressed a sigh. “Do you have any ID?” he asked.

Dave and I provided him with our IDs, once again far too hastily. The teller took one glance at the pair of laminated cards before returning them.

“These are fake,” he said. “I see these ones all the time, guys. Sorry,” he added, as we opened our mouths to contest the assertion.

“Oh, come on,” Dave started pleading. “We’ll sit at the back, out of the way, and won’t make any noise.”

“Sorry, no,” the teller said. “You’re under age.”

“But we’re eighteen!” Dave insisted. “If we were under eighteen, we’d still be at school.”

“You can leave school at sixteen,” the teller reminded us as what looked like his manager, who had been watching from the other end of the counter, came over to join him. “We’d get in trouble with the police if we let you in. You can’t see any film classified as eighteen. You look about fifteen or sixteen to me, so I can let you in to any of those.”

The manager fixed us with a stare that said that we should give up this fight.

“For fuck’s sake,” Dave muttered.

I could have told him that there was absolutely zero chance that *Basic Instinct* might be being shown earlier. The UK always seemed to get films several months after they were released in the US, sometimes up to a year after.

“Dave, let’s just watch one of the others,” I suggested. “What about *The Lawnmower Man*?”

Dave looked over the show times again, seeing that the next performance was starting in twenty minutes. We ran the idea past Baz, Sam and Rob, who seemed more than happy with it. Our attempts to get into the pubs that afternoon had proven worthless, and they were clearly bored of trying.

“*The Lawnmower Man*’s that Stephen King film, right?” Sam asked.

“It is, yeah. It said so on the advert I saw for it,” I said.

“Oh! Don’t they shag in that?” Baz then said enthusiastically. “I read it’s got some cybersex scene in it or something.”

“Cybersex?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, with computers and that.”

“They have sex with a computer?” Rob half-scowled.

“No, not with a computer,” Baz said. “The guy and the girl do it in some virtual world thing. It’s meant to be really cool!”

“Like *Tron* or something?” Dave sounded sceptical.

“I guess,” Baz shrugged. “Just not as shit as *Tron*.”

Dave looked a little despondent. He clearly wanted to see something filthier, but it was obvious to me that it wasn’t going to happen. The pubs had been a bust, the ‘theatres’ in Soho had been a bust. Now at a proper cinema, I just wanted to sit down, watch something and get off my feet for a bit.

“Okay,” Dave eventually relented. “It might actually be quite good.”

It wasn’t.

*

“Your dad is pretty cool for letting us all stay here,” I told Dave.

“Yeah, he is,” Dave said. “He trusts me to do whatever I want. That’s why I prefer to stay with him, rather than my mum. She always wants to know where I’m going and what I’m doing, when I’ll be back, and stuff like that. She fusses over me constantly. Except when Pete is there.”

“Pete’s your mum’s boyfriend?” Sam asked.

“Fiancé,” Dave said. “They got engaged a few months ago.”

“Oh, you never told us,” I said.

Dave only shrugged. He didn’t seem to care either way.

“What does your dad think?” Rob asked.

“Doesn’t really give a damn, rather the same as me. Pete’s a patronising, obnoxious prick.”

“What does he do?”

“Chef for some overpriced restaurant,” Dave said. “Which reminds me, what do you want for dinner?”

We all looked at each other, not quite sure what to choose. Dave lived in West Hampstead, near the Heath. It was unlike most other parts of London that I had visited, a lot less busy and more suburban. Dave’s house was quite near a bus stop, just a five or ten-minute walk down the road, from where we could get to Finchley Road or West Hampstead Tube stations, if we wanted to go back into the city centre itself.

“Is your house like this?” Sam asked Baz.

Baz glared at him. I knew that Sam hadn’t meant it as an insult. Dave’s house was big, almost what I would honestly describe as a mansion. Perhaps it was. I had always gotten the impression that Baz’s house was actually quite humble compared to many of the others that attended St Christopher’s. Even so, most others probably didn’t live in a place as big as this. There certainly

were some very large houses on the street, a fair few even larger than this one. I wondered if I might find myself living on this street one day, thirty-six years old, having completed a stint in the City.

“Shall we go back out?” I suggested.

“No,” Rob said. “Let’s save our money for tomorrow. My parents only gave me a bit, and it’s only Friday.”

“I could loan you some,” Dave offered.

There were mumbles of refusal; no one wanted to be in debt to one another. It could cause problems back at school, living in such a close-knit community.

“Okay, so how about pizza? And afterwards we can just watch a couple of films, or just chat or whatever,” Dave said.

We all looked to one another and nodded agreeably. Dave went to the kitchen and returned with a Domino’s menu, a pad of paper and a pen, writing down what we wanted as we passed the menu around.

I then heard the front door of the house open, and a man came walking into the living room, wearing a long winter coat and carrying a briefcase with him. We all shifted in our chairs, sitting a little more upright from how we had been lounging.

“Evening, boys,” Dave’s father said. “Oh, there’s five of you,” he then added, looking about us.

“Baz, I mean Barry, joined us in town,” Dave said. “He lives in South London.”

“Barry Green?” Dave’s father asked. Baz nodded. “I saw your father today at work. Just in the canteen, buying a coffee. He was in a hurry, so we didn’t have time to chat.”

“You’re home early, Dad,” Dave said.

“Yes, I actually went out for lunch to celebrate the successful delivery of a project and ... well, I didn’t come back in until five. There was no point in doing any work after that, so we all just packed up and left for the weekend.”

“Okay for some,” Dave quipped.

“Hello, I’m David’s father, Jim,” the man then said, coming over to Rob and shaking his hand.

“Oh sorry, Dad,” Dave said. “Dad, this is Rob. Rob, this is my dad.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Rob said, automatically switching on all the airs and graces that were expected of us when in someone else’s home.

“Good to see you again, Joe,” Jim said, coming to me after greeting Barry.

There was something on the man’s breath as he spoke; it smelled strongly of alcohol. He had clearly had quite a few drinks during his extended lunch break, or perhaps just one before leaving for the day. I wondered if he had driven home.

“You been in the pub, Dad?” Dave said.

“I have, yes,” he admitted. “But I left the car at work and got on the Tube,” he added quickly as he saw all our eyes on him, clearly all questioning his decision to get behind the wheel after drinking.

“What car do you drive, Mr Nurse?” Rob wanted to know.

“Call me ‘Jim’,” Dave’s father smiled. “I drive a Porsche Carrera at the moment.”

I noticed the other boys roll their eyes as Rob almost jumped excitedly out of his seat. “Really? Wow! What model? A 911?”

“A 911, yes,” Jim grinned, glancing to the rest of us.

“911 Classic?”

“No, the latest 964. I’ve kept hold of the Classic, although it’s at my sister’s house right now.”

Rob’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“I considered the 930, but just preferred the 964,” Jim finished.

“Can I see? Oh, damn, I forgot you’ve left it at work,” Rob said, sounding annoyed.

Jim chuckled. “Really into your cars, I can tell.”

“Always have been, always will be,” Rob said proudly. “They’re amazing. Got to love the noise of some of the engines in the sports cars when they’re going flat out.”

“Yes, because you’ve been in so many,” Baz remarked.

“Well, okay, I’ve only seen them on *Top Gear*,” Rob conceded.

Jim chuckled again. “You can see it tomorrow. I’ll pick it up in the morning. I might get Terry to drive me down there, as I can’t stand getting on the Tube.”

“I find them kind of fun,” Sam said. “We don’t have a subway back home. They can’t build one either, because we’re too close to the sea level.”

“The London Underground is the oldest underground network in the world, did you know that?” Jim asked us.

“Is it?” I said, politely breaking the immediate silence that had greeted the rather mundane fact.

“Yes, it is. It was opened in the late nineteenth century.”

“Oh, wow,” I said, this time with genuine interest. That *was* old. The other four appeared as equally impressed.

“Eighteen ... sixty or ninety, I think?” Dave’s father continued. “It was actually running electric trains back then, too.”

“They had electricity then?” Baz said.

David’s father chuckled. “Yes, they actually had a lot of things back then that we take for granted today. Anyway, I’m going to go and take a shower. Are you all staying here tonight?”

“I’m not,” Baz said. “I’m going back home.”

“So, just the four of you as planned, then. Don’t mind sharing a room, do you? Then again, you’re probably used to it at school, and you’d be doing the same if you were there right now, anyway.”

“We were thinking of ordering pizza for dinner, Dad,” Dave said as his father started out of the living room. “Do you want some?”

“Um,” his father considered it for a moment. “Yes, I could eat. Only a small one, though. Lunch was quite filling, and it will only go to waste otherwise.”

“What would you like?” Dave asked, offering him the menu.

“Just one of whatever you’re having,” Jim said, waving it away. “I want to go and shower and get all the grim from the Tube off me.”

I could have used one myself if I was being honest. I had noticed that my snot and fingernails had turned black since arriving in London. I wasn’t sure if that was in some way linked to travelling on the Underground, but I was sure I had heard someone once say so.

Dave placed the food order, the pizza arriving about forty minutes later. We gathered around the dining table to eat, talking about the film we had seen and what we had spent the day in London doing. I was quite impressed with the relationship that Dave and his father maintained, acting more like they were good friends, rather than father and son. An only child, and with his mother having divorced his father a few years before he had started attending St Christopher’s, maybe their relationship had just taken a different course to most.

While the others were tucking into their pizza quite happily, Baz and I were picking bits off, Baz creating a small pile of unwanted scraps on the side of his plate. Whereas Baz had found the mushroom not to his liking, I had failed to see that my pizza came with olives; I couldn’t stand olives. The others were more than happy to gobble them up, however. Jim’s pet dog was lying on the floor by his side, and every now and again Jim would cut off a piece of pizza and feed it to him. Wonka was a friendly dog, a chocolate Labrador who wagged his tail non-stop.

“Did any of you three know the ones they found?” Jim then wanted to know, looking to Baz, Rob and myself.

“You did, Joe,” Baz said, pointing his slice of pizza at me. “One of them, I mean.”

“Which one did you know?” Jim asked.

“The sixth former,” I said. “Craig Priest was his name.”

“He attacked you in the shower,” Baz added helpfully.

I wanted to let Baz know that he was supplying a little too much information now, but my mouth was full of pizza, and I wasn’t able to swallow it in time.

“Had a run in with him in the past, did you?” Jim said. “How did you feel about seeing him there?”

“Sort of ... ambivalent? Is that the right word? Yes. I ... don’t really know what to think.”

“You didn’t know the other boy, no?”

“No,” I shook my head. “He was from the junior school. I don’t think that his identity has been revealed yet, has it?”

Shakes of heads came from the others around the table.

“A junior boy. That was the same as the last time around, wasn’t it?” Jim said. “Sounds to me like it might be the work of a local paedophile. The police will be questioning and keeping a close eye on all the known sex offenders in the area from now on.”

I had no idea of the word that Dave’s father had just used.

“A what?” Baz then asked, saving me the indignity of having to do so myself.

“A paedophile,” Sam answered. “A man who fucks kids! Oh, sorry, Jim,” he then said, his ears

catching up with his tongue and causing him to redden immediately.

“Don’t worry, I hear worse than that every day at work,” Jim said, looking at Sam. “But, yes, it’s someone who sexually abuses children, and often kills them afterwards. You’d probably find it’s someone from the local town that the police already know about. Might not be a man, either. Could even be one of the teachers, or even one of the monks,” he shrugged.

“Oh, I doubt that,” I said automatically.

“Why?” Rob asked.

“I ... don’t know. I just don’t see anyone from the school doing something like that.”

“I’m willing to bet it was Quasimodo,” Rob said.

“Quasimodo?” Jim asked.

“It’s the name we have for one of the gardeners, due to the fact that he walks with a hunch.”

“His real name’s Andre Kethlan,” Baz said.

“How do you know that?” I asked, seeing the others around the table looking as equally taken aback.

Baz shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve just always known that. I think he might have introduced himself as Andre to me a few times.”

“What makes you think it’s him?” Jim asked Rob.

“He’s a very strange man. He seems to be a few bricks short of a full load,” Rob said.

“That’s because he is,” Baz pointed out.

“Is he?”

“Yeah. He stares at the boys all the time and is always touching them. Whenever he talks to me, he always wants to shake my hand and then doesn’t let go.”

“He does like to make physical contact all the time,” I nodded, remembering how he would always touch me whenever I spoke to him. It was usually just on the shoulder or the arm. It was maybe something that he just did, but it still felt wrong.

“Does he live at the school?” Jim asked.

“He lives with the monks, but in a separate part of the monastery,” Baz explained. “They look after him and give him work and stuff.”

“And you say he’s a bit mentally retarded?”

“He has a previous conviction from when he tried to rob a bank, using a banana.”

I snorted my Coke at that, laughing extremely hard. Rob, Sam and Dave were doing likewise. “What?” I asked.

“It’s true,” Baz insisted. “I’m not making this up.”

“He tried to hold up a *bank* using a *banana*?” Jim smirked.

“Did he think it was a gun?” Rob asked.

“No, he just thought that no one would notice,” Baz said. “He didn’t hold it out in the open, but had it under a tea towel that he’d taken from his mother’s house. That’s what I was told, at least.” He picked another piece of mushroom off his pizza, putting it aside.

“I don’t think it’s him,” Sam said. “He might be weird, but I doubt it’s anyone from the school.”

“Most likely it is someone from the school,” Jim countered. “They know the grounds the best, everything that goes on, and can pick their targets without raising suspicion.”

“So what about Craig Priest?” Baz wanted to know.

“Why he was killed, you mean?” Rob said, finishing off his Coke and starting to pour himself another glass. “Maybe he interrupted the killer and they killed him as well.”

“What would Craig Priest have been doing outside at that time?” Dave asked, pushing his glass over to Rob to request a refill. Baz, Sam and I followed suit.

“Does he smoke?” Sam asked. “Because if so, perhaps he was just going for a late-night fag. It must have happened then. Would make sense, too, given that the bodies were found early in the morning.”

“That’s most likely,” Rob said. “Otherwise, you’d need to have a pretty strong reason to go and do something like that to someone.”

I saw all four of the other boys at the table glance in my direction, Dave’s father cottoning on a short moment later.

“We’ll probably never know,” I said.

*

We finished the pizza and began to load the dishwasher, Dave’s father telling us that he needed to check some electronic mail that he was waiting on from the US. I had heard about electronic mail and was quite interested to see how it worked, but Dave suggested that we take the dog out for a walk. He seemed rather keen on doing so. I knew what that meant.

We began walking the neighbourhood, Rob’s eyes almost on stalks as we passed by the expensive-looking mansions and houses, and seeing the equally expensive-looking cars parked out the front. This, to Rob, must have been like attending a motor show, except without the chance to take any for a test drive. With that in mind, I decided to keep an eye on Rob, in case he did decide to see if he could get inside one.

“Best avoid the Heath at this time of night,” Dave said as Wonka trotted happily along beside us. “Loads of gay men up there, and we want to avoid getting bummed.”

“Really?” Rob asked.

“Yeah, they all go ‘cruising’ up that way,” Dave said.

“Cruising?”

“It’s when they walk around, looking for other gay men to pick up,” Dave said, with a look of disgust on his face.

“Gross!”

“Yeah,” Dave said. He then looked around to see who else was about, before taking a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, extracting one of the sticks and a lighter from within. He wasn’t a

heavy smoker as far as I knew, but he had had two already today.

“Oh, give me one,” Sam said. “I’ve got some back at school I can repay you with.”

“And me,” Rob said, wrenching his eyes away from the cars parked in the driveways of the houses we passed.

“Sure,” Dave said, handing one to each in turn. “Don’t touch any of the cars, Rob. Most of their alarms are really over sensitive. There were a couple ringing for over half an hour last night. It was really bloody annoying. Baz?” Dave presented the pack to him.

“No, thanks,” Baz said.

“Do you not smoke at all?” Sam asked.

“No.”

“Ever tried it?” Rob asked.

“Not interested, to be honest,” Baz said, sounding defiant and quite proud of his choice.

“Fair enough. Crotty?” Dave asked.

“No, thanks,” I said, waving them away.

“Go on, try one. No one’ll see.”

“Oh, I just don’t smoke either,” I lied.

“What’s wrong with you two?” Dave asked, looking between Baz and I.

“When did you start smoking?” I asked Sam, shifting the focus of attention.

“I only do it sometimes,” Sam said, lighting his cigarette and taking a small drag. “I mostly just sell the others to the first and second years. I sold one for a pound the other week.”

Dave laughed. “Really? Who to?”

“Neil Booth,” Sam said.

“The fat lump in the second year?”

“Yeah,” Sam grinned. “He was desperate, and no one would sell him any.”

The walk ended up being a little longer than originally planned, with Dave and Rob each enjoying a second cigarette, chaining them off the first. Wonka had no complaints. The longer the better in his eyes. We stopped off at a corner shop on the way back to buy chewing gum, in an attempt to mask the smell of the tobacco. I never believed this actually worked; no one’s parents were that ignorant.

Jim had the TV on when we returned to the mansion, preparing to watch a football match. Like Dave, he was a Liverpool supporter, one of the few boys at St Christopher’s that took more than just a passing interest in the sport. I had never really paid much attention to football, rugby and cricket being the main sporting events at school. Football was played, but the inter-school matches never really made any headlines, and they were so infrequent that they largely passed by unnoticed.

Tonight, Liverpool were playing a match against Genoa. Jim was sitting with a glass of beer in his hand, poured from a rather tall can that was resting on a little table next to his chair. ‘Carling’, the label on the can read.

“UEFA cup? Wasn’t this on on Wednesday?” Dave asked. “We watched it,” Dave nodded to

Sam.

“It was, but I taped it. I was too busy with delivering that project at work and have only just had a chance to catch up. Don’t tell me the result!” he added quickly, sticking a finger out towards his son. “I’ve been avoiding the sports pages for that very reason.”

“First Division game tomorrow night,” Dave said.

“Yep!” Jim grinned happily. “Do any of you boys follow football?” he asked of the rest of us. Shakes of heads all round.

“No, it’s all rugby and cricket at St Christopher’s, isn’t it? Do you boys fancy watching the game with me?” he asked.

“Sure,” we said after looking to one another and shrugging. We weren’t really up to anything else.

“How old are you boys?” Jim asked after we had found places to settle, Dave bringing a bean bag down from his room for Sam to sit on.

“Sixteen,” we said. It was mostly true. Some of us were still fifteen, but we would be turning sixteen in the coming weeks.

Jim pondered for a time before asking, “Would you like a beer? I think you’re old enough to be fair, and I know you’re not going to do anything bad.”

“Yeah!”

“Oh! Yes, please!”

“Really? Cool!”

Jim chuckled. “That’s about the same thing I said when I was your age. It was my dad that took me to the pub for my first half pint, though.”

“Really, Dad?” Dave said.

“Back up in Yorkshire. It was almost the done thing back then. Your grandma was absolutely furious. Can’t do that these days. David, go and fetch five cans from the fridge, would you?”

Dave did so eagerly, returning from the fridge bearing five additional cans of Carling, still affixed to the plastic holder they had come in. We eagerly cracked them open.

“Actually, David, could you get some glasses, too?” Jim asked. “It’s better you don’t drink it straight from the can.” He next showed us how to pour the beer, tilting the glass at an angle and pouring the contents of the can slowly into it. We did as shown, some pouring a little faster than others, and the beer fizzing up too much.

“Oops!” Baz said, putting his hand over the glass to stop it from bubbling over and dripping onto the coffee table. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t worry, just try not to get it on the carpet,” Dave’s father waved his hand dismissively, his focus now mostly on the TV.

The players were starting to exit the tunnel, the commentator talking about each of them, mentioning past performances, any injuries that they might have sustained, and the occasional mention of something that had been happening in their personal lives. Hooper, Jones, Rush, Barnes

were some of the names I heard and saw on the screen. With my focus on the beer I had been given, the information mostly washed over me. It probably would have anyway, to be honest. For someone not into the sport, it was quite a lot to take in all at once, and I had forgotten most of the names of the players by the time it came to kick off.

I had never had beer before, my parents refusing to let me have any. I wondered how it might taste. Quite sour, I thought, as I lowered the glass after my first gulp. Dave's father started to chuckle, and I realised that, as with everyone else, I had grimaced a little at the taste.

"I didn't like it to begin with, either," he said. "Give it couple more goes and you'll be okay."

I did so, finding it not quite as bad as before. Maybe my tongue had gotten over the initial shock of this brand-new taste. I took another gulp. That one was even better. Still a little bitter, but not nearly as bad as the first taste.

"What do you think?" Baz asked.

"Yeah, it's okay actually," I said. "I'm trying to think what it tastes like," I added, looking over what was written on the side of the can and what the ingredients were. Hops and barley I recognised from discussions in biology class.

"Beer tastes like beer," Jim said with another chuckle. We continued to drink for a while, watching the TV and silently nodding our appreciation of our first ever beers to one another. I often thought that it might have happened in a pub. I conceded that around a friend's house or even at my parents' own was far more realistic.

"Don't like it?" Jim then said, looking at Rob.

We all turned to Rob, who looked to be trying to drink his beer, but was struggling in both his effort to do so and maintain the mask that he was enjoying it. I could tell already that he was actually going to choke it down, drinking it only out of politeness to his hosts.

"It's okay if you don't like it," Jim said. "Some people don't. Others only acquire a taste for it when they get older."

Rob looked a little sheepish as he put the can down, admitting defeat. He clearly wanted to drink it to save face with his peers, but I already knew that he would only get so far. After all this time of wanting to get into a pub and enjoy a drink, dragging me all over Baconsdale in the attempt, he had discovered that it wasn't really for him.

"There's cider, if you want to give that a try?" Dave's father suggested. "It's sweeter than beer, so it might be more your thing. It's rather like drinking fizzy apple juice."

"Sure," Rob said. "Thank you."

"David, go fetch a cider from the fridge. It's the can of Strongbow," he clarified as Dave got up to once more go to the kitchen. "And bring that big bag of crisps with you, from the top cupboard."

Dave returned, bearing Rob's cider, as well as a big bowl into which he had emptied the packet of crisps. The cider can was quite a bit larger than our Carlings had been, and Rob found the cider far more palatable than the beer. I knew deep down that he was disappointed, despite how much he might be trying to disguise it.

We all turned our attention to the game. The match was being played at Anfield, Liverpool's home ground. I had never been into football in the main, but admitted that it was quite exciting. Jim wasn't too impressed, however, the score being one-nil to Genoa at half time.

"Is it worth me watching the rest of this?" he asked, looking at Dave, who only shrugged, clearly not wanting to give anything away.

"So, do you think they're going to close the school down?" Jim asked us as he began to fast-forward through the half-time commentary and the adverts.

"Close it?" I asked.

"Because of the murders."

Would they? It was only something I had briefly considered, and quite fleetingly at that. As much as I no longer enjoyed my time at St Christopher's, I had never given thought to there coming a point when the school might cease to exist or shut down for any reason. I saw it as outlasting me, continuing to educate boys and take on new pupils long after I had lived my life.

"I don't think so," I said, glancing at the others. "It would be pretty bad for us if they did, since we'd all have to find somewhere else to go." And though that was my overall goal by the end of the school year, I didn't want it to happen just yet.

"Yeah, and we'd have to finish our courses and sit our exams at different schools," Rob said.

"True," Jim said. "And they would only let you do that if they had room. Otherwise, you'd have to sit your GCSEs out and do them next year. That would then mean that you would be a year older than everyone else going into higher education," he added, finishing his current glass of beer and pouring out the can that Rob hadn't drunk into the glass. I noticed that the speed of his drinking had slowed after he had initially swallowed down half of his first glass very quickly.

"Gawd, man, I wouldn't want to repeat the third year entirely," Baz said. "Some of the schools around where I live are rough as."

"Yeah, none of the three schools in Baconsdale are supposed to be very good," Rob said, with a glance in my direction.

I had heard the very same. The thought of having to attend the comprehensives, even for a year, filled me with chills. I vaguely wondered if perhaps my time at St Christopher's had turned me into a snob. Or perhaps it was just the beer I was drinking. It was making me start to feel a little funny.

"I don't mean to bring you down," Jim started, "but I think you might have to accept that there is a very real possibility that the school *will* shut."

"Seriously?" I said, starting to feel very despondent.

"I think so," Jim nodded, taking a drink of beer. "Actually, it all depends on what the school says themselves and just how pragmatic the headmaster can be in his response to the incidents. But if he's unable to provide any real assurances that the school is safe, then it will close down for certain. And even if it does stay open, I won't let you go back there if I don't think they're taking the issue seriously, David."

Dave nodded, but said nothing.

“The rest of you should think very strongly about that, too.” he told us. “But assuming it does stay open and the whole nasty business is dealt with, are any of you thinking of leaving once you finish your GCSEs?”

I kept my expression deadpan as I looked about my friends’ faces, seeing the unspoken refusal to uproot themselves from the place they had called home just yet. Baz said nothing, despite his confession to me the previous month, and avoided direct eye contact.

“I think we’re all staying put,” I said. “Better the devil you know and all that.”

“What about you, Sam? What are your plans after you finish your A-Levels? Assuming you stay here that long?” Jim asked, pressing play on the video remote to resume the football match.

“Thinking of heading back to the States?”

“No way,” Sam said. “I want to go to university here.”

Jim chuckled. “You seem very sure of that.”

“I’m thinking of going to Durham,” Sam said. “I don’t think I’m going to get into Oxford or Cambridge, so I’m just going to nip it in the bud now.”

“Why don’t you want to go back home?” I asked. I was pleased that Sam was keen to stay in England, but wondered what the draw of staying put was. I always thought that American universities (or colleges, as I believed they were called) were better.

“You can’t drink until you’re twenty-one,” Sam reiterated what I had heard at the post-rugby match tea the previous term.

“Seriously? Twenty-one?” Jim said, looking a little surprised.

Sam nodded. “That’s why you always see college guys desperately trying to get hold of kegs in the movies. It’s illegal if you’re under twenty-one. You can get expelled if you get caught doing it repeatedly.”

“Well, I never knew that,” Jim admitted. “I always thought it was the same as here.”

“So?” Baz giggled, somewhat sloshily. “Don’t get caught.”

“But that’s only to buy beer, right?” I said, looking both to my friends and the beers we held, as well as Dave’s father. This wasn’t a bar; we were drinking at home. My parents had, on occasion, as with many others I knew, given me a small glass of wine with my Sunday roast. There was nothing illegal about that, I was sure.

“No,” Sam said. “In some places it’s illegal to even drink it if you’re under twenty-one. Imagine going through university and not being allowed to drink. Those are meant to be the best days of your life. I’m not planning on doing that sober.”

Jim started to laugh. “Days so good that you can’t remember any of them. Not the best reason for staying here that I’ve ever heard.”

“You can, however, get a learner’s permit to drive a car back home when you’re fifteen,” Sam said.

That reminded me. I would be able to apply for my provisional license in a little under ten months. I knew I would be watching that particular date on the calendar very closely.

“But how old do you have to be to actually drive?” Rob wanted to know.

“Oh ... actually, I think that’s still seventeen,” Sam said after a pause. ”So, the same as over here.”

“No other reasons for staying?” Jim asked, his focus mostly on the TV.

“Oh, I’ll want to hang around with these guys, for sure,” Sam said. “Friends for life and all.”

We all smiled and giggled, then raised our glasses and clinked them off one another. I would most certainly be keeping in touch with these four, no matter what happened.

Dave picked up his can to refill his glass, but found that only a little beer was left. “Can we have another?” he ventured of his father.

“No, I think you’ve had enough now,” Jim said after a moment of consideration.

“Not a whole one. What if we get two and just share them?”

“Well, okay,” Jim said. “But don’t cry to me if you have a headache in the morning. And if anyone is sick in the middle of the night, you’re cleaning it up, okay?”

“Yes, Dad,” Dave said. He fetched two more beers, Rob passing on drinking any more cider, and we watched the Liverpool-Genoa match resume. Liverpool lost two-one.

*

We realised as we finished up for the night that Baz still had to get home. It had apparently slipped Jim’s mind, too, something he berated himself about for letting us drink. Baz wasn’t drunk, but seemed to be the wrong side of merry. He obviously couldn’t handle the beer as well as some of the rest of us.

Unable to drive him and unwilling to either let him take a bus or the Tube, Jim called a taxi and had it take Baz all the way home, giving him the money for the journey in advance. Despite being somewhat inebriated, Baz was slightly embarrassed by the gesture and made sure that he repaid Dave in full the following day. Strangely, Baz didn’t have a hangover. The rest of us did. We didn’t complain about it, though.

*

The following week, my parents received a phone call. St Christopher’s was re-opening and the spring term was to resume as normal.

“Is it safe?” my parents had wanted to know.

“Yes, it is,” they were told.

The police had apparently made an arrest.

Chapter Eighteen

I was seated next to Baz and Sam, crammed into the assembly hall, the entire school once more in attendance. Or at least, the ones who had chosen to stay. As my parents had arrived at the school, I had seen a number of cars being loaded up, duvets, suitcases and all manner of other items being loaded into the back of them. It hadn't taken me long to discover what was going on. A number of the families returning to St Christopher's had concluded that the school was no longer safe, despite the reassurances of the headmaster. They had therefore decided it was best to remove their sons from the school and find a new place to educate them. The casualty rate was said to be about one-third of the entire school population.

"The headmaster is holding a meeting for the parents," I had heard Mr Somers saying to one of the first year's mother and father. "If you would like to attend, I think it is a very much worth your while."

"We don't think so," the boy's mother had responded. "Thank you. We'll be in touch regarding report cards and final billing."

My mother and father had glanced at me, their eyes suggesting for once that I didn't have to stay and could go back home if I wanted to.

"I'll be okay," I told them. "I need to get my exams done."

Another hug from my mother. "Call us tonight or tomorrow," she requested.

Father Benedict had called an assembly the same day. As well as the pupils themselves, all the significant members of staff were present. All were seated, the absence of one hundred and sixty boys freeing up a number of chairs. I sat in silence as the headmaster waited for the late arrivals to find places to sit, before starting.

"I will get straight to the point, to mitigate any further misunderstanding that might soon arise. The police have made an arrest in connection with the recent events of the school—"

I noticed how he walked around saying 'murders'.

"—and soon hope to press charges. I am being kept regularly up-to-date with everything that is going on and will keep you and your parents informed as to any significant and relevant developments.

"Despite this, you will have noticed that some pupils have chosen not to return and are in the process of moving on from the school. This, we do not expect to have any significant effects on those remaining, and any such issues will be handled by your housemasters. Please speak to them in the first instance."

My eyes flickered around the assembly room, making eye contact with various other boys as they did the same as myself and looked to see who had left. As far as I was able to tell, the departures came largely from the junior school, and the first and second years of the senior school. I couldn't tell if anyone from my year was missing. I doubted it, though. That would disrupt preparation for their GCSEs quite a bit. I wondered just how many sixth formers had gone. I didn't

bother to turn around and try and count them.

Father Benedict continued, "This term is going to pick up immediately where it left off, with classes resuming first thing at nine, tomorrow morning. Unfortunately, due to losing the last three weeks, the spring holiday will only last one week, and so I urge those preparing for their GCSEs and A-Levels to make good use of the time available to them and make an effort to put in extra hours during the weeks."

Crap. That wasn't good news. The spring holidays were usually four weeks long, and I had intended to devise a good revision timetable and focus on ensuring I was well prepared to tackle some of my weaker subjects. Now it looked as though I was going to have to work harder than ever. Unconventional as it was, I considered raising my hand and asking the headmaster why they simply didn't put the exams back, when he then answered my question.

"Unfortunately, the exam boards are unable to move the dates of the exams by such a large amount and consider even a margin of two days to be too much. To sit the exams so long after the rest of the country could be seen as giving those involved an unfair advantage."

"That happened to Ian Sykes, when he was our dorm prefect, do you remember?" Baz whispered into my ear.

"Did it?" I whispered back. Sykes had been my dormitory prefect two years ago, and I honestly couldn't remember.

"Yeah, he had a clash with two of his exams and had to do his classical civilisations exam a day earlier than everyone else. He wasn't allowed to talk to anyone else in his class, and Mr Somers had to escort him to all his meals, to make sure he didn't. Remember how no one was allowed to come into the dorm?"

Damn. If they went through all of that just for one day, what on earth would they need to do for three weeks? I couldn't imagine them unplugging all the telephones and TVs in the school, or even withholding all the mail and letters to pupils. In fact, they would have to isolate the third year and upper sixth entirely. No, that would be practically impossible. I guess it was just tough luck on us.

"The exam boards, however, have said that they will be taking recent circumstances into strong consideration when it comes to the marking," Father Benedict said. "Coursework will also be graded with the same considerations."

I saw a number of the teachers nodding their heads, and gave a sigh of relief. Things could possibly work in my favour here. What might have once been a good grade could now turn out to be a great one. Maybe I would see straight As after all.

"Football and rugby matches for this weekend are going ahead as originally scheduled, and voluntary service and optional activities are unaffected. Games will also be going ahead tomorrow afternoon, as usual.

"One change to the normal running of the school will now see the addition of added security, and you should not be alarmed by the men you see patrolling with dogs. They are there for your protection, and you are to continue to go about your day as normal. You are, however, to cooperate

with them as much as possible. You may find them patrolling your house, inspecting your dormitory and also monitoring the classrooms.”

I had spotted three of the said security staff earlier. They were dressed in high-visibility jackets and had had a rather large Alsatian stood next to them, panting. I had been suspicious at the time that they were part of a new security team the school had employed and had just been proven right. Well, as long as it got me through the rest of the term and the summer, I didn't care.

Father Benedict continued the assembly, talking largely about Oxbridge and UCAS applications for the sixth formers, as well as speaking of the behaviour he expected from us at all times. We left once he was finished and headed back to our houses.

*

“What did the headmaster want to see you for?” Anthony Simmons wanted to know, as I returned to the third year dorm. He looked quite concerned for a change, but was likely just fishing for gossip.

“He just wanted to speak to me and a few of the others about Craig Priest and Ted Osmond. The boy from the junior school,” I added, seeing that Simmons was unsure of who I meant.

“Because you saw the bodies?”

“Yes. He wanted to know how I was feeling about coming back,” I said, unlocking my tuck box and removing some of my personal possessions that I had stored there before leaving three weeks earlier. “I was okay. Some of the others were a little upset still, though. I think he was trying to make sure that no one else was about to pack up and leave.”

“Have a lot of people left?”

“I don't know for sure, but judging by the assembly, about a third?” I shrugged.

“Does anyone know who they arrested?” Simmons asked, looking from me to Baz.

“Everyone says it's Quasimodo,” I said. “He's always around, so I think if no one sees him in the next few weeks we can assume it was him.”

“What a fucking freak,” Simmons growled.

The dormitory door opened and Daniel Rye, another twentieth of the Clique, entered.

“Hey, Ant, you heard about what's happening in the first and second year dorms?” he asked.

“No?” Simmons asked.

“Because so many of them have left, they're now merging some of the dorms together.”

“Really? Fuck.”

“Mr Somers is also getting me to share with Matthews.”

“Two prefects in one dorm?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Rye nodded to me. “They're going to start making more of us share because of the number of people that have left. Those dorms are almost empty. It's like everyone is away doing the Duke of Edinburgh award.”

This I hadn't expected. Not that it was a big deal. Normally, dormitories were looked after by

one prefect. I guessed that the departure of some of the boys had led to a number of spare beds becoming available in some dorms, with others lying empty. It would potentially mean that I would be taking a dorm with one of the other third years next term.

“Is D of E still happening this year?” Simmons wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” I said after no one spoke. “I doubt they’ll have cancelled it. It counts as an extra GCSE.”

“Not that it matters, since it doesn’t affect us,” Simmons said. “We’ve already done the bronze and silver parts.”

“You coming to dinner, Ant?” Rye asked of Simmons.

“Sure, let’s go.”

No invitation for Baz or myself, I noticed.

“Oh, they’re serving us dinner?” Baz asked me.

“Yes,” I chuckled. “They said so in assembly.”

“I wasn’t listening the whole time,” he admitted. “I was just going to have a Pot Noodle. I’ll save it for another day.”

“Where’s Sam?” I asked.

“I think he’s on the phone to his parents, to let them know what was said at assembly.”

“We’ll wait for him before going, then,” I said.

*

“I swear the food here is getting worse,” Charlie Moon, a short, skinny boy from Enfield House, said, moving his dinner around the plate and making little effort to eat any more of it. “They clearly didn’t bother to take any cooking classes while we were away.”

“What do you mean?” Baz said. “This is nice.”

“No, it’s not. This is gross!” Moon glared at him. “They just shove anything together – ‘bit of run over chicken and some onions, that will do’,” he mimed the chef’s actions, “put together some random sauce, whatever’s within arm’s reach, and then make up a name like ‘chicken tikka masala!’”

I swear that I heard all those in the immediate vicinity fall silent, knives and forks being lowered and attentions being turned to Moon.

“Um ... what?” I said.

“That’s what they’ve called this,” Moon repeated, poking the food with his fork.

“Moon, it’s not made up! That’s its real name, it’s a curry!”

“Curry? This?” he said incredulously. “Just because it’s got chicken and rice in it, that doesn’t make it curry.”

I admitted that I didn’t really know what defined a curry, but I knew that this was one. I told him so. “It’s a well-known English curry,” I added.

“English curry?” Moon said.

“Yes, it was invented here,” I said.

“No, it wasn’t,” I heard Ben Wild say to me from across the other table. “What are you talking about, Crotty?”

“It was,” I said. “It was invented in Birmingham.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Wild repeated.

“It’s from India,” Will Butt, seated next to him, as always, backed him up.

“It was created in Birmingham,” I began to repeat the folk legend of how the dish came into being. “A chef up there put cream into a chicken tikka when someone complained it was too dry, and called it chicken tikka masala.”

“Bollocks,” Wild scowled.

“Yeah, Crotty, it was made in India,” Butt added.

I shrugged and decided to ignore the two. As soon as the Clique got it into their heads that they were right, nothing would dissuade them other than another well-informed twentieth or a teacher. But only a teacher they respected.

“Birmingham?” Baz said. “I thought it was invented in Newcastle?”

“You’re both wrong. It came from Scotland,” Jeff Armitage said.

“No, *you’re* wrong,” Marvin Trent said. “It *was* invented in India, like all the other curries. There was a *rumour* it was invented in England, but it’s wrong.”

“It’s British!”

“Does anyone know the nationality of the chef?” I asked as the table descended into petty squabbling, hoping to end the argument before someone decided to start a fight over it. “Was he English?”

“He was Indian,” Baz said.

“Exactly, so that means it’s an Indian curry,” Trent said.

“Not if it was invented here, you thick twat!” Butt shot from the other table.

“Guys, it really doesn’t matter,” I said, wishing I hadn’t commented on Moon’s original statement.

I was ignored, and the squabbling continued unabated. I looked over at the other tables, as those there watched the argument continuing, smirks all over their faces. I then caught Brian Donald’s eye.

“Joe,” he called.

Joe? Normally you call me ‘Crotty’, I thought. He had done so the whole time he had been copying Simmons’ CDs earlier in the term. The Clique rarely ever used my first name. It was either ‘Crosthwaite’ or ‘Crotty’ for them. I knew immediately that he wanted something.

“Hi,” I said.

“Have you finished your English Lit coursework?” he asked.

Let me guess. You didn’t bother doing anything during the three-week break and now you want

to copy it, I thought. I nodded that I had done the work, picking up my orange juice and taking a sip.

“What did you do it on?” Donald asked.

“*The Catcher in the Rye.*”

“Can I borrow it?”

I considered refusing, citing plagiarism and reiterating what I had been told about the consequences of copying geography coursework (a conversation, I reminded myself, he had been a part of). I then decided to bargain, instead.

“What do you want it for?”

The question seemed to throw Donald. He struggled for a moment for an explanation, then said, “I just want to take a look, to see how much I need to do. I don’t really get the book.”

Given that I found Holden Caulfield an obnoxious cretin with few redeemable qualities, I would have thought that it would be easy for Donald to sympathise with the character.

“You haven’t actually read it, have you?” I grinned.

“No,” he admitted. “It’s shit.”

“*The Catcher in the Rye* isn’t shit, it’s actually a very important book,” Seb Silverman said. “It’s about alienation and teenage rebellion, and one of the first books to actually acknowledge all those things. It was actually written for adults, but the themes involved are more appropriate for adolescents.”

Brief silence followed the statement. “I actually agree with Brian – it’s shit,” I said. “I had to force myself to finish it.”

“Exactly,” Donald leapt back in, “and I don’t really understand what’s so special about it—”

“I just told you,” Silverman said, incredulously.

“—which is why I want to borrow your essay,” Donald said, ignoring him.

“What do I get in return?” I asked.

The question threw him again. I wasn’t the sort to bargain with people. I would generally just let them look at what I had done, as a gesture of good will. Maybe it was because I now had my mind so firmly set on completing my GCSEs and getting the hell away from the school that I knew I had little to lose by offending people.

“You like Coke, don’t you? You’re always drinking one every day,” Simmons said, looking from me to Donald. He clearly hadn’t done the work, either.

“I do,” I said.

“Okay, how about this,” Donald said. “You lend me your essay, and the next time I go home, I’ll bring you back a bottle of Coke?”

I knew he wouldn’t. He would conveniently forget until I stopped badgering him about it. I considered asking him for money, but that seemed a little low and entering into a territory that I would rather stay well away from. I tried to think of what else Donald might have that I would want. Sadly, I could think of nothing.

“How about you lend me your results from your geography practical?” I suggested. “I didn’t

finish all of it when I was home and just want to shore up my numbers a bit.”

“Yeah, okay,” Donald answered immediately.

“Cool.”

“Can I get the essay off you tonight?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just drop by my dorm.”

*

“Joe, don’t copy your results off someone else,” Sam urged me as we walked back to Butcher.

“You’ll get in real shit if you get caught, remember?”

“Exactly, and he’s copied those off someone else already,” Baz added.

“His older brother,” I reminded them.

“Anyway, I thought you’d done it already,” Sam said. “You told us in London that you had.”

“And I did,” I smiled. “I just wanted to see what I could get off Donald. I’m not going to use them at all.”

Both Baz and Sam looked a little baffled by my revelation, but I added nothing.

*

My remaining coursework began to diminish as the term went on, and I handed more of it in. There would be a small few bits and pieces that would only be finished in the first few weeks of the summer term, but I was pleased to get the vast majority of it out of the way.

I discovered that one of the security staff that patrolled the grounds with one of the two Alsatians was an Australian man by the name of Josh. He had lived in England for several years, coming over on a student visa and finding employment here. He apparently also had an Irish passport, which meant that he could stay indefinitely. He was from Darwin originally, in the north of the country. A party town it was, apparently. All the backpackers headed there, as the nearby airport provided easy access to Bali. The dog that Josh usually patrolled with was called Max. He was bad tempered and didn’t like being touched. Not like Wonka at all, then.

Though there were no Australian boys at St Christopher’s, the school had taken on a handful of antipodeans as temporary teaching staff, though mostly to handle sport. I had played Aussie rules football on occasion, and could only describe it as ‘different’.

One evening, both Josh and the current Australian sports teacher, a man called Stu, were sitting around in one of Butcher’s lounges, talking about home. There were a handful of first years there, listening intently. Stu was drinking a can of beer.

“Alright, Joe? How’s it going?” Josh said to me as I passed by the door, chewing on a Lion Bar. “Come in and join us,” he added, indicating one of the empty seats. “Have you ever been to Australia, Joe?”

“No, never,” I said, swallowing the chocolate I was chewing. “I’d really like to, though; perhaps that’s because of an overexposure to *Neighbours*.”

“You Brits don’t travel a lot, hey?” Stu said. “Not like us Aussies. We’re all over Europe. England’s a great launch pad for that sort of thing. Though lots of Brits are emigrating to Australia because it’s so cheap for them right now. It’s about three dollars to the pound.”

“No kidding?” Josh said.

“Are you going to go back?”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty settled here, to be honest.”

“Could get a lot for your money right now. A house is just a fraction of the price, and you could get it right next to the beach.”

“True,” Josh said. He looked as though he was torn between going and staying. “I’d probably have a tiny mortgage, too.”

“Or maybe buy a couple of units.”

“A unit?” one of the first years asked.

“Oh, that’s what we call an apartment back home,” Josh said.

“A flat you call it here, don’t you?” Stu asked.

“So, if I went over to Australia for a couple of weeks, what would I want to do?” I asked.

“A couple of weeks?” Stu laughed. “You’d barely have gotten off the plane before it was time to go back. The flight takes about twenty-four hours, and then you need about a week to get over the jet lag.”

“You’d want to go to Bondi Beach and get some surfing lessons,” Josh said. “And then head up the east coast, go to the Great Barrier Reef and stay in Cairns for a bit. The east coast is great. It’s all beaches and partying and drinking and surfing.”

“What are the girls like?” asked another of the first year boys.

“Fucking fit!” Stu said. “Better looking than the girls over here, that’s for sure. They’re always on the beach in bikinis and always up for a good party. They’re nice friendly girls, too.”

“Oh yeah?” the same first year asked with a cheeky grin.

“Yeah,” Stu said, taking a glug of beer.

“I thought you’d be drinking Fosters,” yet another first year said.

“It’s not really for me,” Stu said. “And it’s not actually that popular back home. Everywhere else, sure, but we don’t drink it that much over there. Are you sure you don’t want a beer?” he asked Josh.

“No, I can’t,” Josh said. “I have to go on duty in twenty minutes, so I can’t drink.”

“What else would I want to do in Australia?” I asked.

“I’d say explore the outback,” Josh said. “You can go to the cities, but after you’ve travelled a bit, a city is a city.”

“Sydney’s the capital, right?”

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Stu said, pointing to me and laughing evilly. “Wrong!”

“Melbourne ...?” I ventured.

“It’s Canberra,” Josh said. “Everyone thinks it’s Sydney, but it’s Canberra.”

I had never heard of the place.

“Sydney and Melbourne had a dispute over which of them would be the capital,” Stu began to explain, “and when an agreement couldn’t be reached, a city was simply built between the two of them to end the problem.”

“That’s one way of fixing the problem,” I chuckled. “A little extreme, though.”

Josh just shrugged. “There’s lots of interesting things to see in the outback,” he went on, to another evil chuckle from Stu. “If you don’t mind driving, that is.”

“There’s almost nothing in the middle, except desert,” Stu explained to all of us. “Everyone lives around the coast, and the middle is largely just ... dirt and sand. You can drive for hours and hours and only ever see one car coming the other way.”

“Usually a road train,” Josh pointed out. “That’s a truck with three or more trailers on it. But don’t worry, there’s still lots to see – The Devil’s Marbles, Ayers Rock, King’s Canyon ...”

“... Coby Pedy, if you fancy your luck at opal mining,” Stu said.

“There are also towns out there with a population of only about seven or eight people. And if you don’t fancy that, in Sydney you have the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge. Seriously, you cannot go for just two weeks. You’d need at least six weeks if you were only going for a bit,” Josh advised.

“Even that’s not enough. I’ve known some travellers who were there for a year and never made it over to Perth. But admittedly that’s because they run out of money and were forced to live and work in the hostels.”

“Have you been to Ayers Rock?” one of the first years asked.

“Er ... no,” Stu said, laughing. “We’re like you – if it’s right next door, we don’t bother. I bet half of you have probably never even been to Buckingham Palace.”

We all nodded in agreement. I had never been anywhere near the it as far as I could remember. I had been to the British Museum on a day out when I was still in the junior school, but it wasn’t somewhere I would choose to visit myself. My weekend up in London to visit Dave and Baz had taken me nowhere near the palace, either.

“I’ve been to Ayers Rock,” Josh then said. “Or Uluru, to give it its aboriginal name.”

“What was it like?” I asked.

“Massive,” Josh said, his eyes growing big, stretching his arms out wide. “It takes about two hours to walk around the base of it. It was baking hot when I went there, in December. Absolutely incredible to see, though. I’d highly recommend it. Don’t take anything from there, though.”

“Don’t take anything?” one of the first years asked.

“Nothing,” Josh shook his head.

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s cursed.”

“Seriously?” Stu asked.

“Yep,” Josh said. “It’s sacred ground. You shouldn’t take anything from it, or you’ll end up with loads of bad luck. It happens to people all the time. They decide to take a rock home with them as a souvenir and all sorts of things happen to them. They then usually return it sharpish. Some people have posted them back all the way from America. They’re known as ‘Sorry Parcels’.”

“No kidding?” Stu said, although he didn’t seem to be sure whether Josh was being honest or was winding up his audience.

“It happened to me,” Josh said.

“Woah! Wow! What happened?” all the first years asked.

“I was out with a tour group and decided to take one of the stones home. It was only a small thing,” he made the shape of a pebble with his hand, “but it was enough. Our bus broke down on the way back to our campsite. Took us two hours to fix it, and it was forty-seven that afternoon. We were pouring water all over ourselves and stuff, and our guide had to try and get under the bus to fix it. It was a nightmare. Then, that night, I was bitten by a spider. My leg seized up, and I couldn’t walk the whole of the next day because of the poison. I’m not superstitious or anything, but I told my tour leader I’d taken the rock, and he went to return it. The problems stopped after that.”

“Could be a coincidence,” Stu said.

“I’d rather not have taken the chance, to be honest.”

“But what if you get a stone stuck in your shoe?” one of the first years asked.

“It has to be taken with intent,” Josh said. “Otherwise you’d get cursed simply for treading the land. Right, I’d better get down to the gate. Have to be extra vigilant tonight.”

“Why?” Stu asked. “Has the suspect fought his way out of the police station?”

“Might as well have. The police have let him go, apparently,” Josh said.

“They have?” I asked.

“It wasn’t him they reckon,” Josh said.

“Shit,” I mumbled, unable to help myself. The first years looked a little rattled by the news. I could well agree. It hadn’t been Quasimodo? I hadn’t seen the man around the school at all, and had presumed that he had been locked up. Did that mean that the killer was still out there? Could we expect a fourth body in the weeks to come?

“Hey, if that’s true, then you weren’t supposed to tell these guys,” Stu said, indicating us.

“We’d probably find out from our parents, anyway,” I said. “The school would be letting them know.”

“All right,” Stu said, looking at his watch and draining his beer. “It’s nearly time for evening prayers, so you had all better get into your pyjamas. And don’t say anything, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the first years said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep it to myself,” I echoed. Though I had absolutely no intention of doing so. The road to freedom had become obstructed once more.

Chapter Nineteen

“Thought I’d find you here,” I said as I entered the Belfry and saw Carson, Sam and Rory seated around his desk. “What are you talking about?”

“Ms Walker,” Sam said, grinning.

“Who?” I said, sitting myself down on Carson’s bed.

“Ms Walker, the new junior school English teacher.”

I had no idea who they were talking about. I’d never heard of the woman. “Is she fit?” I asked. After all, that was probably the only reason why they would be discussing her.

“Very,” Carson beamed. “She’s tall, blonde, has fucking massive tits ...”

“I’ve never seen her around. When did she start?” I asked.

“Last term, I think,” Carson said. “She apparently went to Oxford.”

“What’s she doing here then?” I said, everyone laughing along with me. “No, seriously, has anyone spoken to her?”

“No,” Sam said. “She smiled at me today, though. Didn’t know who she was until Carson told me. Mr Sutherland is apparently already perving after her, too.”

“Isn’t he married?” I asked.

“Yeah, but nothing’s going to happen,” Sam said. “She’s so bloody fit. I’d love to fuck her.”

“And how many girls have you fucked, to make a statement like that?” Carson asked.

Sam said nothing.

“Only kidding, Sam,” Carson laughed. “I’d love to fuck her, too.”

“Guys, seriously, how can you say that?” Rory then asked.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“She’s old!”

“Old?” I asked, looking at Carson and Sam. The image I had held of a twenty-two-year-old woman was suddenly erased, replaced by that of a granny with a walking stick.

“Yes, she’s about *thirty*.”

“Thirty?” I said. “Thirty’s not old!”

“It’s nearly twice our age,” Rory retorted.

“Dude, thirty is not old, believe me,” Carson said.

“And you know what they say – dirty thirty,” Sam smiled.

“Or a naughty forty,” Carson grinned.

“Or a thrifty fifty,” I added.

“Now you’re going too far,” Sam told me.

“I only said it to wind Rory up,” I said, seeing him looking as though he was sucking on a lemon.

“Yeah, but whatever. She’s not a good as you’re making her out to be,” Rory said.

“Out of ten?” I asked Sam and Carson.

“Eight,” Carson said.

“Nine,” Sam said. “Seriously, she’s that nice, Joe.”

“*Nine?!?*” Rory almost spat. “She’s more like a six!”

“Six?!?” the rest of us chorused.

“Yes, six. She’s not as good looking as Cindy Crawford or Elle Macpherson.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” Carson said, looking at Rory with utter disdain. None of us could believe what we were hearing.

“Okay, Rory, look,” I said, scooping one of Carson’s men’s magazines off the bed and thumbing through it, until I found the pages I was after. “This is a model. She’s not an ... ordinary woman, if you get my meaning. You’re probably never going to marry or even go out with someone who looks like that.”

“Yeah, and she’s airbrushed, too,” Sam said. “So she’s not even that good looking. Her legs and arms are too perfect. She also doesn’t look like that all the time, and certainly not first thing in the morning without tons of make-up on.”

I examined the photo, but couldn’t really tell what I was looking for. I knew the photographs were doctored before printing, however, to make the girls look a little more attractive than they might otherwise be.

“You’d probably be looking more for ...” I flicked through the pages once more, looking for someone a little more ordinary. Unfortunately, the pages were populated with actresses and models, and I was unable to find anyone to appropriately illustrate my point. “Anyway, you can’t judge normal girls on the same scale as supermodels and actresses,” I concluded, setting the magazine back down. “You’ll probably end up dating girls who look more like ... John Davidson’s sister.”

“Who?” Rory asked.

“Fucking hell, have you seen her?” Carson said, ignoring Rory.

“Now *she’s* fit!” Sam said. “She goes to St Anne’s, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, she’s doing her A-Levels at the moment,” I said.

“If that was my sister, I’d have difficulty keeping my hands off her,” Carson laughed.

“Ugh, Carson, that’s disgusting,” I said.

“Calm down, I was joking,” Carson said, waving a hand dismissively.

“I’ll point her out to you the next time she comes to a rugby match or whatever,” I told Rory.

“If the school stays open that long,” Rory said.

I wondered how long it would be before this subject was raised again. It had only been a week since I had learned about the police letting their apparent only suspect go. It wasn’t common knowledge about the school as far as I could tell, a handful of boys knowing for certain and everyone else (mainly the junior school, and the first and second years of the senior school) being told the opposite.

“So, they had arrested Quasimodo, but then had to let him go?” Sam asked.

“No evidence whatsoever, other than his previous convictions,” I said.

“What?” Carson said. He genuinely didn’t seem to know, so I told him about the banana incident in the bank. “Jesus, why are they letting him work here?”

“He doesn’t really though, does he?” I said. “He’s part of the monastic staff and only does odd jobs about the school, under the supervision of the monks.”

“So why did they arrest him?”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking at Rory and Sam. “I don’t think anyone knows. The police probably had something on him that they don’t want to share.”

“Maybe he had child porn or something?” Sam said.

“Gross,” Rory said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

Carson reached for the travel kettle that rested on one side of his desk, popping it open and looking to see how much water was in there. “Anyone want some coffee?” he asked. “I’m going to fill this up.”

“Do you have any milk?” I asked.

“Powdered.”

“Do you think the kitchens are still open?” I said, looking at the others.

“Don’t know, but well volunteered,” Sam grinned.

“Yeah, Joe, go and see if you can get some milk,” Carson said. “And if the kitchens are locked, see if you can sneak into Mr Summers’ office. He never locks it and normally keeps some in his fridge.”

“Mr Somers’ office?” I said, pausing as I made to get off the bed. “Are you mad? I’ll get in real shit if I’m caught stealing milk from a housemaster’s office, and I’ve already been put on the *Murga List* once this term.”

“*Summers*, not *Somers*,” the other three sang back at me, as if that made the deed any less of an offence.

“Don’t worry, Joe, you’re not going to get put on the *List* just for borrowing a little milk,” Rory said. “And if he sees it’s missing, he’ll just think the cleaning staff threw it away.”

I nodded reluctantly and made my way down to the kitchens, to see if they were still open. I saw the kitchen staff beginning to leave as I did so, heading for the taxis and other pick-ups that were provided by the catering firm St Christopher’s employed, and knew already that the refectory would be shut. Sure enough, the lights were out. I checked the doors regardless, in case someone had failed to lock them. They hadn’t.

I headed back to the Belfry, walking past Mr Summers’ office. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if raiding the fridge was such a good idea. I then decided to risk it. If someone was in there, I could always feign stupidity that I had walked through the wrong door. I tried the door handle, finding, true to Carson’s promise, that it was unlocked. I didn’t bother to switch on the lights and headed straight for the fridge. Inside, I spotted two one-pint cartons of milk. One was unopened, the other was less than a quarter full, judging by the weight. Good enough for four cups of coffee. I slipped it beneath my jacket, holding it under my left arm as I left the office, pretending

to be picking at something on my left hand with my right as I returned to the Belfry, to disguise the fact that I had something concealed.

“Did you find any?” Carson asked.

I produced the carton.

“Hurray!” the three cheered. “How much is there?”

“About a quarter,” I said.

“Plenty.”

We brewed our coffees, Carson taking a box of sugar cubes out from one of his desk drawers. “By the way, it is true that Kerry Oldman has got a pirate copy of *Basic Instinct*?” I asked.

“What?” Rory looked to me as though I had just revealed the ultimate secrets of the universe.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Sam grinned. “He has *everything* to do with porn. His folks probably work in it, you know.”

“No, it’s not Oldman who has it,” Carson said, blowing on his coffee. “It’s Yan Brown.”

“Really? Yan Brown?” I asked. “He’s a little too goody-goody for that sort of thing. Is he trying to improve his reputation by one-upping Oldman or something?”

“Probably,” Carson said, opening his locked desk drawer again and taking out a packet of biscuits. He passed them to us, prompting us to take one (and *only* one), before returning the packet to the drawer and locking it again. Maryland Chocolate Chip Cookies. I wasn’t surprised he wasn’t keen on sharing the entire packet with us.

“Ha! Oldman the Porn King doesn’t have *Basic Instinct*,” Rory laughed. “Of all the people.”

“Where did Brown get it?” I asked. “It’s not out here until May, I think?”

“Not sure,” Carson shrugged. “Think he got it off someone back home.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Last weekend,” Carson grinned.

“Do you really get to see Sharon Stone’s vag?” Rory asked excitedly.

“What are you so excited for? I thought you didn’t like women in their thirties?” Sam asked. Rory ignored him.

Carson frowned. “Not really. It’s a bit disappointing actually. You only get to see it for about a second. She’s sitting on a chair and uncrosses her legs, but you can’t really tell. The scene is overhyped. The whole film is in a way.”

“I still want to see it,” Rory enthused. “Do you know where Brown keeps the tape? We should nick it and watch it one night.”

“Probably locked in his tuck box,” I said. “He’s not exactly going to be keep it in his classroom locker. Someone will probably confiscate it soon; one of the prefects who just wants to land him in trouble I bet. Zackery Goodman will have it for sure if he finds out.”

“You should’ve come along to watch it with us the other night,” Carson grinned.

“Well, I would’ve if you’d told me it was happening,” Rory said, sounding more than just a little disappointed. “What’s the rest of the film like?”

“Shit,” Carson said simply.

“But does Sharon Stone take her clothes off a lot?”

Rory was sounding a little more desperate than normal. I wanted to see the film, but he *really* wanted to see it. I couldn't help but feel that Rory might end up a little disappointed with it in the end. He liked to pretend that he ran the World Film Club to be cultured (and make a load of money), but I was certain it was because he just wanted to see as many naked women on screen as possible. Some of the European films we had rented from time to time would never be shown on television in England.

“The first scene is actually pretty good,” Carson then smiled. “She's on top of this guy, fucking him really hard.”

“Cool,” Rory said, almost dreamily.

“It is. Right up until the bit when she starts stabbing him with an ice pick. It's really gross when she gets him in the eye. The eyeball just pops, and it all goes everywhere,” Carson laughed, seeing the horrified look on Rory's face.

“That sounds pretty disgusting, actually,” Sam said.

“Why would they ruin it like that?” Rory said, sounding annoyed.

“I think she slits his throat after she's done stabbing him in the chest, too.” Carson's expression suddenly grew quite serious. “Didn't Craig Priest have his throat cut when you saw him?” he asked, looking at me.

“I ... don't remember,” I said, although I actually did. I just didn't want to talk about. Sadly, Carson and the others did.

“Seriously, does anyone have any idea of who might be doing it?” Rory asked.

“Dave's dad thinks it might be a paedophile,” Sam said.

“Someone who fucks and murders kids,” I said, in case either Carson or Rory were unfamiliar with the term.

“Well, they don't necessarily kill them,” Sam corrected. “Roman Polanski was done in the US for apparently sleeping with an under-aged girl.”

“The film director? Why isn't he in prison?” I asked.

“He ran away to France before they could do so,” Sam said. “Anyway, I'm a little worried. It could be any of us next.”

“What, that might get fucked by Roman Polanski?” Carson chuckled.

“No,” Sam said, looking serious. “Might be killed by whoever is doing this.”

It was the first time I had actually heard someone admit to being scared of being targeted by the school's stalker. I was worried myself, but for a multitude of different reasons. Firstly, for my own life, and secondly, that the ongoing problems might lead to the school shutting and causing me all manner of troubles. I had devised what I saw as a set plan for my life – GCSEs at St Christopher's, A-Levels at Baconsdale Sixth Form College, economics degree at the best university I could get in to, and graduating to work in an investment bank in London, where I would earn my millions. There

wasn't much room for deviation, and I couldn't have things such as this causing me to fall at the first hurdle. I almost felt compelled to do some junior sleuthing, to help find out who the perpetrator was.

"I don't think it will be any of us," Carson said, reaching into his drawer and taking out another biscuit. He didn't offer the rest of us any this time. "The two boys that have been killed were quite wimpy and from the junior school, so I don't think he's going to actively target anyone older."

"Carson, you're completely ignoring Craig Priest," Rory said.

"He wasn't targeted," Carson said. "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He saw the pedo and so the guy had to kill him."

"That's one hell of an assumption," I said.

Carson only shrugged. "As long as we stay inside and don't go wandering outside late at night, we're safe."

"One thing's for sure – they managed to get into the junior school, even though it was locked," I said. "That could only be done by someone who knew the school quite well, or had access."

"Do you think it's one of the teachers?" Sam suggested.

"Ha! Maybe it's Ms Walker," I laughed. "She started this year and the murders began around the same time. Hardly a coincidence, I'm sure." I was glad to see that the others knew I wasn't being serious.

"Can women be paedophiles?" Rory wanted to know.

I wasn't actually sure, I couldn't really see how. I looked enquiringly at Carson and Sam, who only shrugged.

"I don't think it's one of the teachers," Carson said, ignoring the question.

"They still had access to the junior school, though," I said, largely to myself.

One of the other boys? Were any boys in the school charged with keys or anything, as part of wider duties or security that I wasn't aware of? Despite what Carson said, I couldn't see it being anyone *but* one of the teachers.

We sat there for a moment in silence, each trying to figure it out.

"This is really weird," Sam said. "I mean, how did they get the boys out of bed? It's a dormitory, so I don't see how they could have done it all without waking someone up?"

"To be fair, at that age you sleep pretty soundly," I said. "I barely even woke up during that hurricane we had in 1987."

"Really?" Carson asked. "It didn't wake you up?"

"No," I said. "I was ten. They gave us lights out at nine p.m. at that age. I'd sleep through almost anything."

"Perhaps he's drugging all of them?" Sam said. "Putting something in their hot chocolate, so they sleep through it?"

"This is getting stupid now," Rory said.

"How would you do it? If you were the killer, I mean?" I asked.

“I wouldn’t take them out of the dorm directly,” Carson said, after considering it. “I’d entice them to meet me somewhere.”

“That would work for the first one,” Rory admitted. “If it was someone they trusted, and it was the first time away from home, then they could have been lured out of their dorm for some reason.”

“Which means, again, that it’s one of the staff. Or maybe one of the monks,” I said. “Not Ms Walker, though.”

“I’d still finger her,” Sam said.

We all snorted at that. Luckily we had finished our coffees or Carson’s desk would have been sprayed a light brown.

“Your fingers stink after you’ve done that, apparently,” Rory said.

“Really?” we all looked at him.

“Yeah, it’s pretty gross I’ve heard.”

“It depends on the girl,” Sam said. “Whether they smoke and what they eat can make a difference.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I’ve heard Cody talking about it with some of his army friends when they were home one time. He didn’t want me listening to what they were saying, though, so I only caught a bit.”

“Right, anyway,” Carson said, pulling out a pad of paper and a pen, “let’s get this written down. They would need to get access to the school, which means they would need keys—”

“Ah, not true,” I said. “There are two teachers’ bedrooms in there, remember? So they could already have been inside.”

“What about the matron?”

“Too old,” I said. “She’d never be able to carry the body or ... oh crap, I forgot that the first one was all the way down the Red Road.”

“How did you forget *that*?” Rory asked, a little incredulously. “*You* were the one who found them.”

“Well, no, I remember finding them. But I just never really thought about it like that. The distance, I mean. They must have put the body in a car and driven them down there.”

“But how?” Sam asked. “The school gates are locked.”

“They weren’t back in September. They’ve only just started doing that after Craig Priest was killed. So, whoever did it could have driven around the school grounds without any problems.”

“Risky, though. Someone could have seen them,” Rory said.

“Unless you were one of the staff and were therefore above suspicion.”

“Like Quasimodo, for example,” I said.

“We’re going in circles here,” Carson said.

“Maybe it was the Headless Highwayman?” I laughed.

“The what?” both Carson and Sam looked at me.

“The Headless Highwayman, from the junior school,” I reiterated, looking at both of them. “Oh,

sorry, neither of you went to the junior school. It's haunted." I was trying, and failing, not to grin as I said it.

"Haunted? By a ghost?" Carson scowled.

"Yep. Part of the junior school used to be an inn or something like that back in the eighteen hundreds, and the landlord and landlady hanged a highwayman there after he kept robbing them. They got away with it due to something about him being wanted dead or alive, etc."

"But his ghost is still there?" Sam said.

"Yep," I nodded vigorously, still trying not to grin. Rory was smirking uncontrollably. "It floats about the corridors at night, looking for its head."

"Oh, fuck off, Crotty," Carson said.

"It does!" I repeated, laughing. "There have been loads of sightings. Rory saw it twice while we were there – once in the library and another time in the changing rooms. You're too scared to go to the toilets in the middle of the night, in case you walk into it on the way there. Or it comes up behind you and grabs you while you're peeing."

"He's lying," Rory said.

"See," Carson said to me. "Even Rory doesn't believe you."

"No, I mean he's not actually headless," Rory said. "The rope broke his neck in such a way that his head isn't upright any more, but hangs down over one of his shoulders."

Rory and I both started chuckling.

"Whatever," Carson said.

"So, there *is* a ghost there?" Sam wanted to know.

"No, there isn't," I said, admitting that the joke had already gone on long enough. "It scares the hell out of the first years telling them that, though. Some of them actually believe it, too. You should see the panic when you punish them with having to go to the library on their own at night. Well ... at least I don't think the school is haunted. Quite a lot of old buildings actually are."

"So anyway, what have we got?" Rory said, looking at Carson and nodding to the paper he had been writing on.

Carson looked at the paper, already with several ideas and proposals crossed out. "Ah, I don't know," he said, giving in, crushing up the paper and tossing it into the bin next to him. "As long as they don't get me before I can get out of here and get to university, I don't care."

"Where are you going to go?" I asked. "Any more ideas?"

"Durham," he said with the certainty of telling me that two plus two was four.

"Isn't that where you want to go, Sam?" I asked him.

"No, I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Probably because Durham's bloody hard to get in to," Rory said. "It's where all the rejects from Oxford and Cambridge go, apparently."

"What about UCL?" Sam said to Carson.

“UCL?” Carson asked.

“University College London. That would probably be ideal. It’s near the City and Canary Wharf.”

“Canary Wharf?” I asked, trying to place the name.

“It’s now the tallest building in Britain,” Sam said. “You can see it from Hampstead Heath.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Dave told me when I was staying at his. He thinks he’s going to go to UCL, and I think I might join him. It’s right in the middle of London, so it would get you loads of work contacts. Dave’s dad said that networking is really important to get ahead in your career.”

I nodded. Sam raised a good point. It would be ideal for me, too. It would fit in well with my plans and give me a chance to get to know London before I embarked on a career there. I had found the city somewhat overwhelming when I had arrived there for the weekend, and knew that was an issue I would need to address as soon as possible.

“I think I’ll stick to the City,” Carson said. “Canary Wharf’s not going anywhere just yet. No one’s really moving there from what I’ve read. Maybe in a few years, but not right now.”

There came a rap at the door; it sounded like a teacher’s knock.

“They always know where to find us, don’t they?” I commented.

“Come in,” Carson said.

The door opened, and in swept Father Thomas. Was the man stalking me? I wondered. Did the monk stand outside Carson’s door looking at his watch and waiting for us to be late to evening prayers or something? The tall man looked around briefly and opened his mouth to speak, before his eyes settled on Sam.

“Ah, I was about to ask if any of you had seen Sam, but here you are. Would you come with me, please? The headmaster would like to speak to you.”

Sam glanced uneasily to the rest of us. “Is something wrong, Father?” he asked.

“No, don’t worry, you’re not in trouble,” the monk said, raising a hand to calm everyone down. “But Father Benedict needs a word. It’s private, so he will tell you himself in his office.”

Sam stole another glance at us, before getting up and making his way to the door in silence.

“Boys, could you all please be back in your houses by nine thirty, for evening prayers? It’s nine twenty now, so you should think about getting there soon,” Father Thomas added, before departing with Sam, drifting out the door without any glimpse of shoes or feet beneath his cassock.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“No idea,” Carson said.

“I doubt he’s in trouble,” Rory said. “Sounds like something’s happened at home.”

“Isn’t his brother in Iraq right now?” I said.

“Shit, that’s true,” Carson said. “Christ, I hope not.”

So did I. Sam was one of my best friends, and I would hate anything terrible to happen to him or his family.

*

“Joe? Joe? Can you hear me?”

Huh?

“Hey, Joe?”

Who said that?

“Joe? Are you okay?”

I opened my eyes. I was in Butcher’s third year dormitory. The lights were on. I looked around, seeing the others all staring at me. Simmons, Smith, the other Smith, and Silverman were still in their beds. Sam and Baz were standing not too far from me.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I think you were sleepwalking,” Simmons said. “I woke up and you were just standing there, over my bed, staring down at me. I woke Seb up, and he turned on the light, and you walked away. I thought you were mucking around, but you only just woke up now.” He sounded quite unsettled. The ribbing I had suffered from the last time I had been walking about at night was nowhere to be seen this time.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Twenty past one,” Baz said.

I had barely been asleep for a couple of hours.

“Are you okay, Joe?” Sam asked, sounding quite concerned.

Why had I been sleepwalking again? What was wrong with me? How often did I do it? I couldn’t be sure that I actually woke up each time.

“I think you should go back to bed, Joe,” Baz suggested when I didn’t answer.

“Right, okay,” I said, turning around and lurching back to my own bed. I felt a little lightheaded. “Sorry,” I added to everyone as I lay down and pulled the duvet back over me.

The others said nothing, and the lights soon clicked back off.

“Are you okay, Joe?” Baz whispered to me.

I don’t know, I thought to myself. I didn’t answer him.

Chapter Twenty

The next day, I had a free afternoon and used the time to go and talk to the school nurse, to arrange a meeting with Steve Martin, the psychologist I had met when the headmaster and the police had wanted to talk to me about Scott Parker's body.

I didn't expect him to be coming in any time soon and was prepared to have to talk to him in a week or two. As it turned out, Martin was coming in to talk to one of the other boys about a 'delicate subject', as the nurse said. I didn't seek to find out what that might be and waited for the man to become available. I was hesitant to speak to him; I didn't want anyone at the school to think that I was crazy. I hoped there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for my behaviour.

"So, what's bothering you, Joe?" Martin said after we had exchanged some pleasantries and he had fetched me some water. "Is it to do with the murders at all?"

"No, actually," I said. "I was wondering if you knew anything about sleepwalking? The causes of it and that. I've been doing it a lot lately, as well as having some bad dreams, and so I thought I'd see if you knew anything about it."

"Hmm," the man said, screwing up his face a bit. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I said.

"Sleepwalking isn't a common thing, but it's not all that unusual around your age, either," Martin said after considering things for a while. "It can often be related to puberty. As you will know, your body is going through a number of changes, and they can be psychological as well as physical. Have you been experiencing anything else at the same time?"

"Nightmares," I told him.

"What do they involve? Is there any consistency between them?"

"They usually involve 'goblins'," I said, finding myself laughing a little at the absurdity of the term. "They're these small white creatures, with long bony fingers. They're usually waving spears and things about. They chase me around the school and try to kill me. They succeed a lot of the time, too."

"Do you watch a lot of horror films or read anything of that nature?"

"No," I said. "I've actually been having the nightmares since I was about twelve, so this isn't a new thing."

Martin nodded, thinking some more. "The 'goblins' are obviously a product of your imagination, but are likely representative of things in your life that are causing you distress. They could stand for your schoolwork or the older boys that might bully you. Nightmares are extremely common during adolescence, though most teenagers don't like to talk about it. They're afraid of admitting what has woken them up at night and that it might make them a subject of ridicule amongst their peers. Were you bullied a lot when you were younger?"

"In the junior school, yes," I admitted.

Another understanding nod from Martin. "We don't like to admit it happens, but bullying is a

fact of school life. You can only stop the worst of it, unfortunately. Do you ever fight back against them?”

“The bullies or the goblins?”

“Sorry, I mean the goblins in your dreams?”

“Sometimes. I remember having attacked them from time to time.”

“But it doesn’t work? You still get the dreams?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Sometimes recurring dreams can be stopped by getting to the root cause of the problem, either in the dream itself or in real life. I used to have nightmares when I was your age. They slowly went away as I got older. When you suffer the nightmares, are you experiencing any stress from real life?”

I thought about it carefully. Now that he mentioned it, I could see a correlation with what was happening in real life. The first nightmare I had suffered was when I had entered the senior school and been terrified of what might happen to me there. I had been overwhelmed by the scale of the new environment and the number of boys in my year and those above. The other times I had suffered them had been whenever I had been facing tests or exams, and, more recently, around the times of the murders. I told him so.

“Stress and puberty,” Martin nodded. “I am confident that your dreams will go away in a few months, after you finish your GCSEs. If it’s something you’re very worried about, I can give you some sleeping aids to help deal with them.”

“Thank you,” I said. I felt better knowing that. I suspected, as Martin said, that many of the other boys in my year suffered nightmares. Most would certainly not admit to them, especially if they were members of the Clique. That would almost certainly be seen as a sign of weakness.

“The sleepwalking, on the other hand, is a little more troubling,” Martin then said. “You could harm yourself or one of the other students while doing it. When did it last happen?”

“Last night,” I said. “I was just walking about my dorm. Apparently my eyes were open.”

“They usually are. It can be very unsettling for other people to see that.”

I thought of how much it had bothered Anthony Simmons. He had looked quite afraid of me, as I expect anyone would with been, finding someone looming over them in the middle of the night, staring at them with a glassy look in their eyes. Baz and Sam had been attempting to wake me, though they had maintained a distance and looked equally bothered.

“Is there an easy cure that you know of?” I asked.

“Not as such. It can quite often be linked to other things, in this case your nightmares. Having thought about it, both could probably be avoided simply by maintaining a good sleep hygiene.”

“Sleep hygiene?” I asked.

“Getting the right amount of sleep, avoiding caffeine and sugar just before bed, not using the bed for anything other than sleeping – meaning don’t sit or lie on it when you’re not intending to sleep – eating properly, exercising regularly, changing your sheets often, and avoiding stress. I can

see that last one being a little more difficult, given your upcoming GCSEs.

“But try not to let the thought of that stress you out, either. Worrying about the nightmares and the sleepwalking could simply *cause* them to happen.

“As I said, I can arrange with the clinic to bring in some sleep aids for you, for use when you’re feeling stressed. I’m very certain that this is just a temporary thing. Start with the sleep hygiene and try not to do any schoolwork just before going to sleep. Worrying about it will only stick in your mind. Read a book, something fun and interesting to settle your mind. *Not* horror. If after all that you’re still suffering from the nightmares, come and see me and I’ll arrange for you to receive some sleep aids.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks. Um ... this is just going to be kept between us, right? You’re not going to let the headmaster or anyone know, are you?” I asked just before leaving.

“It’s just between us for now, Joe,” Martin said. “I would only advise the school nurse if I thought it was something that needed further investigation.”

“Cool, thanks,” I said.

“Have a good day,” Martin smiled.

I felt relieved that it wasn’t something serious. I had wondered if I was going to sleepwalk for the rest of my life. To hear that it was something that generally only happened when you were younger (and wasn’t all that uncommon at that time) was a great weight off my mind. The fear that the *thought* of the nightmares caused me was almost worse than the things themselves, kind of like a negative feedback loop of sorts. I might well have broken the chain.

Only one thing still bothered me, and that was what Martin had said about my sleepwalking. One night I had found myself in Tudor House, walking around the lower corridors. It was clear to me why I had made my way over there.

I couldn’t really hurt someone that way, could I?

*

I returned to Butcher, making plans for which subjects I needed to tackle during prep that evening.

I halted outside the third year dorm, seeing the door propped open by a large cardboard box. I had suspected something was up as I had walked through the entrance to the house and seen a car parked outside. Although staff cars dotted the grounds, it was unusual to find a car parked in such a specific place. It was a hire car, too, I could tell from the branding and advertising plastered all over it.

I entered the dormitory to see two somewhat heavy-set adults packing things into boxes. I had only met them on a couple of occasions in the past, but knew immediately who they were – Sam’s parents. His bed had already been stripped, the duvet folded over and sitting on the bare mattress, alongside the two pillows and a large case that was already quite swollen with clothes. I stood in the doorway for a moment, unable to go any further.

“What’s going on?” I eventually asked. The three turned around to me.

“I’m leaving,” Sam said bluntly. His voice was a mixture of both apology and anger. “I’m going back home to Texas.”

“And you were just going to sneak out the door, without telling anyone?” I said, flabbergasted.

“I’m not going right away,” Sam said. “But I’m not staying at the school after today.”

“We’re staying at a hotel in town, while we arrange for Sam’s things to be shipped back to America,” Sam’s father said.

“But ... you can’t,” I said.

Sam said nothing, only looking to his parents.

“How long have you known?” I asked Sam accusingly. A thought then occurred to me. “Is that the phone call you got last week? You were called into the headmaster’s office. Father Thomas came to get you from the Belfry.”

“Mom and Dad don’t want me staying here any longer,” Sam explained.

“We don’t think this school is safe any more,” Sam’s father added.

“So, your brother’s okay?” I asked. It had been my very first thought as to why they might be here, losing a son who was away in a foreign country and wanting the other to now be closer to home.

“Cody’s fine. He’s just a bit bored out there,” Sam said, again with an apologetic tone.

“This one ready?” Sam’s father asked him. Sam nodded, and the big man began lugging the case out of the dormitory.

I felt like blocking his way for a moment, before moving aside. “So, you’re leaving tonight?” I asked Sam.

“Sorry, Joe.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I’ll come back later in the week to say goodbye properly,” Sam reassured me.

“After we heard about what’s been happening here, we didn’t think it was appropriate for Sam to remain at St Christopher’s any longer,” Sam’s mother said. “We thought that England was a safe country, but if things like this are going to keep on happening to the boys, then he’s better off back home.”

“But you can’t go!” I said, almost begging.

“Sorry,” Sam said, looking to his mother, “but I think it’s for the best.”

I tried to remember his mother’s name, but failed. “Look,” I said to her. “This school isn’t dangerous. And Cody is in the Middle East for Christ’s sake! He’s being *shot at* daily!”

“That’s not quite true,” Sam said, as if trying to make things sound not quite so bad.

“Three murders in one year at a single school make it dangerous to me,” Sam’s mother added. “I’m surprised it’s not been closed down yet.”

“It almost has been. Nearly half the boys didn’t come back this term,” I muttered. “What has the school said? Have you spoken to Mr Somers or Father Benedict?”

“Mom and Dad have been talking to them ever since the second closure,” Sam said. “Both said that the school is safe, and that I should stay, but my parents don’t agree.”

“It’s *not* safe, Sam,” his mother told him.

“So, you decided to go now that they’ve found out that it wasn’t the gardener that was doing it?” I blurted out. I realised as I said it that Sam’s mother probably wasn’t aware of recent developments.

“So, they no longer have a suspect?” Sam’s mother said, looking to her son. “More reason now that you should leave.”

“For fuck’s sake, Sam,” I said, not caring about swearing in front of his mother, “you can’t go! What about your GCSEs? You’ve got to do those next term. You’ll have to repeat the year over or whatever.”

“I’m going to try and take my SATs this year, but I might have to repeat a few classes. SATs are more or less the equivalent of GCSEs back home,” Sam clarified.

I was devastated. I had known Sam only two and a half years, but he was my best friend. He couldn’t leave. This was just stupid and unfair.

“But you’re not flying out tonight?” I asked.

“No,” Sam’s mother said. “At the weekend.”

“What day?” I insisted.

“Sunday.”

“What time?”

“My husband has the details. I think it’s at six.”

“Morning or evening?”

“Joe, don’t worry,” Sam said. “I’m going to come back on Saturday, to see everyone.”

“What are you going to be doing before then?” I wanted to know. It was only Wednesday. There was no reason I could see that Sam should have to go right *now*.

“Since we don’t come here a lot, we’re going to go to London and see the Queen in Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, and visit Wimbledon, as well as a few other places,” Sam’s mother answered. “I would quite like to see Cornwall, but I don’t think we’ll get the opportunity.”

“Sounds like you’ll have a nice time,” I answered a little soberly.

Sam’s father reappeared, requesting that Sam and his mother give him a hand to carry more items down to the car. I didn’t offer to help them do so. I would rather be unpacking those cases. And other than standing in the dormitory watching two people take my best friend away from me, there was only one other place I needed to be.

“Back in a minute,” I said. “*Don’t* go until I come back.”

I strode from the dormitory, down the spiral stairs and to the housemaster’s office. With Sam’s parents having arrived from America, I knew he would be in, wanting to speak to them at some point. And there he was, sitting quietly at his desk, pushing a pen across a piece of paper. I knocked

on the open door.

“Just a minute,” he said without looking up.

I fidgeted impatiently for a time, trying to control a mild rage that was building within me. I should actually just go back to the dorm and find out more details of what Sam would be up to over the next few days and when exactly on Saturday he would be visiting, in case I was involved in some sporting activity or other.

Mr Somers then looked up. “Yes, Joe. What can I do for you?” he asked.

I entered the office, feeling the rage rising, a part of me wanting to close the door so that I could shout at the man. “Sir, why are you letting Sam leave?” I demanded.

“Because, Joe, his parents called the headmaster and said that they want to take him out of the school.”

“And you said that that was okay and just *let* them?”

“Joe, do not speak to me that way,” my housemaster cautioned me. “I’ve told you once already about your recently failing attitude.”

“Sorry, sir,” I said, forcing the anger from my voice. “I’m just ... really annoyed right now.”

“Sam’s departure from the school is none of your business, if I’m being perfectly honest,” Mr Somers continued. “But if you must know—”

“Hold on,” I said, requesting he hold that thought, before moving over to the door, removing the stop and closing it. With the office door shut and with only my ears to hear it, I was sure that my housemaster would be willing to share more than he might otherwise.

“If you must know,” Mr Somers continued, “we did talk to Sam’s parents a great deal about keeping him at the school for as long as possible. Unfortunately, they were more concerned about the incidents that have occurred of late and thought it was best for them, as well as their other son, that he return home to America. Sam is far from the first pupil we have lost, as you know. You will be fully aware that there are a number of boys from the first and second year in Butcher that have not returned to the school, as well as a number of others from the other houses. There are several entire dormitories in the junior school that are now empty, as a result of the respective parents having taken their boys back home.

“The headmaster and I, as well as all the other housemasters and teachers, talk *daily* to concerned parents about the well being of their boys. We did whatever we could to stop Sam from leaving, but at the end of the day it is his parents’ choice. His departure could well be the catalyst for some of the other boys in your year to leave, as, again, their parents have expressed similar desires.

“And as well as being under a great deal of pressure to reassure parents of the safety of the school, we are also fighting a daily battle to keep St Christopher’s *open*. We are receiving calls from all quarters to close until the matter can be laid to rest, and it is putting every member of staff under a great deal of pressure. I’m bending over backwards to keep everyone happy, and it’s the hardest I have ever worked in my life. You probably have little idea of how stressed many of us are

these days.

“Ofsted inspectors are here at least once a week to get updates from the headmaster, the police are advising us not to allow any boys to stay on the grounds overnight, as they are still interviewing suspects, and the local council is suggesting that we close the school after the end of this year, in case this is the work of someone targeting us exclusively.

“I won’t lie to you, Joe – it’s possible that we very well might have to do so, as there is no guarantee that enough boys will return at the start of the next school year to allow us to stay open. We’re doing everything we can to keep the school running, as no one wants to see five hundred boys turfed out midway through a school year and forced into limbo. It could be disastrous to their continued educations. We’re doing this all for the sake of the boys and doing our utmost to keep them safe at the same time. There are risks, we know, but we’re doing everything we can. The continuation of their schooling is very important. And you should know – it’s why you’re staying here to complete your GCSEs before leaving us, isn’t it? Now, does that tell you everything you wanted to know?”

My jaw had become slack. I had no idea that things were this bad. “Shit,” I said, unable to help myself.

“Shit, indeed,” my housemaster responded, before I could offer an apology. “The school lost one of its prefects over the weekend, too – Damien Sanderson, leaving Martin House with a role that now needs filling.”

“How come we weren’t told?” I wanted to know.

“Because, Joe, as I already said, this is really none of your business. It doesn’t matter to you or your studies, and only concerns those directly affected,” my housemaster said matter-of-factly. “None of this, as you can imagine, is good for the school’s reputation, and it only gets worse when the newspapers start running stories. We are forging on as best we can, but things are getting more and more complicated, and, frankly, there are some things that people don’t need to know. The headmaster wants to avoid a second mass exodus, as it wouldn’t be good for anyone.”

“Have my parents said anything?” I found myself asking.

“I received a call from them shortly after everyone returned, seeking to put their minds at rest, as well as one just last week. I trust you will keep this to yourself, Joe?”

“Yes,” I said. “Of course.”

“Good. Please could you prop the door back open on your way out,” he indicated with his pen.

I did so, leaving the office in an almost zombie-like state, my mind swimming. He had a point – this *wasn’t* any of my business. Still, it was nice to know, and it sounded as though Mr Somers also needed to get a load off his own chest.

I returned to the third year dorm to see that Sam was just about done. He was looking under his bed and behind his bedside locker. This was it. He was really going.

“Got everything?” I mumbled.

“I think so,” Sam said. “I think Rory has still got my *MC Hammer* album, and I don’t have time

to go and look for him and get it.”

“I’ll get it for you and give it back to you on Saturday,” I said. “Oh, and give me your address in Texas. I’ll post you anything important that you might have forgotten.”

“Good point,” Sam said, writing his address and phone number down on a piece of paper I retrieved from my desk. He took down the phone number for the house as well, and then the two of us walked down to the front of Butcher House, where his parents were waiting in the car. It was bulging with all Sam’s belongings. Being a foreign student, he had stored many of his possessions at the school during holiday time. Where those of us who lived in England could ship bits and pieces home with us at weekends and the end of term, reducing the clutter, Sam had hoarded a huge amount during his two and a half years.

Sam spoke to his parents to confirm that he had all that he could find, and we then stood there awkwardly for a time, not really knowing what to do. We then hugged one another. I didn’t know why. Maybe it was just in case.

“See you later, Joe,” Sam said. “You’ll have to come over to Texas to visit some time.”

“I will do,” I said.

With that, Sam got into the car and it drove off. I knew I shouldn’t feel sad; I was going to see him again in a few days.

But Saturday came and went, and Sam never returned.

Trinity Term

April 1992 – June 1992

Chapter Twenty-One

“Your grades are excellent,” my mother exclaimed.

I smiled. She had clearly expected a lot less, even though my grades throughout my entire education at St Christopher’s had been anything but. I was sure that I had only ever seen one C grade during my time, and that had been at the end of my first year of senior school, for French. I wasn’t expecting anything higher than a B in that for my final GCSEs.

“Maybe they’ve taken the murders into account, and how it might have affected your grades,” my father suggested.

“They do that for boys who suffer a death in the family,” I said. “But they didn’t take the murders into account this time, not for the mocks. One of the biology teachers told me.”

“So, your final grades could be higher when you take the actual exams?” my mother asked.

“Yes.”

My parents continued to look through the grades, reading the comments alongside them. I had seen them already, having opened the envelope when it had arrived that morning, eager to see how I had done. The very next minute, I had made my way down to the sixth form college and presented them to the receptionist. A very brief meeting with the admissions officer had followed (as it was unscheduled and I should have made a proper appointment) and I had been given what I considered a verbal acceptance.

“Do they always send the projected grades out?” my mother asked, looking from me to my father, who only shrugged.

“Only if you ask for them,” I said.

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

My father chuckled. “Because he wants a car as a reward.”

“That, and I want to do my A-Levels at BSFC.” I pronounced it *bas-fic*.

My mother and father said nothing, and just looked at me.

“Don’t worry. I don’t want an expensive car,” I smiled.

“Still have your heart set on going to school down the road, do you?” my mother asked, clearly suppressing a sigh.

“Of course,” I said. “I might not actually be able to stay at St Christopher’s much longer, not with everything that’s going on there. I’ve been told that it could close for good at the start of the summer.”

“Regardless of what’s happening there, Joe, you can’t go to BSFC.”

“Because?” I asked.

“Because you can’t,” my father said.

“I can’t?” I said incredulously.

“No.”

“Why not?” Because ‘you can’t’ was hardly a legitimate reason.

“Why do you want to go to BSFC?” my father asked. “Other than leaving St Christopher’s because of the problems there?”

“Because he wants to meet girls,” my mother supplied before I had a chance to explain. “Joe, if you want to meet girls, we can send you to a mixed boarding school once you finish your GCSEs. As you’ve said, it’s likely you’ll have to move to another school once you’ve done your exams, anyway.”

“Okay, Mum, look,” I said. “I don’t *want* to go to another boarding school. I want to go somewhere completely different. I want to learn to drive a car and have more freedom. I want to live as a normal teenager and do all the stuff that normal teenagers do. I don’t want to be made to get up at a certain time, eat at a certain time, be in my room at a certain time, be asleep at a certain time ...”

“If you were living here, you’d have to be,” my father pointed out.

“And as I keep saying, you can’t stay here,” my mother said just as firmly. “The reason we sent you to boarding school in the first place was because of our jobs. We wouldn’t be here to look after you, since we have to travel a lot.”

“We were going to send you to live with Grandma and Granddad, but you didn’t want that,” my father added. “Remember?”

I vaguely recalled it. I was eight when my parents had suggested that I go to boarding school. Older and somewhat wiser now, I realised that this was more for their benefit than my own. They had had to put the brakes on their careers ever since I had come into the world, and had been keen to get back to them.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” I said. “When I was here for three weeks the last time I coped fine on my own.” Other than the baked beans incident, which I had managed to cover up successfully. “I’m not a little boy any more. It wouldn’t matter that you might not be here, I could look after myself. I know how to get to the college and get back; it’s just down the road. I can also keep the house tidy, wash my clothes, cook ...”

“You are *not* doing that. You’d burn the bloody house down,” my father said.

“The point is that I don’t need looking after,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” my mother said.

“Mum, I’m sixteen!” I answered.

“Exactly, *you’re only sixteen!*”

“But, Mum, at that age I’m legally allowed to leave school, get married, get a job, have children ... The only thing that I can’t do yet is drive a car, but I can apply for my license next year, in February. I’m an adult.”

“You’re not an adult until you’re eighteen,” my father answered, keeping his cool a lot better than my mother. “And how do you know that that school down the road is any good?”

I didn't. I just assumed it would be based on them only accepting 'the best'. "I took my projected grades down there, and they said that they would accept me."

"They did?"

"Yes, they did. Look, I'll give you the prospectus I've got. You can have a look for yourself and tell me what you think," I offered.

My mother shook her head. "It's only two more years, I'm sure you'll survive. Once you're done with your A-Levels, you can go off to university and have all the freedom you like."

See? They don't want you here. Told you that you were a mistake, the voice of Craig Priest crept into my head. *They never wanted you and only sent you to St Christopher's so that they wouldn't have to look at your ugly face every morning.*

Fuck off, Priest, I responded.

"But you're not actually both away all that often," I continued to argue with my mother and father. "The last time you were both away for any significant amount of time was January, and that was for two weeks. And let's be honest, you didn't actually need to be here as much as you were when I came home from school in March. The only thing you need to teach me how to do is cook and use the washing machine ..." I ignored the look of horror returning to my father's face. "I could walk or bike it to college, so that would save money on bus fares and petrol. And you'd be able to get another cat, too, Mum," I added, pointedly.

That stopped my mother a bit short. Her wishes for a new feline companion were strong, but her career had always come first. I sort of felt sorry for her. I didn't actually know if my parents had many interests outside of work.

"Being here would also help me get over the culture shock of going to university, where you can pretty much do as you please," I said to my father. "I know of people who have found it difficult to cope with the freedom, and so this would be a good transitional step."

My mother and father said nothing for a time, each contemplating silently. "What are you going to study?" my father then asked.

"Economics, maths and English," I said immediately. My father eyed my grades once more, before passing them to my mother.

"I don't know," she then said, sounding completely defeated. "Ask your father." She turned and walked off into the kitchen, though not with the stomp that I had anticipated, more the steps of reluctant acceptance.

My father didn't look as though he was going to come to a decision any time soon. I decided to bargain, instead. "Okay, how about this?" I said. "If I don't get good grades, then I go where you want me to."

"And what would you call 'good grades'?"

"Those or better," I said, nodding to the sheet of paper that my father still clutched. "If I get grades lower than those, then you can make all the decisions. But if I equal or better them, I go to BSFC."

My father didn't answer immediately, and continued to look at the grades on the paper. "I'll think about it," he said. That basically meant 'yes'. He just needed to convince my mother of it. "Do you have the prospectus for that college?"

"In my room," I said. "Unless Mum threw it out."

"Get it for me. I'll look at it tonight."

The phone in the hall began ringing, my father answering it.

"Joe," my father called. "It's for you."

I made my way to the phone, seeing as I passed the kitchen that my mother was at the table, reading the *Daily Mail*. At the other end of the phone was Rob.

"Want to go into town?" he asked. "We could go to Burger King for lunch, and then go to the cinema to see *Wayne's World*."

"Sounds good," I said, watching as my father made his way into the kitchen to talk things through with my mother. I should be revising, but it was probably best that I disappeared out of the house for a few hours. "I'll see you there in an hour."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The return to St Christopher's for the summer term was quite chaotic. When I had been in the first and second years, as well as the junior school, I would always return to the same dormitory in the spring and summer terms, only moving to a new one in the autumn.

Now in the third year and being charged with looking after a dormitory, I had to move to a new one each term. The extremely short five-day Easter holiday meant that no one packed away their clothes and personal possessions, and the third years left it until the day of their return to rotate their beds. Boys were therefore walking up and down corridors, waiting for those that were occupying their new dormitories to move their things out. The person waiting on their place would also be forced to wait, and so on. Apparently, this was what being in the chain to buy a house was like. It only took one person to dally or screw up, and the entire thing could end up collapsing.

As I had known, I would be looking after a second year dormitory this term. They were a great deal less submissive than the first years I had looked after in the autumn, growing a good deal more confident as they saw themselves soon to progress to becoming third years themselves. I knew that they would pay me little attention and not respect my authority a great deal, and so I chose to preempt such things by not bothering in the first place. I had only twelve weeks to survive in this term, shorter if you considered that my GCSEs would be done within ten weeks, and I could in fact leave the school at that point.

Anthony Simmons was the other prefect in my dorm. I had expected him to complain about having to share with me two terms running, but he was strangely sedate, waving to me as I came in and saying hello. I wondered if he was remembering the night I had stood over his bed during my sleepwalking and had decided to play it safe and be nice to me.

"Did you get much revision done?" he asked, as he was setting up his stereo.

"Some," I said. "But it was more like being home for a weekend than a proper holiday. I finished all my remaining coursework, though."

"It will be good next year when we get our own rooms and don't have to keep moving all our stuff around. Don't you think?" he asked when I didn't respond.

"I won't be here next term," I announced to him.

"What?" he said, stopping what he was doing and looking up at me. "You're leaving?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to do my A-Levels somewhere else."

"Shit," he said, coming around to my side of the dorm. "When did you decide that?"

"Just over the holiday," I said.

"Was it your decision or ...?"

"Mine and my dad's. He thinks I've been here long enough and that I should go and do my A-Levels somewhere else," I told him, being somewhat economical with the truth.

"So, you're not going to be here next term at all?" he repeated, looking a little shocked.

"Nope."

Though Simmons was part of the Clique, and I hadn't had too much to do with him in recent years, other than the odd conversation here and there, I had known him since the junior school. He probably felt as though a small connection to that place had just abandoned him.

The dormitory door opened and in walked Charlie Smith. "Alright, Ant?" he said.

"Hey, Charlie, Joe's leaving," Simmons said immediately.

"What? When? Now?" Smith said.

"No, not now," I said. "At the end of term, when I've done my GCSEs."

"You're not staying to do your A-Levels?"

"No," I said.

"Why?"

"Just because," I shrugged. "I'm going to do them somewhere else."

That was largely how the conversations ran from there on out. The Clique reacted in shock to the news, almost as if I had just declared that it wasn't cool to remain at St Christopher's. Baz, having already confessed to me that he had plans to depart, was the easiest to talk to about it, being on exactly the same wavelength as me.

"Have you heard from Sam at all?" he asked me as I sat in his dorm.

"No," I said, somewhat bitterly. I wondered what had happened to him. Since leaving, he had not contacted me at all. He hadn't called, written a letter or anything. I began to wonder if he was okay. I had tried to call his home in Texas a number of times, but no one had ever picked up.

"I'm sure he's okay. He's probably just busy," Baz said. "Maybe he lost your address."

That would be the most reasonable explanation. I found it hard to believe that Sam would simply cut off all contact with me once he left the country.

"In that case, hopefully he'll find it soon and let me know what's happening with him back home. I'll have to tell him that I'm not staying here, too. Have you finished all your coursework?"

"I've got a bit left," he said. "But I'll get it finished soon. All our classes are now dedicated to finishing that, revising and doing tests."

"Do you know where you're going once you finish here?"

"To whatever sixth form college will take me," Baz shrugged.

"You don't already know?" I asked.

"Nope," he laughed. "I'll just see where I end up."

"A little blasé of you," I said.

"Well, keeps things interesting, doesn't it?" he said. He then looked around his bookshelf to a first and second year, who had started arguing fiercely with one another. "Oi! Cut that out!"

"But he's just given my bed an apple turnover!" the first year wailed, indicating the mattress and sheets that were sitting the wrong way up on the bed.

Lucky he didn't lamppost it, I thought. Those metal beds were rather heavy, so it often took two boys to lift one. Only once had I ever heard of the Holy Grail of lampposting - doing it to a bunk bed. That was impressive. Not so much fun for the two boys that were later forced to right it,

a half of my life, sitting there by the side. You have to understand – I was ten years old, full of energy and with wide-eyed wonder at the world, wanting to explore new things, interested in everything that happened, and keen to see the results as soon as possible. Sitting around, watching others enjoying themselves was therefore not my idea of fun. Cricket was a team game, I had been told. I couldn't quite see how when eighty percent of the team sat about doing nothing except pulling up the grass and trying to find ways of entertaining themselves (and with the sports teacher telling them to be quiet whenever they were talking). It was more like a punishment than a fun sporting activity.

The batsmen were gradually whittled down, until it came close to my turn. By this time, it was three fifteen p.m. Afternoon tea would be served at half three, classes resuming at four. Things would probably have to speed up if we were going to get back to the school in time. I pulled on my pads, picked up a bat, and took my place in front of the wickets. I was careful about where I put the bat and how I would swing it, as I had already witnessed a couple of the boys knocking the bails off as they flailed about while attempting to strike the incoming ball. Not that it had made a difference to Mr Styles, who simply told them to replace the bails and carry on.

As with everyone else, Mr Styles took a short run up and then bowled a gentle ball to me. It was an easy one to handle, yet I found myself panicking as it came towards me. I lifted the bat as it bounced, not swinging it, but holding it in front of me, deflecting the ball high into the air, where it drifted almost gracefully towards Mr Styles, who watched the ball come down and caught it smartly.

“Out,” he said.

I stood there looking at him, not quite sure of what I had just heard. “What?” I asked.

“Out,” the cricket coach said.

“But that was my first go,” I protested.

“You're out, Crotty,” one of the second year boys who had been watching from the other crease called out. “It's Pete's go.”

“Sir?” I started. “Can't I have another go?”

“No,” the teacher said, tapping his watch and gesturing for me to return to my place. “We're running late as it is.”

“But—” I sniffed, starting to well up.

“You're out, Crotty!” some of the other second years joined in the jeers.

I ignored them, looking to my team-mates through blurry eyes as the tears warped my vision, seeing Peter Barnet strapping his pads on eagerly and snatching up a bat. I looked pleadingly back to Mr Styles, but he only came forward, put his arm around my shoulder and walked me back to my place on the bench.

“It's not fair!” I blubbed.

“It's just the way the game goes,” the cricket coach said. “Sometimes you can be in bat for hours, sometimes just minutes.”

“But I wanted another go! I haven’t played this before!”

“You’ll do better next time, Joe,” Mr Styles said. “And we need to keep going if everyone is going to get a turn.”

The game went on for another thirty minutes, cutting into class time, and Peter Barnet never went out. We were even scolded by the junior school’s history teacher, who told us that those who weren’t playing should have returned and washed and dressed immediately. The following Saturday we swapped teams, my side fielding as the others batted. I stood on the field for close to two hours, and the ball never came my way once.

I often looked back on that first ever time in bat, imagining that it might be rather like how I expected losing my virginity might be. Except not nearly as disappointing, not over quite so quickly, and not without the desire to ever do it again. Sadly, I was forced to endure the sport for another five more years.

“Really?” Rory said, looking quite stunned as I finished my story.

“No word of a lie,” I said. “And that’s why I absolutely hate cricket and swapped to athletics and swimming, instead. The only downside is that we have to put up with Mr Bertrand whenever he’s taking it.”

“Which is probably today,” Rory said.

Damn, I thought. Still, this might present an opportunity for me to exploit. If I could somehow schmooze my way into the French teacher’s good books by means of promising athletic ability, some well-timed jokes and helpfulness throughout the afternoons, then it could help my GCSE result. Should I find him taking my French oral in the real thing, as I had during the mocks, then he might be a little more lenient and forgiving when speaking and not be so rude. But then again, maybe not. After all, I reminded myself, he was French.

“Why are you doing athletics, anyway?” I asked. I tried not to make it obvious that I didn’t exactly consider Rory the athletic type. He was quite chubby, and running any real distance tended to turn his face as red as a tomato.

“Because it only lasts until three, and then we can go and do what we want,” he said. “Playing cricket usually turns into a complete mission, and we don’t get back to school until after six. I don’t mind the game as such; it’s just a little slow and takes up a lot of time.”

“Are you still playing the guitar, then?”

“Yep. Going to try and join a band when I get to university,” he said.

“Isn’t Stuart Evans doing that?” I asked, remembering what Rob had told me back in September.

“No, he’s not even going to uni. He’s just going to start a band with people from home and chance that. He’s an idiot if you ask me. He’s going to leave himself with nothing to fall back on.”

“Sure, but sometimes you have to focus on one thing exclusively if you want it to work out,” I argued.

“And what happens if it doesn’t, which is what happens to most bands?” Rory said. “You’ll

have to get back to uni and end up as a mature student, and that would be shit.”

“How so?”

“Once you’re over twenty-five or so, you’re classed by the university as a mature student. You then don’t really fit in with everyone else, as they’ve all come out of school and are in the same boat, whereas you just look old to the rest of them. Think about it – everyone else is eighteen or nineteen, and you’re a quarter of a century.”

“Sure, but you’re all studying together,” I said. “I don’t really see what the difference is.”

“It’s just the way people look at it,” Rory said, shrugging.

“Something like a clique?” I asked.

“Something like that.”

I nodded in understanding. It seemed that life would always be full of cliques, no matter what you did or where you went. Was that just general human nature? I wondered. A ‘them versus us’ mentality wherever you went? Surely not.

We came to the athletics training field. We didn’t have a proper sports track, just quite a lot of land to practice on that some of the workmen and gardeners would paint running lanes onto. We rarely practised on proper tracks, as that involved a trip to Hallmouth, the nearby town, and the school wasn’t willing to finance the trip on a regular basis.

I saw that Rory had been right as to who would be leading athletics today, and that Mr Bertrand was keen for us to practice javelin throwing, as well as the shot put. Fine with me. I always enjoyed chucking those things around.

Charlie Moon was assisting Mr Bertrand outside the storeroom, removing the javelins and leaning them up against the wall. I saw the hunchbacked Quasimodo lumbering away from the storeroom, Mr Bertrand thanking him for opening it up. The gardener mumbled something in return, but did not look up from staring at the ground. I instinctively gave Quasimodo a wide berth as he passed me, even though I didn’t have anything to fear from the man. He didn’t look at either Rory or myself as he passed, appearing quite downbeat, and I felt a little sorry for him. It must have been awful to have been arrested and held under such suspicion. He wasn’t right in the head to begin with, so what might that experience have done to him?

“Ah, Crosthwaite and McGregor,” Mr Bertrand said in his very thick French accent as we approached, “would you please take these to the field for us to use later. Please do not play with them, as they are not toys.”

“Alright, Crotty?” Moon smirked as I approached, grabbing a handful of the poles and passing them to me.

I had no idea why he was looking so pleased with himself. Along with Rory and Moon, I walked the javelins over to where the other boys were gathering for the afternoon’s training, telling the second years and the odd first year, who had some special reason for not playing cricket, not to touch them. Despite this, a handful of sixth formers came over and selected which of the javelins they wanted to use. I could have told them to return the javelins, but I knew my words would fall on

deaf ears.

“What are you smirking about, Charlie?” I asked Moon, who was still grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“Did you hear about that boy who got killed at Rowford?”

“No,” I said. “Been sort of busy with what’s been happening here.”

“A javelin impaled him,” Moon said, pointing to the pile.

“Bullshit!” Rory said.

“One hundred percent the truth,” Moon said. “He went to get his javelin back and someone threw one at him, just to scare him. It actually hit him and went right through him.”

“Rubbish, that’s impossible,” I scowled at him. “Who told you that?”

“What are you talking about?” one of the lower sixth boys asked. I forgot his name. It was either Crowe or Swann or Sparrow or something bird-related. It might have even been ‘Bird’. The guy was a bit of a loner from what I had gathered and spent most of his time in his room, reading fantasy books and comics.

“Moon says that *apparently* someone was killed by a javelin at Rowford,” I answered, emphasising the alleged nature of the incident.

“No, that’s true,” the sixth former said. “Didn’t happen recently, though. It was about ten years ago, back in the eighties. People like to exaggerate what happened. It didn’t kill him immediately; he died in hospital after a week. Blood loss or heart attack or something like that.”

“But those can’t do that,” I said, looking at the javelins. “They’re sharp, but I’m not sure they would go into someone so easily.”

“They go into the ground okay,” Rory said, driving one of the implements into the earth.

“And don’t forget the speed they’ll have attained due to height and gravity,” the sixth former said. “If it came down from far enough up, pointed straight down, then it could actually go through you from the right angle.”

It sounded plausible, I guessed. But it still sounded ... stupid.

Mr Bertrand was done fetching the equipment and came over to us carrying a clipboard, a stopwatch dangling from around his neck.

“Today, we will be doing the javelin and the shot put,” he started.

“First and second years, too?” the special case first year asked.

“First and second years, too,” Mr Bertrand echoed.

“Yes!” came the excited voices of the younger boys.

“But before that, we will be doing the two hundred meters dash, and I have also decided that we should do the one hundred metres hurdles.”

“Oh, I love the hurdles. Not!” I heard someone say.

I wasn’t fond of them, either. I spent more of the time knocking the damn things down than going over them. I would just have to get through it as best I could, so I could move on to the good stuff. Mr Bertrand began dictating who was going to be doing what and in which order, when I saw

a latecomer approaching. It was Carson.

“Ah, Mr Young, you’re late,” Mr Bertrand said.

“Sorry, I couldn’t find where we were meeting,” he said.

“Well, you are now here. Good. Now Sports Day is coming up—”

“What?” Rory said.

“Sports Day, 16th May. A Saturday.”

“We’re still having Sports Day?” the lower sixth boy asked.

“Yes. Why would we not be?” Mr Bertrand asked, sounding a little annoyed at our display of ignorance.

“Well, you know, because of the murders and that.”

“Pah,” Mr Bertrand said. “It is business as usual, as the headmaster has said. The school is the same as it has always been.”

Aside from one-third of the boys having left, security patrols walking the grounds, restrictions on coming and going, and the constant sense of fear and uncertainty that lingers in the air, it’s exactly the same, I thought.

“Sports Day’s a Saturday?” one of the boys then said. “Does that mean we get to go home afterwards, if our parents come?”

“The headmaster is thinking about it,” Mr Bertrand said, completely non-committal and seeming not to care. “Young, you will help me to fetch the hurdles. The rest of you will warm up. Twenty sit-ups and push-ups each. King will be in charge until I get back. Make sure they do them,” he said to the sixth former.

“Um ... sir, I could help with the hurdles,” one of the second years offered, clearly keen to get out of it. “It will take a while if it’s just one person doing it.”

“Yes, come on,” Mr Bertrand said.

“Sir, I can help, too!” other offers began.

“One more, then. The rest of you will do the sit-ups. Start!”

*

As it turned out, I wasn’t the only person at school who wasn’t aware that Sports Day was still happening, and many reacted in total surprise when Mr Somers told us during Butcher’s Thursday afternoon assembly.

As always, the pupils would be travelling to Hallmouth on coaches. Those who weren’t participating would be expected to sit in the stands and support their house, cheering everyone on. I had learned very quickly that non-participation could lead to a very, very boring day indeed, not unlike what I had experienced while ‘playing’ cricket.

I quickly sought out a duty, offering to run the four hundred metres. My decision to do athletics that term, as well as the somewhat undesirable length of the run to my fellow Butcher third years,

meant that my offer was accepted without challenge. I had to hide a smirk when I saw the look of horror on Anthony Simmons' face when he was forced to take part in the relay race, even more so when I saw Charlie Smith being told that he would be doing the hurdles. I saw Baz sigh with relief at that. I had urged him not to shy away and to offer himself up for the two hundred metres, so as not to get lumbered with any unwanted duties.

All in all, I found the choices of Kenji Suzuki, our head of house, to be spot on. We actually stood a good chance of winning this year. In past years, the head of house had treated Sports Day as a source of amusement to himself and his fellow upper sixth. The previous summer, Neil Booth, the then obese first year boy (now a second year and still obese) had been made to do the hurdles, for nothing more than to see him attempt to lift his girth over them. The prefects had laughed from the stands as he had flopped, fallen and crashed his way past the barriers, later putting him on the *Murga List* for failing to come in first place. Yes, that had been fair.

I trained for my four hundred metres at each athletics meeting we had leading up to the day, being joined on a couple of occasions by others in my year, who had left cricket behind for the day to practice. I helped them with their relay baton passes, before being scolded by Simmons and other members of the Butcher Clique for assisting the other houses. Despite it being a competition, I wasn't willing to totally stick with one side. These were my friends after all.

The big day arrived, and after a simple breakfast of cereal, tea and toast (I avoided the cooked breakfast, not wanting to run on a full stomach), I boarded the coach allocated to Butcher and headed for the stadium. I discovered that I had been wise in my choice of breakfast not long after. The school had shifted the event schedule around, with my four hundred metres being brought forward three hours, to midday. It meant that not only did I get my participation in the day over and done with, but I could explore the town afterwards.

*

"Did anyone see us?" Marvin asked. He looked a little paranoid that one of the teachers might have tailed us out of the stadium. I told him not to worry.

"Where are we going to go?" I asked. "To the shops, to get some sweets and magazines?"

"The pub."

I nodded but said nothing. I knew how this would end.

"Take your ties off," Marvin then said, tugging his free and stuffing it into the inside pocket of his jacket. "If they see our ties they'll know we're from St Christopher's and probably under age."

Yes, that's what will give us away and not these obviously fake IDs, I thought, looking at my sixteen-year-old self in the photo. Twenty pounds this had cost me, and it was probably going to be confiscated within the next hour. Still, if by some random chance it worked ...

"Is this how your next year will be? Living at home, I mean?" Rory asked me.

"Walking out of school and going into town during my study periods? I think so," I said,

thinking back to the sixth formers that I had seen in the park back home the previous September. I imagined myself in the same situation in the coming months, drinking a can of beer, a hot blonde next to me, giggling at my jokes, anecdotes and charming mannerisms. Okay, that last one might have been stretching things a bit. Still, the whole boarding school thing might be attractive to the female students, intrigued to know what life had been like.

“Are you definitely leaving?” Marvin asked.

“Definitely,” I said.

“Joe, you should stay,” Rob said.

“There might not be a school to come back to after this term, Rob,” I reminded him.

“Sure, but if the school stays open, next year’s going to be cool.”

“How on Earth could it be cooler than being at home, learning to drive and going to classes with girls?” I asked somewhat incredulously. I had noticed that there was a divide at St Christopher’s as to whether those leaving after their GCSEs were in the right or the wrong. Were they cooler than those that stayed or were they losers and dropouts who never really fitted in? I wasn’t sure where I stood on that argument. I was glad to see the backs of some people and disappointed with the departure of others.

“Well, we get our own rooms, get access to the Common Room, the bar, get to go to dances ...” Rob said, though he didn’t sound terribly convinced by his own arguments. They were terribly weak reasons, all four of us knew. He sounded more like he was trying to convince himself, than me.

“Are you going to have a beer when we get to the pub, Rob? Or isn’t it sweet enough for your taste?” Marvin then chuckled.

“Fuck off, Marv,” Rob glared.

“Yeah, leave him alone, Marvin,” Rory chuckled. “It’s not his fault that he can’t handle beer and prefers girly cider, instead.”

“But seriously, what will you guys do if the school does have to shut down?” I asked. “They’ve not found out who’s done it yet, the security group are still here, and they’re still locking the place up tight every night. Remember all the stuff that Mr Somers told me – Benny is having daily meetings with the police and the school regulators to keep the place open. That’s why he’s constantly so pissed off these days. If they close the school, then you’ll have to do your A-Levels someplace else.”

“Have they actually been reported as murders yet?” Rob said.

“It’s been in some of the newspapers, yes,” Rory said. “The latest one was in the *Today*. They got it wrong, though – they said that it was three first years who had their throats cut.”

“That’s not good,” Marvin said. “Can they print stuff like that?”

“The press can do whatever they like,” Rory shrugged.

“Okay, so what will you do if St Christopher’s closes at the end of term?” I was still curious to know.

“I ... don’t know,” Rory said, looking to Rob and Marvin. “I guess I would just go to another school.”

“I’d probably do what you and Baz are going to do and go to a sixth form college,” Marvin said.

“Rob?” I asked, looking at him. “I think there is still time to apply for Baconsdale Sixth Form College.”

“Sure, but I actually like it here,” Rob said. “Ignoring all the stuff that’s gone on recently, there’s not much wrong with it. It’s a good school, Joe; you get good education here. Sure, it could be better, but there are worse places you could go. You have no idea if BSFC is any good, either. It could be really crap, and then you’ll screw up your chances of getting into a good university. Remember that the admissions offices at the universities look at the schools you’ve been to and take them into consideration. You might not have brilliant grades, but when they see you’ve come from St Christopher’s you’ll stand a much better chance.”

Marvin started laughing. “That is *utter* bollocks, Rob! I can’t believe you actually think that’s true!”

“No, it’s true,” Rob said.

“No, it’s not,” Rory said. “The school only say that to keep you here. The university couldn’t give a shit where you come from, so long as you have the grades they want. The only places where it makes a difference is Oxford and Cambridge. The rest don’t care.”

“Really?” Rob looked a little dumbstruck.

“Yes!” Rory and Marvin chorused.

“My God, you’re gullible,” Rory added with a smirk.

“Right, let’s try this one,” Marvin then suggested, as we approached a pub known as ‘The Peahen’. It being a hot summer day, the door was open to let some air in and create ventilation. The windows themselves were dark, making it hard to see who was inside.

“I don’t think we’ve gone far enough,” I said. “If a teacher comes looking, then this is the first place he’s going to check.”

“Don’t worry,” Marvin said confidently, fishing out his fake ID. “We’ll just sit in the corner. We’ll just have one and not stay too long. Agreed?”

“Okay,” Rob, Rory and I nodded.

We stepped in, my eyes darting over the patrons as we did so, my heart and legs both stopping as I spotted Mr Finn, Mr Carter, and Mr Summers seated around a table, each enjoying a pint of beer. Their eyes met ours.

“Go back to the stadium, boys,” Mr Finn said before the other two teachers could say anything. His words were warm and kind, yet possessing an edge that suggested he didn’t want to have to warn us again.

We heeded his words immediately.

I was enjoying a Lion Bar while playing *Mega Man II* on my Game Boy. I was finding the game particularly frustrating and difficult tonight. I had bought the game during my four days off at home, the same day I went to the cinema with Rob. I was starting to regret the purchase, and I was wondering if maybe I should have bought something else.

“Joe? Joe Crosthwaite?”

A first year boy had come into my dorm after knocking gingerly at the door. He was likely bothered about coming face to face with the second years, in case they decided to knock him about for trespassing in their domain.

“Yes?” I said, looking around my bookcase.

“Phone.”

Phone? Who could that be? My parents were still away with work and, unlike quite a lot of other parents, hadn't come to Sports Day to watch me compete or take me back home afterwards. Still, maybe they had called from abroad to see how I had gotten on today.

I headed for the phone, seeing the first year that had called me settling down on a sofa chair outside the box. He had clearly been about to call someone when the phone had rung for me. He was now going to have to wait about until I was finished. I probably wouldn't be making him wait all that long.

“Hello?” I said, picking up the receiver.

“Hi, Joe. It's Sam.”

“Sam! Oh my God! How are you?”

“I'm fine, thanks. How are you?” Sam said, chuckling. There was a slight delay on the line as we spoke. Sam was obviously calling from America.

“I'm fine, I'm fine,” I said, very glad to hear from him. “What's been happening? How come you've not been in touch?”

“Oh, I messed up,” Sam said. “I was dialling the wrong number for the phone. I forgot that you have to drop the zero when you're calling from here. I was putting in the four-four part, as well as the zero, and it was never connecting.”

“Your parents didn't know?”

“They did, but I didn't tell them for ages. I thought I'd just taken the number down wrong. I tried changing it a few times, and it wouldn't connect. I think I gave you a wrong number, too. Didn't you get the letter I sent you? I put all the new details in there.”

I told him I hadn't.

“Shit. It's probably been lost in the post,” Sam said.

“Hold on, I'll get the details off you now,” I said, opening the door of the box and asking the first year to fetch me a pen and paper.

“What time is it there?” I asked as I waited for the boy to return.

“It's just after two. It's about nine there, right?”

“Eight,” I said.

“Ah, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to call you too early or too late, since you might have been at a cricket match or something.”

“You know I hate cricket,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” Sam chuckled, “due to not winning on your first go.”

“Ha!”

“What have you been doing?”

“We’ve just had Sports Day,” I said.

“Oh ho?” Sam laughed. “Hurdles?”

“Nooooo,” I laughed. “I volunteered for the four hundred metres.”

“You *volunteered*?” Sam said, incredulously.

“Well, sure,” I said. “I didn’t want to get lumbered with something crap. But Suzuki’s okay, so he wouldn’t make me to anything bad, anyway. We actually had quite a good team this year.”

“Did you win?”

“Came second to Enfield,” I said. “There was only two points in it, too.”

“That’s pretty cool.” Sam had never been one to be that bothered about sport. He tended to view exercise as something necessary, but found team games tedious. He had actually been one of the few that had enjoyed the runs along the Red Road, as it was something he could do at his own pace (even if it did stretch him quite a bit). He wasn’t even that bothered about American football or baseball, something I had come to believe all Americans supported fiercely. Each to their own, I suppose.

I told Sam about the rest of the day, about what I had been up to since he had left, that the spring holiday had only lasted a few days, and about how all my classes were now over. I also let him in on various pieces of gossip circulating the school, one of the key points being no further murders or other incidents having since taken place. He was quite relieved to hear that. I imagined that his parents would be, too.

“What are you doing over in Texas? Are you doing your SATs?” I asked.

“I am!” Sam said enthusiastically. “I’ve actually been lucky in that a lot of stuff is quite similar – maths, English, science ... all those are the same. The only major differences are history and geography, and my US history is being treated as if I were still studying in England and the rest is being covered under world history. The differences aren’t as major as I thought they were going to be.”

“That’s good,” I said, pleased to hear that the transition wasn’t causing him any grief. “Where are you being taught?”

“At home. ‘Homeschooling’ they call it. Just until I do these exams.”

“And you’re going to ... high school next?” I wasn’t sure whether it was high school or college that came next.

“High school, then college,” Sam said. “You’re not staying there after you finish your GCSEs,

are you?"

"Huh?" I said. "How did you know?"

"I had a hunch," Sam laughed. "You never seemed all that bothered about graduating to the sixth form and having your own room and that, so I thought that you might be considering leaving."

"You guessed right," I said.

"Is anyone else leaving?"

"Baz," I said.

"Oh, really? I thought he would stay there until he finished the sixth form. Where are you planning on going?"

"To a local sixth form college, back home. As long as I get the grades and they let me in. I've spoken to them briefly already, and they've given me a verbal offer based on my mock results. What are you going to do when you finish high school? Will you go to college there or come back to England?"

"I want to come back to England," Sam said with total determination. "I just have to convince my folks that it's safe for me to do so. They think that I'll get murdered if I come back."

"Who you talking to, Sam?" I then heard another voice say.

"Joe, one of my friends from St Christopher's," Sam replied, slightly off the phone.

"Are you going to be long? I just want to call the others about tonight."

"Not much longer now I know I've got the right number."

"Cool."

"Sorry, Joe, that was Cody," Sam said, returning to speaking to me. "He's home for a bit and has a couple of his army friends over."

"No problem," I said. "There's someone here waiting anxiously to get on the phone, too; one of the first years whose parents didn't come to Sports Day and so he's not been able to go home."

"Maybe he's been gated," Sam said.

"Perhaps," I said, glancing out of the box towards the boy. "He sure looks miserable enough."

"Hey, maybe we should all try and go to university in London?" Sam then suggested.

"That would be cool," I said. "Your parents might feel better about it, too, knowing there were people there that you knew."

"They probably would be. I'll suggest it to them. I'd better go, Joe. Cody is quite keen for me to get off the phone."

"Sure thing. Don't be a stranger," I said.

"You have my number and address, so you can call or write me, too."

"Cool. Good to hear from you, Sam. Thanks for calling."

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So you’re definitely leaving us?” Mr Finn wanted to know, at the start of what would likely be my last session with him.

“I will be, yes,” I said.

“Well, that’s a shame.”

“Do you think the school will still be open next term?” I asked.

“Well, I hope so,” Mr Finn said, looking a little affronted by my somewhat direct question. “We have to think about the pupils here, and I have to consider my own job.”

It was something that had completely slipped my mind. I had never considered what the consequences of the school shutting might have on the staff working there.

“Have you given any further thought to what you want to do as a career?” Mr Finn asked. “You’re still not keen on following in your parents’ footsteps and going into pharmaceuticals?”

“No. I was thinking about something to do with economics and finance. I got the idea from Carson Young, who wants to go and work in the City.”

“I see,” Mr Finn began to smile. “Fancies himself as a high-earning trader, who pulls in a few million every year and lives around the Stockbroker Belt, eh?”

“Ha, yes,” I chuckled. “Exactly that, in fact.”

“It’s hard work, Joe; I won’t lie to you,” Mr Finn said. “There have been quite a few boys from the school who have headed that way in the past, and very few of them stayed the course. Many quit within the first two or three years. It’s a lot to undertake when you’re fresh out of university.”

Exactly what my mother had said to me. There would be a ring of truth there, for sure. “I’ll see how it goes,” I said.

“Anything else you think you might like to do? Let’s not assume that you will automatically find work there. I’m not saying that you won’t, but you should at least keep an open mind and explore as many options as you can.”

“I ... um ...” I wasn’t sure, to be honest. Did anyone really know what they wanted to be when they left school, or were careers something that most people just sort of fell in to? Sure, when I was younger I had entertained dreams of becoming a doctor, a vet, an astronaut, a fireman. Then, as I had grown older, I had been forced to become a little more realistic and appreciate that I couldn’t simply drive over to NASA and expect them to pop me in a space shuttle and send me off to the moon, to work on the base they were building there. The truth of the matter was that I had never really had a clear idea of where I wanted to be in the long term.

“Have you thought of perhaps studying engineering or something like law?” Mr Finn suggested.

“I don’t think I’ve got the patience for something like law,” I said. “I’m not fond of writing essays, and I imagine that it’s a bit like that when you have to argue cases and everything. Engineering ... It’s not something that I’m particularly interested in. I like gadgets and that, but I wouldn’t be able to build or design one.”

“Well okay, don’t wait too long to come to a decision. It will be important at the end of the day that you choose the appropriate A-Levels, to steer you in the right direction.”

I nodded in understanding. It was the way things went at the end of the day – GCSEs to determine your A-Levels, A-Levels to determine your university degree, your degree to more or less determine your career choice.

“If you’re keen on studying maths and economics, then another career choice could be accountancy,” Mr Finn said. “But if you’re still unsure, then there are career talks that the sixth formers are encouraged to attend. Third years are permitted from time to time, if there is space. If you hear of one happening that you think might be of interest, then do go along.”

“Good point,” I said. “I will do.”

“Now, how is your revision going? We both already know that your geography classes have ended. Is that the same for all your other classes?”

“Yes, we’re either revising and doing tests in class, or we’re finishing off our coursework.”

“Have you finished all yours?”

“I have. Ages ago,” I smiled, feeling satisfied that I was able to tell him that.

“Excellent,” Mr Finn said, looking suitably impressed. “That means that all you need to do now is pass your exams,” he chuckled.

“Yes, that’s all!” I chuckled along with him.

“Have you been revising off past papers at all?” Mr Finn asked. “Or are you just using your notes?”

“Mainly just my notes for the moment,” I said. “Some of the teachers won’t let us keep the past papers, such as science, because the questions hardly ever change.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Past papers are good for revising from. Still, at least if you know that it doesn’t change, and you did okay in your mocks, so you should be fine on the actual day.” He then picked his satchel up off the floor and began to rummage around inside, producing a booklet which he handed to me. “That’s the geography paper that you were given for your mocks,” he said. “If you base your revision around that, it will probably help you with your final exam.”

“Oh, thank you, sir.”

“No problem, Joe,” Mr Finn said with another smile. “Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

I thought for a moment, then shook my head.

“Very well. In that case I think we’re all done here. I like these sessions with you, Joe, they’re always very easy and straightforward.”

“No worries,” I said, and took the paper back to my dormitory.

*

“What work have you got to do tonight?” I asked Baz one evening, as we walked along together.

It was a pleasant night, warm and light, and so we had decided to go for a walk around the grounds together following dinner, rather than go straight back to Butcher. With classes having ended, I knew I should start drawing up a revision timetable. Most of the others in my year seemed to be dithering somewhat, exploiting the free time we all had. I was attempting to remain focused and not procrastinate too much, even though creating a revision timetable was exactly that.

“No work left to do,” Baz said happily.

“Going to revise?”

“Nah,” he said. “We’ve got ages until the exams start.”

“Well, no, we’ve got about six weeks.”

“That’s ages,” Baz said. “I think I’m just going to watch TV on my Game Gear, during prep.”

“I forgot you had one of those. Is the reception any good?”

“Most days. Sometimes I can’t get anything on it at all, though. Shhhh,” he then added, as he saw two teachers walking along together ahead of us.

One was Mr Rod, the housemaster of Martin. The other I couldn’t quite place. I had seen the man before though, I was sure. Perhaps he was a sixth form tutor. While video game machines were permitted by the school, as long as they didn’t interfere with our studies, televisions of any sort were banned. Baz would have his Game Gear permanently confiscated if it was discovered that it doubled as one. The teachers had ears for talk of the sort of illegal equipment that Baz possessed.

The man I thought I recognised then turned around. “Oh, hello again,” he said.

I said nothing, unsure if it was me that had been spoken to, while trying to work out why the man’s face looked so familiar.

“It’s Adrian Willis,” the man said as I continued to look blankly at him. “We met in church, oh, sometime last term?”

“Ah, Adrian,” I said, now remembering the man. “Good to see you again.” Though he had recognised me, Adrian still had a searching expression on his face as he shook my hand. “It’s Joe,” I said.

“That’s it,” Adrian said. “I knew it started with a J. Terribly sorry. It takes me a couple of occasions to remember names these days. I never used to have the problem until recently. That’s what happens when you spend all your days working at home on your own, I guess. Are you boys off to prep?”

“I am, yes. Just got to get a revision timetable and all that sorted out. I’ve got my GCSEs coming up in about six weeks or so. Are you helping out with something to do with the church? Evening service?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if one actually happened.

“No,” Adrian said. “I’m actually here to give a career talk this evening. Are third years still allowed to come to the career talks?” he asked, looking at Mr Rod.

“Sometimes,” the housemaster said. “It depends on how much work they have to do and how much room there is. It’s mostly for the sixth formers.”

“We don’t have any coursework left to do,” I said.

Adrian looked back at Mr Rod, who considered it for a moment, before okaying our attendance.

“If there’s space,” Mr Rod reiterated. “Otherwise, you’re to go back to your dorms for prep as normal.”

“Interested in a career as a freelance journalist?” Adrian smiled at Baz and I.

I hadn’t considered it at all if I were being honest with myself. Since talking to Mr Finn and weighing everything up, I now had my heart set on becoming a multimillionaire trader, with a big house, two Ferraris in the garage, and some ex-model for a wife. But Mr Finn did raise a good point – a back-up plan wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Sure,” I said. “No harm is there? Want to come?” I asked Baz.

“I’m crap at English,” Baz said.

“So are a lot of the people who work in journalism,” Adrian chuckled.

Baz mulled it over for a moment and then agreed to join me. The four of us made our way to the classroom block.

*

“There’s room,” Mr Rod said as Baz and I waited in the corridor. “Come in, but sit at the back.”

We walked into the classroom, quite surprised to see just how few had bothered to turn up to Adrian’s talk. Only seven sixth formers occupied desks at the front. One was Wayland Hutchings, from my athletics sessions. I had learned his name over subsequent meetings, but still didn’t know much about him. Fantasy and comic book obsessed, the teachers had suggested he would end up being a drifter for the rest of his life, as he seemed to live in a dream world.

“Are we all here?” Adrian asked after a time.

“I think we’ve got everyone that is going to show up,” Mr Rod said, with a trace of apology in his voice.

“Not to worry,” Adrian said. “I’ll start by introducing myself. My name is Adrian Willis. I have worked as a freelance journalist for the past twelve years. I was actually schooled here, up until the age of eighteen, when I decided that I wanted to take control of my own future and be my own boss.”

That wasn’t true, I knew. He had been expelled for possessing and supply drugs. I said nothing and continued to sit in silence as the man spoke.

“I chose to freelance, as there are aspects of the job that appealed to me – being able to work from home, choose when to work and how much to do, as well as get involved in a number of different subjects. There is also a great social aspect to the work, as it can involve meeting a lot of your clients in person, most of which will happen over a pint. Or six,” he chuckled, most of the classroom joining in.

“So, what can I tell you about becoming a journalist?” Adrian continued. “Assuming that basic spelling, grammar and punctuation are not difficult for you, then you’re already on your way. The

next thing to do is to read and write a *lot*! That's probably one of the most, if not *the* most, important aspect of making it. You need to read a lot of published works to find out how to present a story, how they style content, and how they attribute and research facts.

"To begin with, you need to write a lot so you can hone your own skills. I'll not lie to you, when you first start out your writing will be of the most basic and perhaps even substandard nature. I have retained articles that I wrote many years ago that I find embarrassing to read today. Still, it was a start, and my skills have improved considerably since. To improve your writing, you should write every day, even if you do nothing with it but throw it away. You should probably aim for around two to three thousand words a day—"

Gasps from everyone in the room cut Adrian off. That was a lot of words! I looked at Baz, who appeared equally stunned. That was my GCSE R.E. essay that I had spent over a month writing in one day! How was that possible?

"That's a lot to write," one of the sixth formers echoed.

"It sounds like a lot, but it's not," Adrian said. "You can write two thousand words in under two hours once you've practised enough."

"How?" another asked incredulously.

"A computer helps," Adrian smiled. "I don't write by hand a lot any more, as it's simply not fast enough. The computer can help with your spelling, and some of the newer ones can even help sort out your grammar."

"Really? *Grammar*?" another sixth former said.

"It's true," Mr Rod said. "Father John has got a computer that can do it. It came with lots of desktop publishing software that he uses to write all the church bulletins and orders of service."

"How much did it cost?"

"At a guess, over two thousand pounds."

"Two thousand pounds?" another of the six formers said. There were a lot of big numbers being thrown about tonight.

"I can well imagine that it did," Adrian said. "But, no, the key to success is to keep reading and writing."

He went on to talk a lot more about his experiences, examples of recent work he had undertaken, and the time that went into the career of freelance journalism.

However, I was ashamed to say that Adrian's presentation had totally put me off the idea of becoming one myself. It sounded as if you were always working, always looking for leads and stories, and needing to be on the go twenty-four seven. Sure, you could be control of your own time, but it sounded like there was a great deal more to it than that. I didn't want that sort of life. I would prefer to go into an office, do the job, come home and forget about it. The way Adrian had described his life sounded like there was never any getting away from it, even on weekends.

"Questions?" Adrian eventually asked.

Wayland Hutchings raised his hand. "I want to become a writer when I finish my A-Levels.

Would it be better for me to get a job in journalism, instead of going to university?"

"Fiction or non-fiction?" Adrian asked.

"Fiction. I want to write novels."

I saw poorly concealed grins from some of the other boys in the class. Evidently, Wayland was a source of ridicule for some. He ignored them as best he could, focusing on Adrian.

"I don't know a lot about writing novels," Adrian said, "but I do have a couple of friends who do it. They're full-time writers now, after five or six years of producing novels, and have managed to pack in the day job. From what I gather, the same is true of novel writing as it is with becoming a freelance journalist – read lots and write lots. Join writers' groups and attend conventions whenever you can. Networking can play as big a part in your search for a book deal as your writing skills do themselves.

"As for skipping university, I wouldn't do that. A degree is still a degree, and you can work on newspaper projects and the like at university, to enable you to hone your skills. Skipping higher education might allow you to gain an income and professional experience sooner, but remember that you will be going to job interviews with no qualifications and only your own spare-time work to show. But as far as novel writing is concerned, do read a lot of the authors that are selling well, study the market and do what you can to emulate their style and approach."

"A bit hard to read a lot when the teachers keep confiscating my books," Wayland muttered.

"I don't know anything about that matter," Mr Rod said in response to a glance from Adrian. "But if your housemaster thinks that the material is not appropriate or is causing you to fall behind with your studies, then they have a right to take it away from you."

"Reading is still reading, Edmund," Adrian said, using Mr Rod's first name. "It's subjective in nature, and you can't please everyone. Some will swear by literally fiction, refusing to read anything but *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Animal Farm*, *1984*, and *The Lord of the Flies*, while others won't go anywhere near them and will prefer Tolkien, Iain Banks, Terry Pratchett, Michael Crichton, and Patricia Cornwell."

"*Watchmen*'s considered literally fiction by some," Wayland said.

"That's a *comic*, Hutchings!" one of the sixth formers spat. The others laughed.

Wayland looked rather abashed by the attack, but said nothing. I could see some determination in his eyes to push on to succeed. I only wondered if he would have the ability to do so.

"The best way to become a writer is simply to write," Adrian summarised. "And if that doesn't work, keep doing it. No, it doesn't make sense, but that's just the way it happens."

There was bafflement in the room at the statement, but I could understand where he was coming from. No one is good at anything when they first start, but with enough practice, perseverance and due diligence, they will become better, and hopefully at some point, great. I raised my hand.

"Yes," Adrian said.

"You said that in the first few years of doing it, freelancing won't be your only source of income. What did you do?" I asked partly out of curiosity of the career itself, but also to know what

Adrian had done with his life after his expulsion from the school (a fact that I would still keep to myself).

“I applied for work at local newspapers and publications, and was fortunate enough to get a job offer quite quickly. I stayed for a number of years, improving my skills and making contacts, before then applying for higher-paying work with more substantial newspapers. After a few more years, I then decided to become a freelancer.”

“And you didn’t go to university?”

“No.”

“Did that affect your applications at all?”

“Not that I was aware,” Adrian said. “But this was over twenty years ago, and competition for jobs wasn’t quite what it is today,” he added with a sideways glance at Wayland. “I also didn’t apply for major publications to begin with. Start small, and you’ll get where you want to go.”

“Twenty years?” one of the sixth formers asked.

“Eight in various newspapers and publications, the rest as a freelancer,” Adrian clarified. “Sorry if that got a little confusing. I didn’t become a freelancer immediately.”

“Any more questions?” Mr Rod asked as silence descended on the classroom.

A few more followed, Wayland attempting to find out more and ignoring the slings and arrows of his peers. Eventually, the questions stopped coming, and Mr Rod wrapped things up, thanking Adrian and giving him a short round of applause for his time.

*

“What do you normally do in the evenings here?” Adrian wanted to know, as Baz and I walked him to his car. It was a good deal more modest than I had been expecting. I didn’t know why, but I thought it would be a lot flashier than it was. Maybe it was because I was so used to seeing what most parents turned up in when they came to collect their sons and was now seeing what real people drove.

“In the evenings? Not a lot,” I said. “Usually just hangout.”

“Yeah,” Baz nodded. “We’ll probably just sit around in the mezzanine or go to the TV room or something. Or just play video games or sit about our dorms or something.”

“Ah, not to worry,” Adrian said. “Next term, you’ll be able to make use of the Sixth Form Common Room.”

“Not us,” I said. “We’re both leaving at the end of this term.”

“Really? Why?”

“A number of reasons,” I said dismissively. “It would take a long time to explain.”

“Hmm,” Adrian said, taking a glance about. “Why don’t you tell me over a pint of beer?”

“Pardon?” I said, thinking that my ears had just deceived me.

“Tell me over a drink,” Adrian repeated.

“Um ... we’re sixteen,” I said, looking at Baz. “We can’t drink.”

“Not unless I buy it and no one finds out,” Adrian said. “Want to come to the White Horse with me for one? I’m not quite ready to go home yet, and I fancy a drink before I do. Besides, I’m only going to end up sitting in front of the TV, watching a repeat of *Eldorado*.”

I felt for him in that. “We probably won’t be allowed in,” I said.

“They still serve the sixth formers, don’t they?”

“They do, yes. By special agreement.”

“Then you’re now both in the lower sixth. They won’t ask too many questions if I’m with you, as they’ll just think I’m a teacher or something. Agreed?”

“Sure,” I said, and made to open the passenger door of his car.

“Not here!” Adrian said. “I’ll meet you outside the school, a little down the road from the main gates.”

“We can’t get out,” Baz said. “The gates are always locked up after six every night.”

I detected something in Baz’s voice. He was making excuses not to go and was sounding a little uncertain about all of this. I wasn’t sure there was anything to worry about. I held my composure.

“When I was here, there was a side gate in one of those stumpy little lookout towers, a little way each side of the main gate. Is it still there?” Adrian asked.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” I said, after pausing to think for a moment. “It’s a bit overgrown there now, so I don’t think it’s ever locked. We can go out through there.”

“Good, you do that and I’ll see you in ten minutes,” Adrian said.

“Got it,” I said.

“Um ... are you sure this is a good idea?” Baz asked as we started towards the gates.

“We’ll only get in a little trouble if we’re caught,” I said. “The worst that will happen is that we’ll be gated. We won’t get rusticated or anything. They won’t put us on the *Murga List* either, not this close to doing our GCSEs. Grades first, remember?”

“No, I mean going with *him!*” Baz said.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s invited us to get in his car!” Baz said, his pace slowing. “This is a really stupid idea.”

“Why? He used to come here, he’s just given a speech on what he does for a living, and now he’s invited us to go to the pub with him. He also still comes to church. I’ve seen him about a couple of times. Don’t panic.” Though despite my words, I could understand where Baz was coming from. It would probably be wise to let someone know where we were going, but that could mean we would be denied a drink of beer.

“I don’t think we should go,” Baz stopped.

“Oh, come on, Baz,” I said. “Live a little. It’s only five minutes down the road in a car, twenty minutes walking. If anything bad happens, we’ll just run back, and that’ll take us about ten minutes.”

Baz considered it for a moment. I wondered as to the images in his head. Was he imagining us

getting into Adrian's car, being driven to some obscure woodland, strangled and then chopped up? Adrian wouldn't harm us; he had absolutely no reason to. The idea was absolutely preposterous.

"Okay," Baz eventually agreed. "But if he decides to attack us, I'm letting you get stabbed first, so I can get away."

"Sure," I said, rolling my eyes.

*

We slipped through the lookout tower gate, finding it even more overgrown than I had expected. Though it was still light, not yet nine p.m., we were sure that the security patrol guarding the main gates hadn't seen us.

We met Adrian a little way down the road and he drove us to the White Horse, stating that it would be a good idea for us to sit in the beer garden, out the back, where we would be a little less conspicuous. He also suggested that we remove our ties, to make us look less like the under-aged schoolboys we were. Adrian ordered three pints of beer, two pints of lemonade, and a packet of peanuts. The bartender looked suspiciously at Baz and I for a moment, before Adrian began to wax about career paths after our A-Levels the next year and the need to knuckle down in the upper sixth. He did a good job of pretending to actually be a tutor, and so the barman assumed everything was normal. He didn't even ask for any proof of age. I would have to remember that one. Everything paid for, we settled down to make general conversation about the school, our plans for leaving, our reasons for it, and what we wanted to do in the future.

"You're not overly fond of the school, are you?" I asked Adrian. It was something that I had picked up on as he had spoken to us. He never seemed to be able to speak of something at St Christopher's without adding something negative.

"Not since my expulsion, no," Adrian said. "Excuse me," he then said, getting up. "I need the toilet."

"I feel sorry for him," I said after Adrian had disappeared inside.

"Why? It was his own fault," Baz said. "He was dealing drugs, after all."

"They never actually proved that, though. They only found it in his room. I think he was set up by someone."

"Who, though?"

I shrugged. I couldn't say for certain. "Someone who was jealous of him, maybe?"

"But didn't he say he smoked it himself?"

"Yeah, but not at the school. They only found out he did when they gave him a urine test. I think someone found out the school was going to do it and so planted it on him. Maybe the actual dealer decided to just use him as a scapegoat."

I took another gulp of beer. I had consumed a little under half of it. Adrian was close to finishing his first. I wondered whether I was drinking slow or he was drinking fast.

“Hmm,” Baz said, remaining sceptical.

I was, too, if I was being honest. Though I felt sorry for him, I was struggling to be totally sympathetic. Adrian Willis smoked cannabis, which was illegal. Whether he was doing it during term time or not made little difference to school policy. Immediate expulsion was the punishment for doing such a thing.

“OI!”

I jumped as the voice bellowed across the beer garden. I turned in its direction, the other patrons swivelling on their benches to see what was going on. My heart sank. It was Michael Lawrence, the prefect that had initially been supervising my *Murga* before Father Thomas had intervened, the same day we had discovered Craig Priest’s body in the snow. Lawrence was glaring at Baz and I with utter hatred, our presence at the White Horse clearly offending him. Lawrence was best friends with Zackery Goodman, the head boy. I knew that he wouldn’t be far behind.

“Oh, bollocks,” Baz said under his breath.

I agreed.

“What the fuck are you two doing here?” Lawrence called from across the garden, still standing where he had been when he spotted us.

I felt the colour drain from my face as people turned towards us. We were in deep trouble now. The sixth formers didn’t often come down to the White Horse – it was a long way to go for a drink, and it was apparently more expensive than drinking in the Common Room. Just our luck they would choose tonight to do so. I moved to speak, to concoct some explanation for what we were doing.

“Hey, what’s going on, Mike? Why are you shouting?” a voice came from behind Lawrence.

Too late. The head boy had just put in his appearance.

“Oi, what the hell are you two doing?” Goodman said, marching immediately over to us.

“You’re not allowed to be in here!”

Our pints of beer were in front of us, but so were our pints of lemonade. Unfortunately, where the beers were half full, the lemonades were still quite fresh, Baz and I only having sipped lightly at them. That we weren’t drinking alcohol and were in here for a soft drink was never going to fly with Goodman.

“We ... we ...” I started. The excuses and explanations escaped me.

“Right, come on, you can’t be here,” Goodman said, grabbing hold of my arm and pulling me up. “You’re going back to your house immediately, and I’m going to report this to Father Benedict and your housemasters.”

“We’re in the same house,” Baz quipped.

“Shut up, you arrogant fuck!” Lawrence said, coming over to assist with our humiliation of being frogmarched out the pub. “You’re in shit loads of trouble! And which twat bought you those?” he asked, indicating the beers.

“This twat did,” Adrian said from behind him. He had returned with a glass of what was either

Coke or Pepsi.

The two sixth formers whirled around, for a moment releasing their grips on Baz and I. They then tightened again.

“Who the fuck are you?” Lawrence demanded.

“I beg your pardon?” Adrian said.

The head boy then released me and instead grabbed Lawrence, quickly taking him aside, wrestling Lawrence’s grip from Baz as he did so.

“What are you doing?” I heard Goodman ask when they thought he and Lawrence were out of earshot.

“Well, those little shits shouldn’t be here,” Lawrence said, not speaking quite as softly as Goodman had, the rage caused by our presence clearly elevating the level of his voice.

“Yes, but you can’t speak to someone like that! He could complain to the school. Let me handle this.” Goodman returned to our table. “I’m very sorry,” he said to Adrian. “Mike has just had a very stressful day with his schoolwork.”

“Is that the excuses you use these days?” Adrian said, taking his seat once more and returning to his pint. “If this is what you call stress, wait until you start your first job.”

“Sorry, but how do you know these two?” Goodman wanted to know.

“My name is Adrian Willis,” Adrian said. “I’ve just done the career talk on freelance journalism, that Joe and Barry attended. As they were so polite to me, helping me out with getting dinner, escorting me to and from the classrooms, and walking me back to my car, I asked them if they would like to join me for a drink in the pub and talk about their plans for the future. They said yes, so I drove them down here.”

I grinned along with Baz. That would show them.

“You’re not a relative?” Lawrence asked. He had returned to the table, still looking offended that we had invaded what he clearly considered to be *his pub*.

“No, I’m not,” Adrian said, though without a trace of wrongdoing.

Lawrence’s face suddenly split into a grin. “You got into a car with a stranger? What kind of fucking idiots are you?” he asked of Baz and I. He looked at Goodman. “We should call Father Benedict and get him to drive someone down here to get these idiots back to the school. In fact, I’m going to go and call a taxi. The duty master can pay.”

“I’m not a stranger,” Adrian said, his patience with the sixth formers starting to wear thin. “I’m actually an old boy.”

“Should’ve known better, then,” Lawrence said.

At that, Adrian flew up from the table and walked in front of Lawrence, preventing his exit from the beer garden. “Yes, clearly having attended St Christopher’s myself I should be familiar with all the rules. In fact, it might therefore be appropriate for me to let them know that I saw you smoking on your way down here.”

“Eh? I don’t smoke,” Lawrence said, glancing uneasily to Goodman.

“Not tobacco at any rate,” Adrian said, lowering his voice.

The colour suddenly drained from Lawrence’s face.

“It was a herbal cig—”

“Don’t. Lie,” Adrian almost snarled, cutting him off. He paused between the two words for effect. “Do you think that I’m that stupid that I don’t know the difference between marijuana and a herbal cigarette? I used to smoke weed for years myself. It’s not a smell you quickly forget.”

Lawrence looked stunned, and he glanced to Goodman for help.

“You as well,” Adrian said to Goodman.

The head boy said nothing in response. They had clearly been caught red-handed. *Et tu, Brute?* I had always thought that Goodman was squeaky clean. I wondered just how many of the party that had made their way down here had taken a drag on that spliff.

“What’s going on?”

I saw that three other sixth formers had appeared – Simon Ross, Daniel Gibbs and John Howard, all of Tudor House, carrying five pints of beer between them. They must have gone to the bar to buy the drinks, while Lawrence and Goodman looked for seats. They caught the sight of Baz and I and moved to say something when Goodman intercepted them.

“Come on,” he said, herding them all away. “We’re going to drink inside.”

“But—” one started, still staring in my direction.

“No, let’s go. Come on,” Goodman added to Lawrence, his tone making it clear that he didn’t want to have to tell any of them again.

Adrian returned to his seat once the boys had departed, ignoring the questioning eyes from the other patrons, who had watched the entire sequence in silence. We had created quite a scene here tonight. Word might well get back to the school no matter what happened. I considered that one of the more law-abiding or interfering drinkers might call the school the next day and report the possible misuse of drugs. St Christopher’s really didn’t need any more trouble.

“There’s yet another fucking thing I hate about that school,” Adrian said. “Most of the boys have no respect for anyone at all these days.”

I saw that his hands were shaking, as if the confrontation had rattled him somewhat. He took a deep gulp of beer. His mouth was maybe a little dry. It was the first time I had heard Adrian swear and mean it. Admittedly, I had only met him on one other occasion, but I got the impression that he didn’t swear a great deal. He had done so in the church as I was serving coffee and biscuits, but clearly then only for comedic value.

“They’re just wankers,” I said. “They sometimes talk to the teachers that way.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Adrian said. “Let me guess – richer than average parents, and all with straight As, even though they don’t seem to possess the intellect? A small donation to the school and your grades suddenly improve dramatically.”

Baz and I looked at each other, not quite sure. Aside from Goodman, none of those here tonight were Oxbridge students to our knowledge. But, yes, they were said to be projected very good final

grades in their A-Levels.

“I hate Goodman,” Baz said, picking up his pint and taking a good gulp of the beer. “Why they made him the head boy is beyond me.” He took a second.

“As I said,” Adrian said, finishing his pint, “supposed high flyers. It makes them think that they’re invincible, and that they can get away with anything. You’re right to leave; you’ll find the real world a good deal more satisfying than the life you’ve had here.”

We changed the subject, Baz and I finishing our beers and turning to the lemonade to dilute the alcohol we had had. I could already feel it going to my head. A pint was a lot to drink, more than I had first thought. How some people did ten in a night, I would never know.

We spoke about what we wanted to do once we left – learning to drive, meeting girls, returning to living with our parents, going to nightclubs, all the stuff we imagined that happened to normal sixth formers. Adrian wasn’t quite as upbeat as he had been, however, and he seemed happy to get away from the pub as soon as he had finished his cola and we were done with our lemonades.

“I’ll give you a lift back,” Adrian said, heading towards his car.

“It’s okay,” I said. “We’ll walk.”

“Best not to,” Adrian said, looking back towards the entrance of the pub. “They might catch up with you on the lane. Wouldn’t be a good idea to risk it if they’ve had a few.”

True. It wasn’t as if either Baz or I were short for our age, far from it. There would be five of them, though; five drunk and potentially angry eighteen-year-olds. That wasn’t worth risking at all.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Adrian said after we had gotten in the car and he had started the engine. “It just brings back bad memories.”

“Did you go through a similar thing yourself?” Baz asked.

“Yes,” Adrian said. “And it ruined my life.”

We drove back to the school in silence.

*

I was in bed, reading *Congo* by Michael Crichton, with my lamp on. It was a little difficult to concentrate on what was happening after the beer, and I realised that my mind was wandering and that I had reached the end of the page without a clue of what I had just read. I decided that I should reset my bookmark, set the novel aside and come back to it tomorrow.

Simmons still had his light on, apparently studying. He hadn’t said anything about my absence for the past few hours, even though I had also missed evening prayers. He must have been quite worried about his exams. Maybe six weeks wasn’t quite as long as I had thought. The second year boys were whispering to one another, gossiping and spreading rumours about one of the boys in another of the houses, who had apparently been caught masturbating in the showers, earlier on in the week. Of all the places to do that.

I switched my own light off and settled down, when I heard a voice out in the corridor. For

some reason it sounded like it was meant for me, though I couldn't quite be certain why. I then heard the door of the dormitory opposite open and caught the sound of my own name being called. Shit. Had one of the teachers been tipped off about Baz and I taking a trip to the White Horse? I had returned to the school fine, getting back through the gates without raising suspicion or being caught by security (bit lax, I thought), and no one had questioned my sobriety in the least. A couple of voices responded from next door, and the other dorm's door closed. Mine opened. A figure entered and walked to Simmons' end of the dorm.

"Crosthwaite?"

It was Michael Lawrence! What was he doing here? This wasn't even his house, he was from Enfield! The jolt of the sixth formers' arrival was enough to sober me as if I had just been given some kind of miracle cure.

"Oh, alright, Ant? Sorry, I thought Crosthwaite was in here?"

"Over that side," Simmons said.

Lawrence came over to me, still visible by Simmons' lamplight. "Oi, Crosthwaite, are you awake?" he asked.

"Yep," I said.

"Can I have a word?"

I somewhat reluctantly clambered out of bed and followed him out into the corridor, ignoring the eyes of the second year boys as I did so. We walked out through a set of double doors, leading into the main school. Many of the lights were still on, but it was eerily quiet, even if it was only just past ten at night.

"Are we cool?" Lawrence asked. His breathing was a little taut. He looked a little tense, too.

"What?"

"I said, are we cool? About what happened tonight with the whole," he mimed smoking a cigarette, "I mean."

Interesting. "Sure," I said, folding my arms.

"Good. You've not told anyone?"

"No."

"Good, good," Lawrence nodded. His expression then darkened. "Because I'll tell you what – if you do, then you might find yourself having the shit kicked out of you again."

"Pardon?"

"I said, if you tell anyone about what happened, then I'm going to beat the shit out of you," Lawrence said, his voice still quite tense.

"Ha! No, you won't," I heard a voice say. I was quite surprised to discover that it had been my own, and that I was also grinning.

"What?" Lawrence said, his face falling.

"I said, no, you won't," I repeated, more assertively this time. "I have to wonder – you and what army? Because three tried last term and failed. So..?" I shrugged and left the question dangling. I

wondered vaguely how and when I had become so ballsy. Was it perhaps now that I knew that I was leaving St Christopher's and wouldn't see people like Lawrence again that I no longer cared? Or maybe it was the beer? It did apparently give you extra confidence.

Lawrence opened his mouth to speak. I beat him to it.

"Because let's be honest – if you attack me, then you'll be rusticated or expelled for certain, and I'll make sure of that. You don't need that just before you do your A-Levels. Then you'll not be able to get into university and will end up doing some shitty, low-paid job after you leave here, and every morning you'll think back to that moment you decided to attack me and wish you could go back in time and undo it. Then you'll shove on your black gloves and get back to scrubbing the vomit out of some piss-encrusted toilet."

Lawrence stared open-mouthed at me. "You little fucking shit!"

I laughed. "You're, what, two inches taller than me?"

"Fuck off, you cunt!"

I mimed smoking a cigarette. "I always thought that stuff was meant to mellow you out. You're acting like a tightly wound spring. Maybe you should try knocking one out, instead."

Lawrence said nothing to that and only stood looking at me with a face like a smacked arse.

"Look, I'm going to bed, okay?" I said, walking around him. "I'm not going to tell anyone what you may or may not have been smoking, because I frankly don't care. And if anyone finds out, it won't have come from me, got it?"

"Did you kill Craig?"

"What?" I said, pausing as I reached for the door handle back to Butcher.

"Did you kill Craig? Craig Priest, I mean."

I looked back around at him, seeing him completely serious. His face might have been twisted in hate towards me, but his eyes were betraying him. He actually looked a little afraid of me at that point, as if I was the one who had somehow pulled Priest from his bed and dragged him down to the main drive of the school, before slitting his throat. Was this guy serious?

"No," I said, incredulously.

"Really?"

"Yes, really," I scowled at him. "Now fuck off and don't get me out of bed again," I added, pulling open the door and starting back to Butcher. Why did the idiot feel the need to ask me twice? Did he think I was lying? Or perhaps he considered that I might have somehow conveniently forgotten the deed. Stupid. That wasn't something you would forget doing.

Mud-caked slippers. I shook that thought from my head.

I returned to my dorm, getting back into bed and fobbing off Simmons' enquiries as to what Lawrence had wanted me for, telling him that the sixth former merely wanted me to type up an essay for him, in exchange for a few quid.

I lay there then in bed, feeling my heart thumping away. I couldn't believe I had spoken to Lawrence that way. It was completely out of character for me. Was it really because I was leaving

and didn't care, or was it the alcohol? Even so, I wondered if I had overstepped the mark. Could I expect a visit from Lawrence, Goodman, and a few of his friends in the next ten minutes? Maybe they would bring some cricket bats, just to make sure they broke as many bones as possible.

I waited and waited. Simmons soon switched off his light and growled at the second years to shut up. I next heard the seven-thirty morning school bell ring, telling us to get out of bed, and realised that I had fallen asleep. No visit from Lawrence had followed. My head hurt a little, but I knew that was due to the beer and not for any other reason.

Coward, I thought.

*

As fate would have it, Lawrence was expelled the very next week, following a random drugs test that the school sprung on the unsuspecting sixth formers. I attracted looks of hate from the head boy the day after it was announced Lawrence had been sent home for being in the possession of illegal drugs on school grounds.

"What did you say?" Goodman demanded of me one afternoon when he happened to catch me alone.

"The same thing that I promised him I would," I told him. "Nothing."

Chapter Twenty-Four

I wasn't entirely sure where much of the summer term went. Along with most of the rest of my year, I descended into a routine of getting up, washing, eating breakfast, revising, having lunch, playing sports, having afternoon tea, revising, having dinner, revising, socialising (only a little), revising, and then going to bed. That was how it went, Monday through Saturday. I revised on Sunday, too, Baz, Rory, Marvin, and I testing one another and sharing past exam questions that we had managed to acquire.

Eventually, the GCSE and A-Level exam timetables went up around the school, appearing on Butcher's main notice board and several other notice boards throughout the main school. I borrowed one of them and took it into the school office, requesting that I get a photocopy. Many others followed suit when they saw it pinned to my bookshelf, the times and dates of my exams highlighted in green and orange (the latter representing the subjects that I would find the most taxing).

Simmons grew less and less tolerant of the second years in our dorm, punishing more and more of them with lines and reporting their misbehaviour to Mr Somers on a fairly regular basis. At other times (and if he weren't a part of the Clique), he might have been referred to as a sneak, a dweeb, or one of the many other insults that were common through the school.

"You're going to do those lines," I heard Simmons say to one of the second years one night, who was largely defying his attempts to discipline him.

"Sure, and monkeys might come flying out of my butt," was the response.

"For fuck's sake, will you lot stop quoting *Wayne's World* all the time!"

"Oh, okay. Not."

"Right, if you say that one more time, you're going on the *Murga List*."

"You can't put me on the *List*."

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't. Only a prefect or Mr Somers can do that."

"Do you want me to speak to Mr Somers, then?"

"No."

"Then shut the fuck up and go to sleep."

I heard grumbling coming from the boy as he settled down.

"Guys, seriously, we've got our exams starting next week, so we're trying to get our revision done," I said, opting for an approach that favoured reasoning over threats and abuse. "Everyone in the third year is really stressed right now, and the upper sixth are worse. I think it would be a good idea not to wind anyone up, because the teachers won't take your side if anything happens."

"I don't know why you're so stressed," another boy said. "They're only GCSEs. If it were your A-Levels, I would understand."

"GCSEs aren't that easy," I said.

“I saw one of the papers, and it didn’t look that hard.”

“Believe me, when you’re actually doing them, they feel like the hardest thing in the world. You’ll find out next year. Now, seriously, please go to sleep, otherwise I’ll do as Ant already suggested and report you to Mr Somers. It’s only going to be like this for two weeks, guys. I’m sure you can cope. And then both Ant and I won’t be here, so you can do as you like.”

“All right,” the boys said and fell quiet.

I looked at my timetable. geography first, then English lit, biology, geography (essay questions), chemistry, English lang, physics, history, French, general studies, history (essay questions), and finally R.E. (or R.S. as some were now starting to call it). Despite my personal tutor being one of the subject teachers, I had always found geography a bit of a pain and a bore, so it was nice to get it out of the way early on so I could concentrate on my more difficult subjects. Physics and chemistry were still the two that I was most bothered about. There were so many equations and constants that needed to be remembered in physics, as well as a whole string of symbols and details about polymers, oxides, bonds, melting points, and acids and bases for chemistry. I had scored a B in each during my mocks, and so hoped that the final exam wouldn’t be too much harder. I had largely gotten over my fear of R.E. It was just essay writing and, as long as you presented your arguments correctly, there was no wrong answer.

I glanced at the calendar on my wall. In a fortnight this would all be over, and I would be a free man. There would only be two weeks of term left after that. The school had told me that, following the completion of our exams, we were free to leave or stay around for some practice A-Level classes. Though I was keen to get away from St Christopher’s as soon as possible, I was giving those sample classes some serious consideration.

Economics was one of the subjects on offer, and so I thought it might be worth investigating while I was still here. Of course, whether we were allowed to take the subjects on offer was ultimately at the discretion of the teacher. If they felt that you might struggle with it, or it wasn’t a good fit with the other subjects you might be taking, they could blackball your attempts to enrol. I wouldn’t be taking history, chemistry or French, so I doubted that I would have any problems. I would probably sign up for economics, maths and English, the three subjects that I wanted to study at BSFC. This would help me to ease my way in.

A little while later, Simmons switched off his lamp and got into bed. I followed suit. Four sleeps until D-Day.

*

On the morning of my first exam I made my way down to the assembly hall, along with all the other boys in my year. We had been brought there the previous week by the headmaster, to show us where we would be sitting some of the most important tests of our lives. As had been promised back then, the hall was now filled with a number of small desks and chairs, about five columns and

several rows. There were a lot more than were needed for the third years by my count, and as I waited I saw a handful of sixth formers arriving to join us.

“Would the sixth formers please come to the front,” Mr Finn, one of the invigilators, asked. They shuffled forward, looking every bit as nervous as the rest of us. Mr Finn seated them, starting in alphabetical order and having them sit one behind the other, consuming a little over half of the first column.

“How many of you are sitting the Oxbridge paper?” he asked of the eleven or so sixth formers. Two raised their hands, and he made a mental note before coming forward to the rest of us, still clustered by the door.

“I trust you’ve already been made aware of the seating arrangements?” he asked.

We nodded that we had, but he repeated them anyway. As with the sixth formers, we were to sit one behind the other, in columns, in alphabetical order. I found my place in the first column, and nervously began to unpack my pencil case, scrabbling to grab one of my pencils as it made a daring leap off the desk.

“The exam hasn’t started yet, but from here on, until you leave the assembly hall, there is to be no talking,” Mr Finn said. “If you have any questions, please raise your hand. We’re just waiting for Mr Sutherland to arrive, and then we will start handing out the papers.”

No hands were raised, and Mr Sutherland, the second invigilator, arrived a few minutes later. With both men present, the exam questions and A4 sheets were handed out. DO NOT look at the questions or turn your paper over, we were told. Once all the papers had been handed out, Mr Finn began explaining how the exam would run.

The sixth formers were sitting history, and their exam was to last two hours. Unlike us, they were allowed to look at their exam questions beforehand, but not start. It made me glad not to be doing A-Level History. It sounded as though they were being given extra time to consider some rather complex questions. My own geography exam was set to last for an hour and forty-five minutes. Despite the fact that we would be done fifteen minutes before the sixth formers, we were told that we wouldn’t be allowed to leave, as it could disturb those sitting their A-Levels. Our papers would be collected up, and we would be required to wait out the last fifteen minutes patiently. I hoped that this wouldn’t become a regular occurrence.

After a great deal more preparation and ensuring that we were all comfortable with the set-up, Mr Finn looked at his watch, declared that the time was two minutes past ten, that the exam would finish at two minutes past twelve for the A-Level students, and eleven forty-seven for the GCSE paper, and that we should start.

I opened the booklet, my fingers shaking slightly as I did so, and began thumbing my way through the pages to get a feel for how taxing the more tricky and lengthy parts would be. My eye caught something as I did so, an Ordnance Survey map. It looked familiar. *Very* familiar. I then looked to the question below –

A) What is at grid reference 212452?

B) How high is the highest point at grid reference 2043?

C) What is the relief at grid reference 2244?

D) What do grid references 2145 and 2341 tell us about the past activity in the area? Explain your answer.

I couldn't believe what I had just seen and turned quickly to the final page to the essay questions.

1) Discuss the positive and negative impacts of tourism on an area.

2) Describe the two main types of ecosystem, illustrating your answer with examples.

Was I dreaming? Aside from a handful of differences, this was the very same paper that I had sat during my mocks and used as a revision template ever since. Had Mr Finn been aware of this when he had slipped it to me? I wondered. Had the exam board made an error, or did they make a regular habit of recycling the papers? I looked to the man seated at the front of the hall, but he didn't meet my eye.

I glanced to those seated around me, some nodding quite happily to themselves. Baz met my eye and grinned. We had revised this paper together just a few nights ago. This was going to be terribly easy. I snatched up my pen and commenced writing, answering the multiple choice questions robotically, ticking the boxes that I already knew were correct.

I finished the entire paper after just an hour and twenty minutes, and despite going over it a couple more times to ensure I hadn't missed something, I came to the conclusion that I already had geography in the bag.

*

The next two weeks became a roller coaster of stress and emotion, some of the boys in my year claiming to have breezed through everything they had done, whereas others were on the verge of suffering a mental breakdown over what they described as complete and utter screw ups of all their exams. There wasn't much I could offer in the way of sympathy, other than to say that they had probably done better than they expected, and then invite them to revise some of their other subjects with me.

When it came to chemistry and physics I found myself cursing the rules that I wasn't allowed to bring either a periodic table or a set of equations into the exam room with me to help. Physics was the better of the two, and at the end of the day I wouldn't be sad to put chemistry behind me. While I found the time tinkering about in the labs with Bunsen burners, test tubes and various acids and bases to be amusing, I didn't see the subject figuring very much in my future plans. Those involved

suits, rather than lab coats; a white-collar job, as opposed to the blue. I did manage to remember all the parts of a flower in biology, though, and I was certain that I had managed to get chloroplasts and chlorophyll the correct way around this time.

By the first week of June, I had crossed many subjects off my list of exams. It was very satisfying to see a series of red lines on the photocopy. I was feeling more and more like a free man with each passing day. I wouldn't be totally free until the penultimate week of term or so, after I had completed the A-Level classes, but the end was certainly approaching.

Something unusual then happened towards the end of my exam period. I was in my dorm one afternoon, studying quietly and listening to the radio at a low volume. Simmons was nowhere to be seen. I guessed that he had gone to study with someone else, in another of the houses. My dormitory door opened and in walked my housemaster.

"Ah, Joe," he said. "Good, you're here. Now, how many exams do you still have left?"

"Um ... just one," I said. "R.E."

"When is that?"

"On Thursday."

"Good, come with me. I need you to take a prep."

"Pardon?" I said, completely thrown by what Mr Somers had just said. "A prep? I'm in the third year."

"Yes, I know, but there are no sixth formers available to take it. They're all revising for their A-Levels."

"What about the lower sixth?" I asked, not willing to move. "They don't have any exams."

"The lower sixth and second years are in a meeting with the headmaster this afternoon, about the future of the school," Mr Somers said very matter-of-factly. "Their futures are hanging in the balance on whether or not the school is able to stay open into the next year, and so they are attending a talk on their options."

"Sir, my future is being decided *this week* by my GCSEs," I reminded him.

"You only have one left, Joe, and it's R.E. We both know you'll do very well in that. Now, come on, you can continue to study in prep." He drew back his sleeve and looked at his watch. "You only have to do this for twenty-five minutes."

I could tell that there would be no arguing with the man, and so reluctantly picked up my binder containing all my revision notes, photocopies and essays on R.E., and followed Mr Somers to the classroom block.

Preps were periods set aside by the school during certain times of the day, normally between classes, to enable us to do coursework and other tasks given to us by teachers. The frequency of these periods would vary, but we always had one every night for an hour, after dinner. It was rare for teachers themselves to ever supervise these periods, the duty normally falling to the upper sixth, cascading down to the lower sixth when the A-Levels were in full swing. For a third year to take a prep was extremely rare and unusual.

Third years and sixth formers did their preps in their dormitories and rooms, whereas the first and second year would do them in their classrooms. My own experiences of preps during those years had been mixed. The prep taker themselves could also usually be filed into three distinct categories.

The first was the grumpy bastard, who would, to his credit, run the prep as it probably should be run. The miserable sod would lumber in, slam his work down on the desk at the front, and tell us all to shut and get on with it. We would do so, fearful that the slightest drop of a pen might cause the guy to fly off the handle and into a rage that would result in the entire classroom finding themselves standing at the front gates of the school at five on a Friday morning. We would all be very grateful to hear the school bell ring, signalling the end of the prep and allowing us to get the hell away from that classroom as quickly as possible.

The second was a more passive version of the first. He would come into the classroom and get on with his work, letting a few things like the occasional whispering or short conversations for the most part slide, and occasionally entertain minor gossip and none too personal questions. He would insist on silence when it was needed, or he thought we really should press on. I liked those preps. We could discuss work freely, as well as other school-related things, without fear of getting into trouble.

Then there was the third kind. These guys were something else. They saw themselves as either the king of the classroom or the circus ringmaster, and that those in the prep had been put there for his own personal entertainment. I remember how, on at least one occasion, someone would be made to snort sherbet up their nose through an empty ballpoint pen case, pretending that they were doing a line of cocaine. Other jocular larks would include going to the library and asking the librarian to locate a book with an obscene title; running up and down the classroom corridor, trying not to get caught by a teacher or duty master; or walking into another prep and insulting the sixth former taking it. Although the insult was being sent by their friend, the recipient would be none too impressed and would generally sign the deliverer up to the *Murga List* that Friday. The idea of not shooting the messenger certainly did not apply here.

I knew even before I arrived at the classroom block that I was more of the second type of supervisor.

*

The class that Mr Somers brought me to contained a number of first years. Having now spent two terms at St Christopher's, most had come out of their shells and weren't the scared, meek little boys that I had encountered in the autumn term when I had been a dormitory prefect to them.

"Hurrah, it's Crotty!" they hollered once Mr Somers left me to it. Most of the textbooks and A4 binders were pushed aside, with copies of *FHM* and *GQ* filling their places, as well as an Italian magazine that was basically just a porno dressed up as a fashion publication.

“All right, guys, settle down and do some work,” I said, as I put my R.E. notes down on the desk and kicked away the stop that was holding the door open. “I need to revise for my exam on Thursday.” I had already been warned by my housemaster that I should ensure that the boys in my care were actually going to work, rather than screw about for the next twenty minutes or so. I wanted them to do so, too.

“What are you revising?” one of them asked.

“R.E.,” I said.

“That’s what we’re doing,” another immediately piped up. “Can you help us with ours? We’ve got to write a two-thousand-word essay on nuclear weapons.”

“It’s not hard, guys,” I responded, to exasperated looks.

“It’s two thousand words!” another one said. “That’s about four or five sides of A4. And we’ve got to write it at least twice – a draft and then the actual thing.”

“Do you have one we could look at, to see what you wrote?” another boy asked, his eyes fixed on my vast collection of notes.

“I didn’t do that essay,” I said. “I did one on ethics – utilitarianism and that. Besides,” I added as their faces fell at the prospect of having to scribble out legible facts and arguments that they had come up with themselves, “there is lots of information about it in the library, and in the newspapers practically every day. Start with the facts about who has what, what they are used for—”

“Blowing stuff up,” one chuckled.

“Deterrents is what they’re really for,” I said. “Firing one would be an incredibly stupid thing to do, the fall out and the retaliation and all that. Think about what happened at the end of *War Games*, if you’ve ever seen that. Soon as one country fires a missile, everyone else would fire theirs. It won’t take you as long as you think.”

“I hate R.E.,” one said. “It’s so boring.”

“I like it,” another added. “There’s never a wrong answer, apart from the dates of things. You just need to put across a good argument and you’ll get the marks.”

“Right, guys, do some work,” I said, wanting to now focus on my revision and not spend the next half an hour entertaining eighteen bored thirteen-year-olds. “Seriously, I want to do this. It’s my last exam, and I want to do well.”

Even so, it was clear to me that they knew I wouldn’t punish them if they continued to talk. In fact, they knew that I wasn’t the sort to ever punish anyone for anything, anyway. Punishments such as detonations, lines and the dreaded *Murga* could only be handed out by the upper sixth, and usually only by the prefects. Others had to lodge a complaint with one of the teachers, ideally the housemaster or deputy housemaster, in order for it to go through. I could never be bothered. Just so long as they shut up. To my satisfaction, they did, only occasionally muttering to one another about something. Work-related or not, I didn’t mind, as long as they weren’t disturbing me.

“Hey, Joe?” one of the boys asked, not five minutes later.

“Yes,” I said, attempting to hold back my frustration at the interruption. I could see my chances

of passing R.E. with the grade I was after beginning to slide out of view.

“You found all the bodies, didn’t you?” he said.

“No,” I said. “Just the first.”

“But you were there when they found Craig Priest,” he insisted. His eyes were alight, as though the subject was highly entertaining to him.

“Yeah,” I said.

“What did he look like?”

“Pale,” I said. “Now, get back to ...” I was going to say ‘work’, but he was clearly ogling some bikini-clad lovely in the magazine he had open on his desk. I tried not to stare for too long at the girl’s smooth white skin, slender body, legs, buttocks, breasts, and everything else that my teenage mind was attempting to process all at once. “ ... reading,” I settled on.

“Do you think they’ve gone to Heaven?” someone asked.

“Who?” another answered.

“Craig Priest and the other two from the junior school that were murdered.”

“I don’t see why not. You’re more likely to if you’re a virgin, right?”

“Really?” another boy asked. “In that case, Pete’s sister’s definitely not going there, then.” He turned to the boy named Pete, smirking.

“Fuck off,” Pete responded angrily.

“Doesn’t she work as the admin for your local football team?” another boy pitched in.

“Yeah, and we all know why she picked that job,” yet another chuckled.

“Will you fuck off?” Pete said again. “She’s only been doing it a month.”

“Probably been through all of them already, too,” another boy snorted.

“Well, at least she’s getting some!” Pete shot back, his face red from his anger. “How many people have you had sex with?”

The comment, though quite absurd given that we were all boys in a single-sex boarding school and of the ages thirteen through sixteen, was met with silence. Though one could say that, aside from a small handful of the upper sixth, no one had ever slept with a girl, and none were willing to either admit or liked being reminded of it. Inexperience with women was a grand source of ridicule for a reason I was still unable to total fathom.

“Virgin,” Pete finished.

“Oh, and you’re not?” one of the other boys shot back.

“Guys, be quiet,” I said, seeing the fun-poking in danger of boiling over into either a shouting or throwing match. The boys fell silent, though sadly only for a few seconds. An A in R.E? Maybe a B+ now.

“Are you a virgin, Crotty?”

I saw that all eyes were suddenly on me, and I felt myself flush, despite all attempts not to. I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt very self-conscious, as if I were contaminated or possessed some sort of undesirable quality. I shouldn’t have felt ashamed; I was sixteen at an all-boys

boarding school. It was perfectly understandable that I had never had sex. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time in the past nine months that I had even spoken to a woman that wasn't either my or someone else's mother (seriously, go back and check, you'll see I'm right). Yes, I might be a virgin now, but I would make sure that I wouldn't be by this time next year.

"Do some work," was all I said, pointing to the essay I could see him still attempting to write. He had so far managed to fill only about five lines since the prep had started.

"Okay, seriously," one started.

I suppressed a sigh. A B grade, then. "What?" I snarled, without raising my eyes from my notes.

"What do you think happens when we die? Do you think we go to Heaven and Hell?"

"I ... don't know," I answered honestly, but without much of a care. It wasn't relevant to my own revision.

"Because, do you think that if you're actually just evil and do bad things, like murder or rape people, then you'll go to Hell?"

"Of course not!" Pete's still-angry voice came. "There's no such thing! All that happens is you're either cremated or you rot in the ground. It's bloody obvious there's no such thing as God."

Pete's admission jolted me from my revision, and I looked up from my notes, seeing every face in the classroom turning to him in shock. I had never heard anyone say such a thing while they were at St Christopher's. This was a Catholic boarding school, built on Christian values. It was why we were made to attend church every Sunday, without fail, why we had evening prayers most nights, why the headmaster was a monk, and other little things such as why we were denied meat on Fridays.

"You don't believe in God?" one of the class asked.

"No, of course not," Pete scowled. "You speak to Mr Tyler, and he'll tell you it's just a load of crap created to control people and scare them into doing what you want. People used to worship the Sun, for fuck's sake. Kings, rulers and conquerors invented the idea of a god to make people think that there was someone more powerful than them, and if they didn't do as they were told, really bad things would happen to them and their families. Religion is basically just a load of bollocks. It causes the biggest number of problems in the world and should just be banned. Look at the Middle East, for example. They're always killing each other over there over some mythical being they think lives in the sky, but can't actually prove exists."

Ah, Mr Tyler. The fiercely atheist biology teacher. He made no secret of his utter dislike of anything to do with God or religion. He was a very good teacher, though, and I had to wonder how the man had landed a job at St Christopher's. Perhaps the founders, the school board and even the monks themselves wanted to give the students perspective and arguments. One couldn't fault them for that, I supposed.

The classroom erupted into a small debate, seventeen boys all aiming questions at Pete, wanting to know for how long he had felt this way, as well as his arguments for how the universe and the world came to be.

“Was Jesus not really the Son of God?” they challenged him.

“No,” he said.

“Of course he is,” the others retorted, “the Romans have records of what happened that day and of how he rose from the dead.”

“History can be altered,” Pete put, simply.

“Why are you even at this school?” someone asked him.

“My parents sent me here,” Pete mumbled. He sounded just as fed up with the place as I was.

I became aware of someone moving by the door. It opened and in walked Mr Wilder, slow and steady, letting his presence be felt. “Now, what’s going on here?” he asked with equal calm.

“We’re just having a debate on the existence of God, for their R.E. coursework,” I fielded after silence and blank faces met Mr Wilder’s question.

“I see,” the maths teacher responded. “But I’m not sure all of you are doing R.E., are you?” His eyes strayed to the various magazines that my prep were rapidly attempting to push out of their way and conceal. “I’m trying to teach in the classroom opposite, and I can hear every word you’re saying. Now, you’ve got ten minutes of this period left and I don’t want to hear another word out of you until the bell rings, or you’ll each be punished. Understand?”

I saw his eyes focus on me as he added the incentive, clearly promising that he would find some kind of suitable punishment for me to undertake, GCSEs to sit or not.

“Yes, sir,” both the class and I responded.

“Good,” Mr Wilder said, bending down and reaching for the doorstop. “I think it’s best that we keep the door open from now on, so I can hear that you’re all getting on with your work. And you still have exams to revise for, Joe,” he added with a nod to me.

The remainder of the prep was spent in silence, but at least I got my revision done.

*

R.E. came on a Thursday morning, at ten, and for the final time I trooped down to the assembly hall, along with all the other third years, sensing a mixture of both fear and excitement in the air that this was our final exam.

I opened the paper when I was given the go ahead to do so, turning immediately to the last page so I can decide which essay question I would tackle and allocate enough time for. There were three available.

Write an essay on ONE of the following topics –

1) Discuss why it is socially acceptable to assist in the death of a suffering animal, yet unacceptable to confer the same right to human beings. Is it ever acceptable to end another person’s life? (20 marks)

2) Discuss the belief systems of Christianity and ONE other religion, drawing comparisons between the two. (20 marks)

3) Debate the existence of God, based on both Christian and Atheist viewpoints. (20 marks)

I grinned to myself as I saw the last option. Before the prep I had been forced to take, I might have chosen question one or two, likely making a hash of the former and stumbling my way through the latter, forgetting key points of Judaism. I immediately scribbled down on a spare piece of A4 what I remembered of Peter Dixon's arguments against God and turned back to the front of the paper to start on the shorter questions.

By the time the invigilator called for the end of the exam, I had written a good three sides of A4 on my essay question, drawing on history, English, various parts of R.E. itself, and science. It amused me that even though I had written so much and argued both sides effectively, I had left the question of God's existence itself completely unresolved. I figured that would mean I would be getting an A+.

*

"Are you packing already?" I asked Baz.

"Yep," he said, sweeping various folders and notes binders off his shelves and into some cardboard boxes. "I'm going to go and find my suitcase in a minute, too."

"We've *literally* just finished our final exam," I said.

"And I'm going home tomorrow!" Baz cheered himself. "My mum is coming to get me tomorrow afternoon, and then I'm *never ever* going to come back!"

He almost looked as though he was going to burst from excitement. He had skipped his way from the assembly room and back up to Butcher, hardly waiting to speak to anyone else and discover how they had found the exam.

"When are you going to pack?" he asked me.

"Not for another couple of weeks," I shrugged.

"*Seriously?*" he asked. "Are your parents away again?"

"Not at the moment, but they're going to the Netherlands at the start of next week, for a fortnight. So, I've decided to stay and do some of the sixth form classes – economics, maths and English."

"Are you mental?" Baz said, looking at me as if I had just deeply offended him. "Do it when you start at the sixth form college."

"I might as well make the most of the classes while I'm here," I shrugged. "Won't be so much of a shock that way. Besides, there's no rush to leave just yet – Rob isn't leaving until the end of

term either, so I won't have much to do when I get home."

"Well, I wouldn't stay here," Baz said, dumping some of his unwanted course notes into the bin.

"What are you going to do at home?" I asked.

"I don't know," Baz shrugged. "I'll find something. I just don't want to be here a minute longer than I need to be. Maybe I'll get a summer job. Want to help me look for my suitcase?"

"Sure," I said.

We retrieved the Butcher House storage room key from Mr Somers and waded through the umpteen bags that were crammed into it. It took us a little longer than we expected to find Baz's luggage, his suitcase crushed beneath a much bigger one. He cursed as he saw that it had become fatally damaged and would only start to come apart from then on. Not that he cared, he reiterated, he had no use for it after he got home. I spent most of the rest of the day helping him prepare to leave.

Both Baz's mother and father turned up the following afternoon, as did several other third year boys' parents. By my estimation, about half the third years wouldn't be returning to St Christopher's next term. If the school was even open, that was. I helped Baz load the car, promising to visit him over the summer when I knew what was happening with my grades and where I would be going in the autumn. We both suggested that we have another day out in London with Dave and Rob, and plan the day a little better this time.

With that, Baz departed St Christopher's forever, taking another small piece of me along with him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Aren’t you leaving, Joe?” Seb Silverman asked as I entered the economics class.

“I am, yeah,” I said, setting my pens and paper down at a desk and taking the seat. “But I thought I’d take advantage of the classes, just in case I don’t like them.”

“Fair enough,” Darren Smith said.

“It’s the same curriculum too, obviously,” I added, somewhat unnecessarily.

The other boys nodded and turned back to what they had been talking about. Ever since I had declared that I was one of those leaving the school, I had noticed a shift in attention between people. Those staying now clung a great deal closer together, subtly and gradually severing the bonds of friendship they had once held with those they had known since they were nine or ten years old, whether they were a part of the Clique or not. So much for friends for life.

The teacher soon entered the class. It was Mr Davies, as I had expected. He grinned widely as he moved to the front. This was probably one of the classes that he enjoyed the most – no pressure, no real expectations or goals, and something he could almost breeze through. There would be some prep to do and some tests, I had been told, but nothing taxing and more for the benefit of the pupil themselves, than the teacher.

Mr Davies introduced himself, getting to know each of us in turn before letting us know what the classes would involve. It would start with an introduction to economics, talking about its place in the world, why understanding it was important, and how it impacted our lives. The first class involved discussing various terms and ended with an example of personal finances. The next few classes went on to cover public finance, national and international economics, and impacts of unemployment, inflation and growth.

I found that my decisions to also study maths and English at A-Level were serving me well. Maths was helping me to more easily get my head around some the algebra and equations involved in economics, while English was expanding my command of the language and helping me to get a better appreciation of business terms.

The final couple of economics classes focused on money and banking, a topic that I was very keen on getting to know more about. Mr Davies commenced by showing us how economics was put to work in an investment bank, where various trading principles and practices were used to generate revenue. In some cases, such as foreign change in low volumes, it was only a small amount, but in others it led to tremendous sums of money. Being able to read, anticipate and understand the market were key to succeeding, I was told.

“Evaluating and anticipating the performance of counterparties is an important aspect to understanding the present and future market conditions,” Mr Davies said, marking down various things on the whiteboard. “We must therefore be able to assess a counterparty’s risk. If we have a large amount of money we intend to invest in a counterparty, then we need to ensure that they are not liable to default on their return payments. In some limited circumstances, the ramifications

could be quite disastrous.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“It *could*—”

He put emphasis on the word.

“—lead to a recession under very extreme circumstances. But recessions aren’t normally caused by this alone. There are a great number of contributing factors.”

“What caused the recent one?” I wanted to know.

“A combination of a stock market collapse, the war in Iraq, a lack of public spending, and a slump in American real estate. Now, on with the risk assessment,” Mr Davies said, continuing to write on the whiteboard.

I started to struggle a little with what I was looking at. There was logic to it, but I couldn’t help but feel that it was grounded in fantasy. Some of what I was hearing, reading and writing down didn’t seem to make much sense. I guessed that it made more sense when you were actually getting your hands dirty in the actual markets.

“Now, let us say that we have a counterparty with a credit rating of A,” Mr Davies said, marking the rating on the already quite cluttered whiteboard. “We wish to score against the counterparty so we know what its risk might be and whether we are safe to trade with it. Because it has a number of subsidiaries, we need to take those into account, too. If one of the subsidiaries’ credit ratings fails, then it could impact the future of the parent in the long or short term.”

He looked around the class to ensure that we were still with him. I nodded my understanding. That much made sense. I raised my hand.

“Does it bubble up all the way to the top of the chain?” I asked. “We’ve only got two levels here, but if we had a level beneath our current subsidiaries—”

“Subsidiaries of subsidiaries,” Mr Davies said. “Or the grandchildren, as they are sometimes known.”

“Those would all be affected, too? So a single subsidiary could affect the very top counterparty?”

“It can, yes, but there are ways of dealing with that. Trading and investments allows us to do some very clever things to avoid such problems. We won’t get bogged down in that now. You can learn about it all next year. We’ll keep this example simple and only have five subsidiaries,” he continued, marking them on the board and drawing a line from the parent to each.

“How many might a company have?” Ben Wild raised his hand.

“Oh,” Mr Davies said, waving the marker pen around. “They can have anything from one to a few dozen. But to get the full amount, we might also need to take the subsidiaries of those subsidiaries into account, as well. Sometimes we would only descend one or two levels, but in some extreme cases we would need to sum up all the counterparties over a dozen levels.”

“Bloody hell,” Wild said. “There could be hundreds.”

“Thousands,” Mr Davies supplied, still holding the grin he hadn’t lost since first entering the

classroom. He loved this stuff, I could tell.

“Thousands?” William Butt said. “Fucking hell!”

Mr Davies laughed, ignoring the foul language. “Don’t worry, you’ll never have to do such a calculation yourself. It is normally done on a very powerful computer, instead. As I said, we’ll keep this simple so you can understand how this all works.

“So, we have our counterparty, St Christopher’s, and the subsidiaries companies, Butcher, Enfield, Tudor ... er ... um ...”

“Cookson and Martin,” Silverman supplied.

“Thank you. Now, we know that Butcher has a rating of A1; Cookson, a rating of A3; Tudor, a rating of BA, or *Baaaa*,” he said like a sheep as he wrote it, chuckling. “And Martin, a rating of C. Now, what we’d normally do is simply sum up and average the scores of the subsidiaries, to get an overview of how well the parent might be performing now and in the future.”

I nodded as I continued to take notes. Summing up and averaging. Basic maths.

“Enfield House, however, doesn’t have a rating at all,” Mr Davies then noted, tapping the board. “Does anyone want to suggest what we can do to figure it out?”

Silence in the classroom. “Can we look at past performance?” I ventured hesitantly.

“Yes,” Mr Davies said. “We could look at past performance to get an idea of how well it might do. That’s not how we want to approach the solution, however. Any other suggestions?”

“Can’t we just work it out the same way as the others?” Wild asked.

“Not in this case. We will assume that either the company is very new or the data has never been made available. Ideas? It’s staring you right in the face,” Mr Davies said after some more silence.

“Could we ... average the others and base it’s score on those?” Silverman asked. From the sound of his voice, he was quite sure this was a stupid idea. I had to agree.

“Yes! Exactly!” Mr Davies enthused. “We take the average of the subsidiaries on the same level that we know of and average out their ratings. We then get the performance rating we need for the calculation.”

“Really?” Silverman asked.

“Yes, really,” Mr Davies said, turning back to the board.

I found my hand raised. This didn’t make any sense. “Um, what if the subsidiaries are unrelated?” I asked. I tried to think of one. “In this case, we have school houses, but what about something like a load of subsidiaries that sell food? Chocolate might be doing well for the parent, but it doesn’t tell you how well the subsidiaries might be doing selling cat food. The Mars Corporation makes cat food, as well as Mars Bars,” I added as the other boys in the classroom looked at me.

“It’s a good point, yes,” Mr Davies said. “But this is the general method we use for working out missing ratings. Now ...”

He sounded keen to move on. I didn’t question the method any further, mostly happy to go with

the flow. There would be some influence from the parent company over the smaller ones, I thought, but I didn't see how people stuffing their faces with chocolate could tell you how well they were caring for their pets.

Mr Davies commenced with his explanation of the calculation. "We take the ratings we know of, adding them up with their relevant scores, and dividing them by the total individual number available."

Fair enough, I thought. It was just maths, even if a little contrived. I presumed they would use real data when they had it to hand.

"That's the left-hand calculation done. We then do much the same with the right-hand calculation, except that we also include the missing Enfield House, giving it the lowest score available. Now, for each side we then divide the subsidiaries' internal score, as identified by the client, who in this case we will pretend is the headmaster, by the number of subsidiaries who have rating scores greater than B. We then multiply those two together and then times that final result by 0.341."

Pardon? My hand was up again, and I could see that everyone else looked as bemused as I did.

"Yes?" Mr Davies said. The smile wasn't quite as full as it had been before. Maybe he knew what was coming.

"Um, what's the number?" I asked.

"This one?" Mr Davies tapped the right-hand portion of the equation.

"No, 0.341," I said. "Is that meant to be PI?" That wasn't the only question I had. This was the strangest way of averaging out a score I had ever seen.

"Don't worry about that," Mr Davies quickly dismissed me. "No, it's not PI. This is a number that will have been worked out by the analysts, prior to us wanting to score our subsidiary. This number will represent the keystone to accurately discovering what the rating of our missing subsidiaries will be."

"How would we work out any other missing ratings?" Silverman asked.

"The same way, per level," Mr Davies said.

"Do we need a different number for each?"

"No," Mr Davies said, clicking the cap back onto his marker pen. "We use the same rating for all the missing subsidiaries on the same level, until it is updated by the analysts." He spoke as if there was nothing at all wrong with the information he had just supplied.

I opened my mouth to speak, to contest what I had heard.

"It's very important to get these things right when dealing with hard currency," Mr Davies concluded, cutting me off and moving on to other things.

No wonder these guys working in banks could afford boats and huge houses, I thought, they just made it up as they went along. Clearly, they were trading in bullshit, working magic with numbers to generate revenue. It sounded quite wrong, and suddenly physics was making a great deal more sense to me. At least physics was grounded in hard facts, rather than make-believe.

I bit my tongue, however. I wanted to *be* one of these people, one of those rich traders who was retired at thirty-five, without a care in the world. If this was how it worked, then so be it. At least there was nothing illegal about the process and no one suffered from it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I couldn't sleep. Why, I didn't know. Maybe it was the excitement of finally leaving St Christopher's and starting my new life. Ever since I had walked out of that final exam, I had felt like a free man, the world at my feet. It was like I had just come into a large sum of money and was planning what to do with it. It was like Christmas Eve night when I was little, knowing that Father Christmas would be arriving to deliver all kinds of wonderful gifts. I still had two more days to go, though. My parents' work had extended their stay in the Netherlands by a few days, and so I had to wait for their return before I could exit those gates for the final time.

The lack of sleep shouldn't bother me; it wasn't as though I had anything to get up for or do. I had sat in my dorm for the past couple of days, largely twiddling my thumbs. A Game Boy could only keep you occupied for so long. Most of the other third years had now gone, only the overseas students remaining until the last day. With Simmons no longer here, I was running the dormitory on my own. Or what passed for it at any rate.

A smoke would set me right.

I slipped out of bed, quietly opening my tuck box and removing the cigarettes and lighter I had replaced since the last time, when Father Thomas had caught me. No longer a true pupil at St Christopher's, being caught smoking would simply result in the cigarettes being confiscated and nothing else. I crept out of the dormitory, none of the second years so much as even stirring as I moved past their beds.

I took a walk out around the school, finding it comfortably warm. The summer season was well and truly upon us, the days hot, the temperatures reaching into the high twenties. The temperature tonight was likely somewhere in the upper teens.

I made towards the same door I had exited the school by the previous time I had taken a walk, before thinking better of it and heading for another. Staff, security and monks still patrolled the school, even if nothing had happened of late. I saw none of them as I crossed the grounds.

My walk took me up to near the junior school, where I stopped under a tree and lit one of the cigarettes, taking a drag and looking about the buildings. I would miss this place, I decided. I had been here for a good chunk of my life. I briefly considered what it would be like to stay. It was a fleeting thought, however, and it was brushed aside just as soon as it arrived.

I then saw someone moving about. Damn, someone out on patrol. I instinctively made to toss the cigarette aside, the security staff well aware of the school rules, when I remembered that it could no longer land me in trouble. It was clear they hadn't seen me. They likely didn't have Max the Alsatian with them, either. He would have smelled me. Odd to give a dog a human name. Wonka was better. I decided to walk away, finish my smoke elsewhere and go back to bed.

But as I made to do so, I saw that the figure wasn't alone. They were carrying something. *Someone.*

Subconsciously, I started forward. Something about the shadowy figure was making me feel

extremely uncomfortable. This wasn't one of the teachers, monks or patrol staff. This was an intruder. Their gait, height and stature reminded me of someone, too. I then saw who it was and the cigarette tumbled from between my fingers.

"What are you doing?!" I cried.

Adrian Willis jumped, almost dropping the limp body of the boy he held in his arms. He then gave me a look that caused my blood to run cold and made me want to run and hide. "Looks like I'll be dumping two again tonight." The tone of his voice was something other than I could describe. 'Evil' was the only word that sprang to mind.

"Oh, holy fuck! It was *you!*" I breathed. "You're the killer! You're the one who killed those boys!"

"Joe?"

In the dark, and with me in my pyjamas, Adrian hadn't immediately recognised me. He then came forward, peering a little more closely, still clutching the body to him, their arms and legs dangling down.

"Adrian ... what ... what are you doing?" I asked again. I should have been running to find help, shouting to alert the rest of the school. Yet I found myself unable to do so, quite staggered by the scene that lay before me.

"Go back to bed, Joe," Adrian growled. "This doesn't concern you."

"No," I said. I could hear the fear in my voice. It was a small boy Adrian held, likely one of the junior first years, and probably not more than ten years old. The boy was still in his pyjamas.

Scream for help! my mind shouted at me. My feet remained rooted to the spot.

"What are you doing?" I asked again. "How did you get that boy? How did you get into the school and past all the securi ... " Oh. Of course. He had told me that earlier. The side gate, by the lookout tower. But how had he been sure no one would see him? Oh, hell. Baz and I had proved it to him with that trip to the White Horse. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

"Do you think that I don't know all the ins and outs of this place?" Adrian asked. "I came here for over nine years, spent four of those in Churchill House. I know the place like the back of my hand."

Churchill House? Someone else had called it that once. Of course. The junior school. It had been known as Churchill when Adrian had studied here, being a part of the senior school before the senior school itself had really existed.

"Go back to bed, Joe," Adrian warned again. "Your exams have finished, you should have left by now."

His voice was different to how I remembered. Normally warm and passive, he now sounded more like the Adrian that had flared up in the White Horse. I suddenly felt terrified of him and at last I heeded the suggestions my mind had been issuing. Rubber necking was a terrible thing.

"Help!" I began shouting, my legs moving automatically. I began running, wanting to go in several different directions at once. Everywhere seemed logical – the doors to the junior school, the

doors to the houses, the classrooms. Yet I found myself heading in any direction but those. That was what panic did to you. I wasn't moving nearly as fast as I wanted, either. I looked down to see what the problem was and remembered immediately that I was wearing slippers. Running in such footwear wasn't in the least practical. Running along the tarmac barefoot would be worse, however.

"Hey! No!" I heard Adrian shout behind me, and knew without turning around that the man was in pursuit, having dropped the boy he was holding, so the body wouldn't weigh him down as he came after me.

I ran as best I could, still shouting at the top of my voice, finally deciding on running straight for Butcher, for my own dormitory. I must have subconsciously realised that any door I made for would have been locked and would only have impeded my escape. A slipper then flew off my foot, skittering along the road, my toes scraping and bending along the tarmac. Blood exploded immediately from my big toe as the nail was folded over. The pain was instant and intense, causing me to start hobbling as I tried to resume my escape.

Moments later, Adrian was on me. Wearing proper shoes, he had had the advantage, but I was still stunned at the speed that he was able to catch me. He wasn't exactly a teenager, nor very young for that matter. To my horror, the next thing I discovered was that he was a great deal stronger than I had expected.

I turned as he grabbed me, swinging a punch that I successfully landed on his face. It lacked power, I could tell, and Adrian didn't even seem to feel it, dropping down and pulling my legs out from beneath me. I braced myself as I went over, managing to stop myself from striking my head on the road, as was likely Adrian's intent, and scrambled back to my feet. I saw as I did so that the boy that Adrian had been carrying was lying where he had been dropped, still and quiet. Why hadn't he gotten up? Had Adrian killed him already? I was sure that the previous two had died at the scene ...

Adrian made a grab for me again, saying nothing as he attacked – no taunts, quips, mocks or insults of any sort. He was entirely focused on this task. I struggled against him, trying to bring myself around to face him. He was holding me from behind, and no matter where I swung my fists, I could find no effective part of his body to strike. I jerked my head back, hoping to smash his face with it. I missed completely.

"Help!" I shouted. Something was then on my face, covering my mouth, Adrian's fingers pinching at my nose. It was a cloth of some kind, and it wasn't until I was forced to draw breath that I realised how much of a mistake inhaling had been. At first, I thought that the man had placed it over my mouth to prevent me from shouting. But as an acrid taste filled my throat and nostrils, I knew that he was trying to drug me. It was working quickly, too. That would be because of the adrenaline in my body, causing my blood to circulate a lot faster. This was likely why the boy was so still on the ground – Adrian had done the very same to him.

"Hey there! What's all this?"

I recognised the voice, though I couldn't immediately place it. My vision was becoming hazy, my legs turning to jelly. I felt Adrian release me as a dark, giant shape descended on us, and Adrian

proceeded to grapple with the robed figure, still as silent as when the chase had begun. I then saw who the giant was – Father Thomas.

“Joe!” he said to me, as he fought hard to restrain Adrian. “Call the police! Now!”

I felt myself once more moving automatically, my mind racing to think where the nearest telephone was. In my house, I concluded. I staggered along, the world tipping and tilting as I went. It was like trying to walk along a ferry during a rough crossing. It took me a moment to appreciate why I was having such difficulty opening the door back to Butcher, trying to push instead of pulling to open it. I fumbled for the lights as I entered. Whatever Adrian had done to me was making the dark far more difficult to negotiate than usual.

I fell down, striking the floor hard, but not feeling it. I pulled myself up, crashing next into a wall. Reaching the telephone in this state could prove a near-impossible task. But somehow I did, discovering it in its usual place. I yanked the receiver free and stabbed at the keypad. As with the door, it took me several attempts to get it right, at first not realising why the phone was refusing to connect me. 999 was the number for the police, not 899, 988, 888 or 998.

“Which service do you require?” the operator asked.

I slipped down inside the wooden booth.

“Which service do you require?” the operator repeated when I didn’t answer.

“Police,” I said, forcing myself to focus.

“What is the nature of the emergency?”

“There’s a man trying to kill the boys at my school.” I was slurring my words. I needed to concentrate. “I’m at St Christopher’s school, in Wessex. Near to ... to ... Hallmouth.”

“And you say there is a man trying to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“Is he armed?”

“I ... don’t know. I don’t ... think so. He’s the one that’s killed us before. The ... police know.”

“Do you need an ambulance?”

“When are the police coming?”

“They’re are on their way now. Do you need an ambulance?”

“I think so ... Send some. I think he’s drugged me. I feel really funny.”

“Can I have you name, please?”

“What?”

“What is your name?”

“My name’s ... er ...”

“You don’t have to give it if you don’t want to.”

“Okay. I’m going to go ... going to help Father Thomas,” I told the operator. “He’s trying to ... trying to stop the man killing us.”

I hung up, not hearing anything else, and started off back down the corridor to the exit. I heard the phone start to ring behind me as I went. Some of the lights were on in the dormitories I passed.

“What’s happening?” a voice asked.

I carried on going.

“Joe?”

“Killer, outside,” I said.

The remark led to a flurry of questions, all of which I ignored. I made it to the exit, successfully learning against the door to open it. I saw as I started up the hill that Father Thomas had managed to pin Adrian, who was now making quite a lot of noise. Many lights were on all about the school. I thought that I could hear sirens.

“Did you call them?” Father Thomas called to me as I staggered up the hill towards them.

“I think so,” I said.

The tall monk might have said something else, but I didn’t hear, the ground rising up to meet me.

*

I woke up, finding myself in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar place. It took me a while to realise that I was in the school infirmary. I hadn’t been here in many years. It smelt vaguely of iodine, bleach and other cleaning fluids.

I stirred, sitting up and becoming aware of a throbbing on my face. I put my hand there, feeling bandages and a sudden rush of pain as I brushed my nose.

“Ow!” I exclaimed. How had that happened? Someone walked in from the room next door. A police officer. I recoiled at the sight.

“Ah, finally awake,” the man said. “They were thinking of taking you to the hospital if you stayed asleep any longer.”

“Huh?” was all I could respond.

“Let me get the sister,” the police officer said. “She will want to know that you’re up. Stay there.” I did as requested, sure that the policeman had been here before. The sister arrived, bright and breezy.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Tired,” I said.

“You haven’t slept properly, that’s why.”

“What happened?” I asked. An instance of the night before then rushed through my mind, the brief imagery enough for me to recall and piece together the rest. “Oh, shit! Adrian!” I said, starting out of bed.

“Stay there, stay there,” the sister said, pushing me back down. “The police have him.”

“What about the boy he had?” I asked frantically.

“He’s in there,” the sister said, nodding to the portion of the infirmary that was reserved for the junior school. “He’s okay, but he’s being sick a lot. You can probably expect some of that later,

yourself.”

I followed her eyes as they flicked to the yellow bucket that sat by my bedside. I felt myself relax a little. Everything was out of my hands. “What happened?” I asked.

“Father Thomas saw you being attacked by the suspect and came to help,” the policeman started. “You called 999 and then collapsed. You had been chloroformed.”

“Really? Chloroform?” Despite the seriousness of the event, it actually sounded quite cool. To my mind, only people such as James Bond were ever chloroformed. Now I knew how it felt to be a secret agent.

The policeman nodded. “We arrived to find Father Thomas restraining the suspect, and with you and Adam Richardson passed out. We placed the suspect under arrest and then the paramedics checked out both you and Adam.”

Though the police officer hadn’t named Adrian Willis, referring to him only as ‘the suspect’, I was obvious it was him. They had got him. Excellent. I still couldn’t believe it had been him. The man had been friendly and open when I had met him, not harbouring any negative sentiments at all.

“I imagine he’ll confess everything in a few days,” the policeman said. “We have the right to hold him for another seventy-two hours.”

I nodded, feeling a sharp pain as I did so. “Is my nose broken?” I asked.

“It is, yes,” the sister said.

“Shouldn’t I go to hospital?” I asked, somewhat incredulously. Were they not concerned about me having a crooked nose for the rest of my life?

“It’s not broken badly, and we can manage it here. You just have to be careful not to bang it against anything, otherwise you may have to go to hospital.”

“And then they’ll have to break it again, which isn’t fun,” the policeman smiled. “Believe me, I know,” he added, tapping his own nose.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Almost nine in the morning,” the sister said. “I’ll go and bring you some breakfast.”

“I guess you have some questions for me?” I asked of the police officer, as the sister left.

“If you can spare just twenty or thirty minutes.”

“Not like I have anywhere else to go,” I grinned, stopping when it caused immediate discomfort.

The police officer introduced himself as Sergeant Paul Newman, reminding me that he had actually been at the school before, when I had come to the headmaster’s office after Scott Parker’s body had been discovered. He asked me to tell him everything that I could about Adrian Willis, where I had met him, what contact I may have had with him outside of school, and what he had said to me, especially if it was something that might hint at a motive. I told him about the first time we had met, that day in church, then of the next time when he had come to give the career talk, and of the discussion in the White Horse after that.

“Did he say anything that might have implied a dislike of any of the teachers, students, or the itself school in particular?” Sergeant Newman wanted to know.

“Yes,” I realised. “Yes, quite a lot.” Now I thought about it, there had been a bright neon sign buzzing above the man’s head the entire time. Adrian wasn’t fond of St Christopher’s, hadn’t been for years. In fact, he *hated* the place. But what was his ultimate goal? I couldn’t think.

“Thank you,” Newman said. “If we need to talk to you again, we’ll get in touch via the school.”

“Just so you know, I won’t be coming back next term,” I told him.

“Enough adventure for one lifetime, eh?” Newman grinned.

“Just time for a new one,” I smiled back. “I’m going to a different school. A sixth form college back home.”

Newman nodded. “I’ll get your home address from the headmaster in that case.”

The sister returned a short time later with some tea and toast. I took one look at the food, felt my stomach flip and then vomited instantly into the bucket by the side of the bed. That would be the poison leaving my body, she explained. I rinsed my mouth in the bathroom, finding that someone had brought my wash bag down from Butcher. I brushed my teeth, somewhat less vigorously than I would normally do to avoid the pain in my nose, before returning to my bed and attempting to drink the tea and eat the toast.

It didn’t stay down, and with sister having now removed the bucket, I was forced to sprint to the toilet in the bathroom. I very nearly made it, too.

Epilogue

I received a witness summons a week after leaving St Christopher's, requiring me to travel twice up to London, to provide evidence in the case against Adrian Willis. He had already confessed to the murders as I was questioned in court, Adrian's defence attempting a plea of insanity, hoping to get him a more lenient sentence. There were a handful of teachers in attendance there, Father Thomas, having tackled Willis, giving the most evidence. The jury were apparently taken to the two places where Scott Parker, Ted Osmond and Craig Priest had been found – along the Red Road and also in the bushes by the school's main drive.

I discovered Adrian Willis' motivations as I had testified. Adrian had been expelled from St Christopher's after he had been discovered to have a quantity of cannabis in his possession. This, the school believed him to be dealing. He had denied it, but a urine and blood test had said otherwise. He had admitted to smoking the drug himself, on weekends, something he was sure some of the other boys in the school had known. Adrian had never, however, kept any drugs on the grounds himself. Though never proven, he believed the cannabis had been planted on him by someone else, to draw attention away from their own smoking of the drug. The school had subsequently turned a blind eye to the positive urine samples of the head boy and two of the other heads of house, who were preparing for their Oxbridge entrance, labelling Adrian Willis as a scapegoat, instead.

After his expulsion, Adrian had tried to get back into college, but his drug allegations on his permanent records had tarnished his reputation. No college would take him, and so his chances of becoming a surgeon had been completely destroyed. He had held a grudge against St Christopher's ever since, blaming every failure in his life on them. Upon the collapse of his marriage (I had always assumed he was single), he had chosen to find a way to have the school closed down and decided that the best way to do this was to have it deemed unsafe.

Having been at the school for close to nine years, Adrian knew of many back doors and hidden entrances that existed, including one that led into the junior school, coming in through an attic window and down through a trapdoor in the library. He had then waited in the younger boys' toilets until one got up to use them in the middle of the night. It had taken months of waiting, one or two times a week. The man's patience had been incredible. And on the rare occasion he had been spotted, the boys' reports had been dismissed by their peers, who simply teased them as having seen the ghost of the Headless Highwayman that was said to stalk the corridors.

Finally getting his victim, Adrian had chloroformed them, carried them out of the school to his car, driven them to an appropriate spot, strangled and then dump them where they might be found. Both the snow and the monks patrolling the ground had made the task of getting his second victim more difficult, and so he had chosen to dump the body in the main grounds of the school itself. He had been caught in the act by Craig Priest, who had been out for a cigarette at the time. Priest had called for help before Willis had caught up with him, slitting his throat when he proved a little more

resilient to the chloroform than had been expected. The parents of Adrian's victims all wept as he had confessed. That he hadn't sexually abused any of the boys was of little comfort.

Adrian Willis was sentenced to life in prison for the murders of Scott Parker on the 11th of September, 1991, and Ted Osmond and Craig Priest on the 21st of February, 1992. He showed little remorse as he was sent down. I felt a twinge of guilt and sadness for the man as he was led from the courtroom. He had been set up, his life ruined by other people, and he had been made to suffer every day because of it. His response had been unnecessary, however. I wondered what I might do if I had been in his shoes.

*

I left St Christopher's on the 14th of June, 1992 and spent long summer days anxiously awaiting my GCSE results. The grades I needed for BSFC were:

English Literature (A)
English Language (A)
Biology (B)
Physics (B)
Chemistry (B)
Maths (B)
History (B)
Geography (A)
French (B)
Religious Education (A)
General Studies (B)

My actual grades were,

English Literature (A-)
English Language (A)
Biology (A-)
Physics (B+)
Chemistry (C+)
Maths (A+)
History (A)
Geography (A-)
French (B+)
Religious Education (B+)

General Studies (A)

My parents mumbled and thumbed the C grade, saying that I shouldn't have received anything below a B. I countered by pointing to the seven A grades I had received, after being projected just four. I also reminded them that the college were the ones who would ultimately decide whether or not I was good enough to attend. Which they did, accepting me the very same morning that I applied.

I began attending BSFC in September, 1992, putting the events of the past year far behind me, and making an effort to acclimatise to my newfound freedom, learning to enjoy it, but ensuring that I stayed focused on my education, so I could attend a good university and finally embark on my career in banking. The allure of millions of pounds in salary and bonuses, and the chance to retire at thirty-five was as strong as ever.

I learned to cook for myself when my parents were absent, wash clothes, and keep a good eye on my own personal finances. I took a job at the local supermarket, working on the tills at weekends and sometimes after college, to earn extra pocket money. I also made good on my promise to get my mother a new cat, buying her a kitten for Christmas. We named her Pickles.

THE END