

## THE SHARK

### BEFORE - Chapter 1

Nov 30<sup>th</sup> 1990

Ian wakes coughing and cries out in pain when his head hits the wooden back of the wardrobe.

Then, something strange and wonderful catches his six-year old's attention. A thin ghost-like snake is twisting in the air in front of him. He reaches out. It vanishes as his hand cuts the light coming through a gap between the side of the wardrobe and its door. He sees movement above, looks up and watches with interest as a hazy grey fog crawls across the top of the wardrobe.

Again, a cough catches him, scratches his chest with nails and sticks hot pins in his throat.

Ian doesn't like this wardrobe anymore. There is no forest path to a lamp post, no friendly beaver to welcome him with tea. He wants to get out, even if Mr Rally is waiting for him, his Mammy and Dadda should be there too.

He pushes the doors, and a thin crack of light shows him the hallway. It too has the grey haze of smoke running over the ceiling. But the doors don't open. He pushes again, tries to kick. It is hard to make a big kick. There is not much space, even for a six-year-old.

He stops, listens. Outside there are noises. Not the horrible noises of Mammy crying, and Dadda shouting. Not even of Mr Rally, who came to do bad things. These are other noises.

One is a crackling sound, like bony legged insects running over dry leaves. Another is faster, like the rush and roar of giant bees in the air.

Then, from nowhere and everywhere, much louder sounds. The screaming wail of sirens, engines roaring, brakes screeching and people shouting. Noise of families running down flights of stairs, he can feel their feet shaking the floor and into the wardrobe.

There are too many noises, too many things happening. He claps his hands tight on his ears, screws his eyes shut, and curls into a tight ball.

He would like to go to sleep again. Hiding here in the dark had been good and safe. If he goes to sleep, then the noises will go, and Mammy and Dadda will be ok, and Mr Rally will be gone.

But the coughing comes back. Now it is tiger claws in his chest and even breathing is difficult. He tries to hold his breath, but every time he does, something builds inside him, and his mouth bursts open in a cough that makes his chest burn.

Then he wets himself, it comes with the coughing, and he feels pee running down his legs, it smells bad. He is crying now. Mammy will complain about his clothes, and his plane is broken at the bottom of the stairs.

He wants to be safe and home in his bed in the kitchen, not locked in the dark with the smoke monster.

He bends his legs back as much as he can, and kicks again. The noise is like a thunder-explosion, the wardrobe shakes and rattles against his back, but still the doors won't move.

They are too heavy for him. They won't open, not even if he kicks forever. The wavy cloud of dark smoke above has crawled down towards him now, little tendrils of it reaching out to choke him.

He kicks and kicks again, but every kick is getting weaker, and though the doors shake, they will not open. Something is stopping them. With every rattle of the doors, he can see a black bar of metal across the gap. He begins to understand, it is that black bar which is holding the doors shut.

The light outside has changed. Before, it was just the hall light and the strange grey ceiling of smoke. Now it flickers red and orange, brighter flashes sometimes with an accompanying roar. A dragon is climbing the stairs towards him.

He wants to call for Mammy and Dadda, but the bad Mr Rally might still be out there, and his chest hurts, and he is so tired and wants to sleep. Every breath makes him feel tired. It would be easier to curl up and wait. Mammy and Dadda will come, he is sure.

The smoke is wrapping him in some giant blanket, his eyes are closing. He tries to hit the door again, but his body wants to sleep.

Everything is slowing for him, thoughts blur and run into each other. The doors won't open, and Mammy and Dadda won't come, and he didn't protect Mammy, and his plane is gone, and...

The doors burst open, and the world rushes in. Bright bright light, smoke and heat, the crackling insects have become skeleton men with flaming swords. There is a dragon roar of noise and shouting.

Standing in front of the flames, between him and the burning world, is a yellow monster. Its arms are waving, shouting. On its head is a great curved metal helmet.

The voice shouts again, muffled, and strange. Behind a clear face plate in the monster's head, he can see a man's eyes, and even the beads of sweat on his face. The fireman reaches in and grips him, pulls him from the wardrobe. He holds onto the man, feels his strength underneath the strange coat. The man is slick and smooth, wet and hot, it but he is someone to hold on to.

The smoke and flame creature is not just in the hallway. Ian can see it crawling under the happy red door of his home. The door is holding the smoke back, but the paint is bubbling and darkening, flaking away in strange glowing drifts.

There is a boom of noise, like fireworks and thunder, he feels it in his chest and through his body. He screams and grips the fireman harder. The happy red door bursts open, pulled by

the wind of an explosion somewhere else in the house. Smoke billows out like a giant tongue and rolls across the ceiling.

The fireman staggers, bangs against the banister. He trips, slips, and lets Ian fall. Ian screams again, then runs for the door, for his parents. The fireman reaches out for him, giving a muffled shout, but Ian dodges

Ian cries out, "Mammy, Dadda." This room too is full of smoke monsters and dancing flames. It is hot and smells, flame sounds roar, smoke bites at his throat and the heat makes his jeans press hard against his legs. He can't see his parents in the kitchen.

They could be in the bedroom, there is nowhere else. They wouldn't leave him. But the fire monster has taken the room for itself, and the heat makes his skin twist and tighten. He steadies himself against the oven and bright red pain stings through his hand.

Ian screams, yet he is only dimly aware of the pain. In the smoke and flame he can see two strange black burning shapes on the floor. Even as he sees them, as they twist and crackle, his eyes shut, and he screams back at the fire.

Then an arm swoops down and grabs him up, and there is more pain, and he wants to screech more, but there is no scream left. He wants to look again but that will destroy him. He pushes his face into the strange hot-cold soft wet plastic of the man who holds him, and screws his eyes shut.

The man staggers back away from the bedroom door. From heat to hot, through smoke to more smoke. He holds Ian like he will break him, and Ian doesn't care. There is the noise and the smells and the tiger clawing at his chest, and his world is gripping the fireman.

They stumble through the door. To the window at the end of the hallway. Ian doesn't look but he can tell, the flame monster has eaten up the hallway, is reaching out for them, still hungry.

The man is shielding Ian from the monster, but then, without warning, he drops his arm and Ian begins to slide off. Ian screams and works his legs, climbing back up the man's chest. The man grabs his arm, twists it, burning pain sears through him. Ian cries and falls to the floor, eyes still shut.

He can hear the flame monster getting closer, he knows it has come to take him like it did his Mammy and Dadda, knows it wants to turn him into the same black burning sticks he had seen. He cannot hold his eyes shut any longer, he will face the monster, his Dadda would have told him to do that.

The fireman, using his legs to pin Ian against the wall, pulls an axe from a loop on his belt, leans across Ian and smashes the window. The flame monster screams and roars, lashes out at them, it doesn't want them to escape.

The fireman bends over Ian as the smoke tongue and flame fingers grab at them. Then there is a different sound, from outside. Water jets over Ian's head with a howl, as if answering the dragon's challenge.

The flames and smoke retreat, hiss and add their own screams to Ian's. Black lines of wet and soot run down the yellow of the fireman's suit.

The Fireman holds his hand up, closes his fist. The roar of the water stops. Finally, the fireman picks Ian up, and passes him through the window to waiting arms and cool air.

## PRESENT Chapter 1

3rd January 2007

"Well, if it's not Thommo. You bastard, you owe me sixty quid."

Detective Constable Ian Thompson recognises the voice, even after more than seven years.

There is a lot of history in that voice, in that nickname. A history he has tried to forget. His instinct is to leave, but that won't do. The voice would follow him out, call into the dark, insist he return. The voice would teeter between threat and promise, and the difference wouldn't be clear. Well, ok. The voice was his past, before he understood himself better, the voice was when he was a kid. Then it had power, now it is only a voice.

Thompson has just entered the low ceiling bar of The Fort St George on Midsummer

Common in Cambridge. His eyes are still adjusting to the light change as he searches for the person who called him. He sees a figure rising from a seat at the far side of the bar, a black shape silhouetted by a flashing fruit machine.

Something in the way the man stands tells Ian, it is The Shark.

Seven years, some of them undoubtedly in prison, haven't altered Andrew Shardlow much.

His dark hair is still cut very short, almost skinhead. His thin face with dark eyes and eyebrows, still have that same expression of pent-up anger and apparent readiness for violence. It doesn't look like being locked up has changed Shardlow still has that attitude, the one Mary Clarke had said was him telling the world that he is here, and you'd just have to live with it.

Next to Ian, two couples are looking at Shardlow. Even from a distance he is tall enough to be intimidating. Ian realizes that the foursome had been talking when he walked in and had stopped at Shardlow's shout. They'd watched him rise and fallen silent. Shardlow stares at them, as if asking a question. They turn away, a brittle empty comment between the men about football brings a grin to Shardlow's face.

Ian takes in a breath, turns on his best smile, which he knows doesn't quite reach his eyes. He tips his head slightly to one side, broadens the smile to a grin. Perfectly choreographed spontaneity.



"Well..." he thinks for a moment, "Of all the gin joints in all the towns..." he lets the quote die. It is a phrase to use when re-meeting people. It sounds surprised, pleased; he has practised it often enough to make sure it does.

Remembering the comment when he'd walked in, he follows that lead, obeying Rule one with Shardlow. Never show weakness.

"What's that crap about fifty quid?" Actually, he knows it had been a lot more. Ian tries to match Shardlow's tone, bantering, hardened only with the faintest edge. He waits, the old feeling coming back, the one he thought had gone, the one he has to conjure in other ways now.

Has he got it right? Shardlow laughs, the braying laugh which he had always tried to stifle and punches him on the arm.

"Yeah - My Thommo, give what you get!" His Thommo? perhaps he had been. Already this is dangerous, he'll have to make it very clear to Shardlow that that was then, and this is now. But The Shark is good at hearing what he wants to hear and ignoring everything else.

Shardlow is still strong, the punch had been hard and on the muscle, Ian's arm hurts.

Shardlow stares around, exaggerated, play-acting Ian realizes. As though making the point that he is checking they won't be overheard. A nod to their past, so much back then to keep out of the light.

The Shark looks again at Ian, as if considering, then, "Well, buy me a pint, and I'll remind you - you were always smart, I'm sure it won't take long. Mine's an Adnams." Shardlow turns back to the machine in dismissal.

Ian goes to the wooden bar, rubbing his arm and reaching for his wallet. As usual the service is slow, which gives him time. Shardlow is reflected in the mirrored wall behind the bar. The man's attention flitting between the two couples and Ian, always with the sense of some inner monologue, maybe the tiniest movement of his lips. Ian wonders if Shardlow is high, but doubts it, but as always there is that sense of dark uncertainty in him.

He studies Shardlow, he was what? Six years older than Ian? So, yes, twenty-nine. He appears more than that, his face slightly lined, skin a bit grey, but that might be the light. He is well dressed. He has a smart white shirt, button-down collar, new, or at least pressed, trousers and shined shoes. The phrase 'on the pull' comes to Thompson.

At last, the young barman faces him, raising an eyebrow in question. Ian orders and carries the two tall glasses to Shardlow's table. He smiles again as he puts the beers down. Shardlow turns his attention to him. He does it in the way he has, a hand gesture of welcome, like he is granting an audience.

"What? No crisps?" Ian notes the tiny upward curl of Shardlow's lips and a softening of the Scouse accent and laughs lightly with him. He needs to pushback, don't-give-an-inch, that needs to be his mantra. Gloria would be proud, he is managing this encounter with his past like she teaches.

"Get them yourself, I'm tapped" Another useful phrase he's practised. It works better than 'no'. Shardlow considers him, head cocked to one side, as if assessing. He brays another short laugh, his head shakes. Ian isn't sure if he passed a test, or failed one.

"Well, we're all grown up now, aren't we? "Again, the smile that isn't quite right, and a judgement, as though by saying it Shardlow made it true. The Shark stares at him.

"I don't come here much, but I reckon this is your local – right?" It's a question, but one Shardlow has decided he knows the answer to. It will have a point.

"Sure, yes, I come here a bit." But perhaps not for much longer Ian doesn't add. Then he bites, might as well get it over with. "Why do you think that?"

"You hardly looked around when you came in, weren't checking for the exits. The fire exits. My Thommo, always took care to know how to get out."

Ian nods. He understands what The Shark is saying, reminding Ian he knows Ian's weaknesses. He takes a sip of his beer, hoping to hide the blood rising in his face. Then picks up the threads.

"Well, it's been a long time. A lot of water under the burnt boats." Ian shifts into the way Shardlow is sitting, pleased at his recovery. He is getting better. Ian breathes in, three short breaths, calm returns, or nearly, focus at least. He can practise on Shardlow.

Also he's the type who might even be of use to Ian in the future? In his new role, it is often who you know that counts.

But, Shardlow brings complications, memories of things best left hidden in the past. The silence has been too long, Ian searches for a topic.

"So, ..." a pause, he thinks, it comes, "how's life treating you?" He nods and twists slightly in the chair, as if getting more comfortable, watching Shardlow's eyes as they darken slightly, now the irises are pinpoints.

"You know me, always something on the go." His accent shifts slightly more to Manchester. Ian remembers that peculiarity. Maybe it is a consequence of Shardlow's history, something Ian can relate to.

But Shardlow would never go searching for his roots again, whilst Ian is on the edge of starting his own journey into the past. This thought distracts him, and he has to focus again.

An expression passes Shardlow's face that Ian can't read. A different tension grows in him, that sense of being alone even when he is not. He is losing it, falling into his other world. He draws in another three calming breaths. Shardlow shuffles his legs and purses his lips slightly, lifts the glass to his lips, "Cheers." Ian copies him.

They sit for a few moments, neither saying anything. Ian watches Shardlow. The man's face

breaks into a smile, and a third laugh. He must be happy. "Shit, you've not changed much have you Thommo? All grewed up in your suit and smart haircut, but still the same."

Ian waits and Shardlow continues. "Still on the edge, watching, judging. Stuff going on in there." He goes to tap a finger at Ian's head, but stops. Maybe he's caught something in Ian's eyes. Again, there is silence.

Despite what Gloria has told him, there is nothing comfortable about this silence. Ian knows he needs to find his way back again.

A sudden draft of cold January air blows through the bar, and they instinctively turn. Two young women have come in, laughing and looking around. They smile at the warmth in the bar and begin unbuttoning their coats, tight blue jeans and t-shirts which compliment but don't match. Co-ordinated in the way only women do.

Ian glances at Shardlow who is watching them. There is a concentration in his eyes that Ian remembers, also a hunger, and something deeper perhaps. The older man nods at them, "Whaddya reckon? Fancy our chances?" Ian tilts his head, as if considering. Actually, he is selecting the way to say No. He would never want to get that close to Shardlow again.

"Not tonight - other things to do." Shardlow's eyes widen, and he pulls back a little.

"Maybe another time," Ian adds. He doesn't screw up his eyes, but allows a tiny blink in anger at himself, he had answered too quickly, had been pulled in the direction Shardlow

pointed. He reminds himself, 'following does not mean being led.'

Shardlow moves things on, but there is something new in him now, or maybe just closer to the old.

"Sure, right. Anyway, I'm on a roll today, could take them both, and be ready for more, though they'd be shagged..." He laughs again, watching the two women. Ian sees them reflected in the gaming machine. One of them catches Thompson's stare, tilts her head to the other. After a moment the two stand and work their way around the tables to the door of the second bar at the far side of the pub.

"Tarts," mutters Shardlow.

"Still, on a roll today, made a score" his voice rises, throwing a comment at the back of the two, now disappeared, women. Ian's lips tighten, he reaches for his drink, masking his feelings.

The two couples behind them fall silent again, glance at each other, nod, and make for the exit, glasses not quite empty.

Ian notices now, how Shardlow is swaying slightly in his chair. He has probably been there for a while. Picking up Shardlow's cue, he asks. "Made a score?" his voice rising a little in question at the last moment.

A chance to talk about himself, Shardlow will lead.

"Yeah, yeah. Up on Trumpington Road." Ian nods, Trumpington Road, very upmarket, lines of large, detached properties.

"Yeah, been working on it a while." He stops, drops his voice. "You see, I always keep my eyes out for the deaths." A thought appears to strike him. "And the births of course, in case I've got to do a runner!" He laughs at this, and Thompson joins a half-second late.

"Yeh, so, well, couple of months ago I saw the death announcement, and checked it out, score, Trumpington Road. I know what happens next, posh house like that. So, I dropped round, all proper and well dressed. Left my card, yeah, I've got cards now for that sort of place." He pulls out his wallet, then draws a small white card from beneath a sheaf of twenty-pound notes. He tosses it across the table, and it slides on the glass tabletop to stop in some spilt beer. "Discrete house clearance, A J Nye and Associates - Andrew Nye, Senior Partner," in small silver letters. "Yeah, my trading name,"

This is a more subtle Shardlow, that probably means more dangerous.

"Anyway, long story very short, I've now got a van load of really fine gear. A fire grate, antique, all brass and spikes, heavy as fuck, and worth a couple of grand by itself! Rugs, a painting and also, a ..." He stops, laughs, "Yeah well, something, unexpected." Silence, this time Ian takes the lead.

"How long since..." He begins, unsure where to restart.

"Since you saw the cops kicking my doors down and pissed off with sixty quid's worth of my gear?" Shardlow interrupts, the words are strong, but there is something else there. Like it was something they shared. Ian knows what that means in Shardlow's mind, that the older man has a claim on him.

Ian decides on a grin, not too much, the one he might use when he is sharing an in joke at the station. "Well, that's not quite how I remember it, don't think there was much else to do." His entire focus is on Shardlow now. He can see the tiny pulse in Shardlow's forehead, smell the beer on his breath, notes the way his head moves ever-so-slightly back and forth.

Shardlow relaxes, and Ian feels a thrill of something good run through him. He forces his face to remain the same. Shardlow doesn't know.

"Nah, you're right, when The Old Bill turn up, best to be moving, especially when you're carrying." There is the beginning of Shardlow's laugh again, but he holds it back.

There is movement behind Ian, and, reflected in the fruit machine, Ian can see the two women from earlier have walked back into the bar, carrying glasses of wine. They sit down a few tables distant, and one glances over at Shardlow.

Ian follows the thread of conversation from a second before.



"Yes, well, not such a big deal now. As I am the Old Bill." As Ian says this, he pulls out one of his own new business cards and tosses it on the table as Shardlow had done. Now, only now, and too late, he looks properly at Shardlow, who's attention is on the women.

Shardlow is smiling at them in a way that has somehow changed his face. But hearing Ian's words, it is as though something electric has shot through him. He shouts, "Well fuck me!" His braying laugh bellowing out he jerks up.

Ian follows the movement only with his eyes, feeling no reaction. As Shardlow rises, his knee clips the edge of the table and Ian's glass wobbles and slops. Ian too jumps back, but not before beer has spilt across his crotch.

They face each other. Shardlow's face twisted in an expression Ian still can't read. He senses from the silence behind that the two women are watching. The moment lasts way too long.

Ian's focus shifts to his trousers, the dark stain. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket. Shardlow, the women, the pub, all are forgotten. He dabs at his crotch then Shardlow's voice breaks through.

"For fuck's sake Ian, go play with yourself somewhere private. Try the bogs." Ian runs the thought through his head, nods and walks towards the toilets, still wiping the front of his trousers.

One of the girls laughs, Shardlow stares at her and she stutters into silence, then he waves his glass as if in salute and both women giggle.

Ian takes his time in the toilet. He should have known, should have been more careful. He thinks about Time, Place and Meaning. Discussions he has had in the past. Shardlow had broken his focus.

Eventually he decides his trousers don't seem too bad, though they still have little bits of green paper towel stuck to them. He returns to the bar. Shardlow is sitting with the two women, facing them across a square wooden table, an empty chair next to him.

"Thommo, come join us!" For a moment Ian hesitates. The voice, the command, the expectation. He remembers them all. To sit now is to return to a past he had escaped. He hangs poised on the fine edge between one world and another. Shardlow stares at him, a history in the stare, a deep knowledge of Ian.

At last, as if from a distance, Ian shakes his head.

"Other plans. Great to see you, I've got to go." He speaks the lines like he is delivering the shipping forecast and makes for the door.

As he leaves, the voice calls.

"Ok Thommo, I'll be in touch, you can be sure." As always with Shardlow, Ian can't tell if it is

a promise or a threat. It is probably both.

Before, Chapter 2

3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 1990 9pm

Ian tilts his head up, trying to see the top of the house. It is tall and his neck aches from stretching backwards. Streetlights throw brightness onto a sloping roof and cast dark shadows across angled corners. Two tall trees stand silhouetted against the starry sky behind the house, their branches wave and shift. For a second Ian thinks of tendrils of smoke, and he grips the hand of the woman who has led him here. The woman from Social whose name he cannot remember and is too frightened to ask.

The woman squeezes his hand back and looks down at him. She makes a smile, and he turns again to the house thinking, there was no reason to smile. Before, with Mammy, he could ask why people did things and she would explain. Now he has no one to ask.

Mammy. He feels tears build up and pushes them back. If he cries, they will ask questions he can't answer or tell him things he doesn't want to hear. He finds the place inside himself, the quiet safe place, and climbs in.

"This is Ian, Ian's had a tough time, but we'll help him, won't we Mary?" The first lady, the one from Social something, is speaking. Her voice is high pitched and hurts his ears. Ian looks out from his hiding place and sees a woman standing at the top of steps leading into the house.

There is light behind her and it shines through her hair, showing the round dark skull. She is large, larger than Mammy, larger than the Social lady. She seems to fill the door and Ian

steps back slightly. The woman, Mary? Takes a step forward, moving into the light cast by the streetlamps.

Mary has lines across her forehead and skin that hangs in small folds, around her mouth under her chin and running into her neckline. She is wearing a thick grey woollen jumper and blue trousers, her stomach bulges tight against the waist of the trousers.

The Social lady puts a heavy hand on Ian's shoulder, he jumps with surprise, but she pushes him firmly forward. She is saying something more to Mary, something about the journey. How they were delayed by the train stopping, how Ian had wet himself and she had to help him change.

Something darts through Ian, a pain and a hot flash across his face. It isn't a feeling he likes, but then most of them aren't. He looks again at Mary, trying to guess what she is thinking. There is a tiny movement in her mouth, a tightening, and he thinks he sees one of her eyes close slightly as she breathes in.

"Well. These things happen." She bends to Ian and for a moment he sees freckled skin hanging down beneath her neckline.

Hello Ian, I'm Mary, welcome to your new home. I hope you are going to be happy here. Let's get you settled in, shall we?" Her voice reminds him of one of the teachers at his school, and just for a second, he wonders if it is her. But he looks again and knows it cannot be. Now Mary pats his shoulder, urging him upwards, only then does the Social lady let his hand go.

As soon as they get inside, the heavy wooden door shuts with a slam which makes Ian jump.

They are standing in a big hallway. It is a little like Before, the house in Trent Road, but that had been smaller, with stairs that went up and up. The floor here has a pattern of black and white tiles, and Ian fights the urge to count them. Counting is a way to hide from the other feelings, it brings the nice white.

There are four doors in the hallway, words are printed on boards on some of them, and he spells them out in his head. 'Kitchen', 'Office', a word beginning with L he can't read, and another with a picture of a man on it. The hallway smells, different, bad, and he wrinkles his nose.

Mary is saying something, and he tilts his head up at her again. "Ian, I'm sorry to hear you've been having troubles, but I'm glad I'll be taking care of you, you seem a fine young man." Her voice has the type of sound he knows means he hasn't done anything bad. So now he smiles, thinking how the Social woman had smiled when there was no need.

As he does, Ian glances at a wooden framed mirror, hanging on the pale cream wall of the hallway, and sees his reflection.

His hair is brown, roughly cut, quite thick on his head, but not long. A light in the office behind him shines and turns his ears a little pink where they stand out from his head. His face is flat with a small nose and thin-lipped mouth. He can see the chipped front tooth which Mammy said would fall out soon. He remembers being measured and weighed by the people of the Social. They had said he was 'normal height' but a bit underweight. He still has a bandage on his left hand, hiding the burnt skin beneath.

Mary releases him, and he nods silently. Over the front door there is a green sign with an arrow and a white man. He spells out 'Fire Exit' in his mind.

"What does that sign mean?" He asks quietly, eyes moving between the two women. He thinks he knows but wants to be sure.

Mary looks more closely at him, dropping down to his level again with a slight wheeze, looking into his face. He remembers something his Mammy said. 'The eyes are the window to the soul my darling.' Bad things happen when people look inside you, he looks down, then around the hallway.

"That's just a way out, if ..." Then her face changes, like a thought has come to her, or she has remembered something. Again, her lips tighten, and he steps back, it was like the look Mr Rally had made at times.

"Well, we can talk about things like that tomorrow. I'm sure you must be hungry. It's past tea-time... but we can make an exception... you've had a long journey, haven't you?" She talks slowly, pausing a few times. Ian listens carefully, watching, she is smiling, so he nods and smiles back, understanding now that that was probably what she wanted.

The Social woman laughs again. She laughs too much, too easily, at nothing. "Ok, that's settled. Mary will take you for some tea, and I'll talk to Jim." This is a new tone, like the Fireman who'd swept him up and run with him, an 'I'm in charge' sort of voice. The Social woman nods to a man who has opened the door with 'office' written on it.

'Jim' is a short man with long hair, and a beard. He is wearing a patterned jumper which his stomach pushes out. He reminds Ian of a story book Mammy read him about a troll who lived under a bridge. He nods then turns away towards his office.

Ian watches them begin to go. He's seen that way of looking at him lots of times in the last few days. They are going to talk about him. The people at the police station, the hospital, the place he slept last night, all asked him lots of questions. Really the same question asked in lots of different ways. Again, he glances at the tiles, there are one, two, three, four...

Mary takes up his hand and he pulls back without thinking, without knowing what he has done. He has lost count and wants to start again. There is something new inside him, he doesn't know if it has a colour or a name. It comes when he thinks of Mammy and Daddy in the bedroom, in the flames. It comes when he remembers they are gone.

"Come on Ian, let's see what I can make you to eat, shall we? I can make egg and chips; would you like that?" Mary doesn't quite smile this time, and whilst her voice is mostly cheerful, there is something else inside it. Perhaps it is tiredness, maybe she is angry a little. He nods again but still finds it hard to move.

The man called Jim turns back, "Egg and Chips, sounds good Ian, would you like that?"

"I like pizza, with pepperoni." The words just come out and he wishes they hadn't. All three of the adults laugh, and Ian falls quiet. They laugh a lot, adults, often when nothing is funny.

"I'm sorry Ian, no pizza tonight, but perhaps we'll try to make some tomorrow." Mary says, again starting to pull him away, and this time he lets himself be carried along. The two others turn to go into the Office with its strange mottled glass windows. Ian follows Mary into the room with 'Kitchen' on the door.

The kitchen is a large room. It is bigger than the kitchen area Before, and that room had also been the sitting room and his bedroom. The walls are the same creamy colour of the hall. It has tall grey metal cabinets and what he guesses must be an oven.

Pots and pans hang from a ceiling rack. A machine in one corner gurgles to the sound of running water, a winking red light on it gleams above a label. Ian spells out 'Hot-point' in his head.

He doesn't like this room, it is like the house, everything is too big. The notices, the flashing lights, all seem to be warnings. He wants to step back to the door, can feel the black and white tiles calling to him.

"Andrew, what are you doing here?" Mary's voice cuts across his struggle. In a flash like leaping flames she has changed, her voice is now a harsh bark, Ian again wants to pull away. He wants to run home. But there is no home to run to.

Ian looks down the kitchen. A boy is sitting on a metal legged stool at the far end of the long worktop. A piece of toast is raised to his lips. He has very short hair, small eyes, heavily lidded, his face is full, and his arms and legs thick. He looks strong to Ian, who guesses the boy, Andrew, Mary called him, is perhaps twelve or thirteen.

Andrew stares at Mary. "Hello Mary, I was hungry. I came for toast. You always say I should take responsibility for myself." As he speaks his face changes in a way that Ian does not understand. The words have something like an echo in them, as though they don't mean what they are saying. Ian looks up at Mary, trying to see inside her.

Ian shuffles. His hunger is forgotten now. The metal and grey coldness of the kitchen fade until all he can see is Andrew. There is something about Andrew, something hard and angry, and again Ian wants to run.

A flash of memory comes to Ian. It is of when he and Mammy saw the men who sat drinking from cans in the park. Men who would call out things that made her walk more quickly. One of them had a dog, a dirty white thing, squat and ugly, tiny ears sticking up out of a head too big for its body. Its owner held the dog on a piece of rope, but it would growl and threaten, straining to reach Ian and the men would laugh.

There is something in Andrew that makes Ian think of that dog.

"Who's he - another bin-lid?" Andrew's voice has a strange accent in it. At first he thinks it is like Mr Rally's, but he knows it is not.

Mary's hand tightens in Ian's. He watches as her lips join together and get thin, then he hears the faint sound of a sigh, and her grip on his hand relaxes a little.

"This is Ian, Ian will be staying with us, we hope for a long time, don't we Ian? And this..." she said, nodding her head toward the boy, "is Andrew. Andrew is going to be like a big brother for you, aren't you Andrew?"

Now the boy is staring at him. Toast forgotten, his face growing red. "I've already got brothers, three of them, all I need is them. What I don't need is another kid in the house."

His voice is louder now, he gets down from the stool, the feet scrape across the tiled floor and just for a moment Ian thinks the stool will fall over. Ian moves closer to Mary.



Andrew's voice is like the dog barking. Andrew walks towards them both, and it seems to Ian that even Mary wants to step back. But Andrew goes on past without looking at either of them, the door bangs as he pushes against it.

"Andrew." Mary calls after him, glances down at Ian, next at the swinging kitchen door, and finally back at Ian.

They stand together for a moment, the silence loud. The machine in the corner makes a final gurgling sigh, and Mary looks down again.

"Well. Let's make you some tea shall we Ian? Don't you worry about Andrew, he's, well..." She stops, searching perhaps for words that don't exist.

Ian nods, his head turning to look at the kitchen door, hoping that no dark returning shape will appear in the window.

Present: Chapter 2

Saturday Jan 13th 2007 8pm

"So, Tracey, how was it oop North? Aside, from..." Tracey Turner smiles at Becca's faux accent, which doesn't even come close to her actual Black Country tones.

The joke is old, but any joke is welcome right now. She's known Rebecca for six years, ever since they started nursing college together. Becca always makes the same jokes, but always at the right time.

" 'Oop North?' Nottingham's not Bradford." Tracey smiles and raises her voice above the

'getting ready to go out' music that Clare insists on. Ricky Martin, livin the vida loca like there is no tomorrow.

"Sorry Babes." Becca shakes her head left and right and almost sings. "North of Watford Gap. All I need to know." Her voice drops a little quieter. "But really, how was it?"

"It was, you know, perfect. Of course Mum got a bit tipsy on the bucks fizz and wine, but we sobered her up. After dinner we had a lovely walk through Colwick Park, went all around Wrekin - the long way round." She adds the last at Becca's confused look.

Tracey remembers, the bright weather, the wind light, the day full of promise. She and Michelle walking along, arm in arm, laughing. Michelle joking about "two weddings next year?" and each being the other's bridesmaid.

And, weirdly, that had been the moment when she had known that she could never marry Michael Wyatt. The way her stomach had lurched. The flash that went through her had been fear, not happiness.

"Now Tracey, don't" I'm watching. You're dropping into 'Mike The Bastard Wyatt' territory. We're going out to forget men for an evening, especially narcissists like him. You're better off without him, I'm just glad you saw the light. – I've been saying it often enough."

Tracey nods, feels inside herself, finds place of calm where before there had always been tension. Time to change the subject. "You remember Katie?"

Becca smiles, "Sure, Michelle's little girl, right? What is she? four now?"

"Yes, that's right, four, going on fourteen. She told me there were plenty more fish in the sea" They all laugh. But something else has crept up through the thought. The music stops, and in the gap, she lets out what had struck her.

"Life's strange. Working with the kids in the hospital. The way we see them every day." She reaches for the white wine on the dressing table and takes a sip.

"When you meet a healthy little girl like Katie, she's the one who looks, odd, different. Too healthy, not like our kids at all."

"No, no, none of that" Rebecca to the rescue. "Tonight, Tracey you are not Tracey Turner Paediatric Nurse extraordinaire, but a desirable and fancy-free, Betty Boop!" All three of them burst out laughing.

She stands up and studies the full-length mirror. Ok, her legs were never going to grow longer, but she is slim, a tiny bit top-heavy, but that works on her. Dark hair matching and setting off dark eyes. A nose which Mike had once said was "button and cute", and full lips.

Yes, in the slim-fitting LBD, bobbed hair, and a tiny bit too much lipstick - she does bear the vaguest resemblance to the cartoon character, enough for a night out at least.

“Picture” Becca shouts. “Clare – piccy of me and Betty Boop here” Clare takes Becca’s phone, and stands back to get them both in. Tracey grabs her bag and Clare snaps the photograph.

It is the picture that will soon be on the front page of the newspapers, under thick headlines and bordering sombre quotes that hope should not yet be lost.

Present: Chapter 3

Sunday Jan 14th 2007 midnight

Despite it all, the trying, and the support of Becca and Clare, Tracey knows she is sinking.

Time to admit it. It will take more than a few drinks and a bit of music to forget three years with "It's My Way or the Highway, MTB Wyatt".

Even the booze isn't doing it for her. They'd tried The Regal first. Only opened recently and apparently the biggest pub in England. Large as it was, it was still full of losers. Of course, this soon after Christmas, and two weeks before payday, she should have guessed. After that, they'd drifted through a few pubs, working their way vaguely in the direction of Cherry Hinton. They'd reached as far as The Warning nightclub on Mill Road, their usual last stop before going home.

It wasn't simply Mike, actually him out of her life was a weight lifted not added. She was missing her family too. Christmas with them had been perfect. Nottingham wasn't far, but it was far enough. Trains were expensive and without a car, she couldn't simply pop home

anytime. On the rebound and feeling lonely, definitely time to go home she decided.

"You all right babes?" Clare has broken from the small dance floor of The Warning where she had been intermittently groping then pushing away the dark-haired guy she'd picked up. She has to shout over the music, but they are both used to lip-reading in nightclubs. Tracey is standing at their table that juts out from a pillar, her drink perched precariously on its small semicircle of wood.

"Well, a bit pissed - but not in a good way. Sorry." Tracey replies. "Think I might set off back soon, you look like you're sorted, and Becca's well away." She nods to Becca who is entangled with a fireman she'd picked up earlier. Tracey tries to keep annoyance out of her voice, feeling, not very deep down, that she is being a bitch.

She smiles at herself, puts her hand out to Clare and laughs out loud. "I'll be fine C, honest. I'll soon have him out of my mind. Even work helps. Nothing like looking after kids needing chemo to give you a sense of what's what!"

She knows she means it. She has thick skin, friends, family. She'd get over MTB, yeah, she'd be alright.

"Anyhow, I think your evening might be about to take an uptick," Clare arches her eyes across the dance floor. Instinctively, Tracey looks over.

They are being watched, not especially subtly, it is getting a bit late for subtlety. The watcher is a tall figure holding a shot glass. His dark hair is only a little longer than skinhead,

he has thick dark eyebrows over large eyes, perhaps brown but hard to tell at this distance. His face is thin but his lips full. He is wearing a bright white shirt, and smart trousers. He is slim, and there is a hint of muscles under the shirt, not body builder – but keep fit.

There is something else, something in the way he stands in the flashing lights, a stance wavering between confidence and arrogance. It is obvious he knows they are watching him. He gives the tiniest of nods and continues looking at them. There is a weight in his gaze, knowledge, self-belief.

He reminds Tracey of Al Pacino in Scarface, yes, the gangster Tony Montana. After 'I don't know what I want in my life' Mike TB Wyatt, a Tony Montana might be what she needs.

Tracey nods to the "Ladies" sign, and Clare follows her.

Surprisingly, there are only three other women in the toilets. A seventeen-year-old doing her make up and two women in a toilet, where one is throwing up and the other holding her hair back. Clare and Tracey laugh, 'been there - done that'.

"So, up for a bit tonight?" Typical Clare, straight to the point. Tracey thinks for a moment, then shakes her head.

"Well, you know me, sometimes a bit of mindless sex can be ... necessary." They both laugh.

"But no, I'd feel shit tomorrow." No. She isn't going to jump into anything, and certainly not into bed on the rebound.

"Still, a bit of a dance, a snog possibly, and the only other thing I'll be sharing is my

telephone number. If he's lucky and worth it." Again, they laugh. "Anyway, I'm on shift at ten tomorrow."

Tracey bends to the mirror, pouts her lips, and stands back. She looks even more like Betty Boop. With a final smoothing of her dress, she lets Clare go ahead, and they walk back into the nightclub, the noise, and Tony Montana.

Tracey and Clare go back to the table, Clare immediately peeling off with a little finger twiddling wave. Tracey looks around at the pillar where 'Tony' had been standing, he has disappeared. A thought comes unbidden, "Well, that's the fastest I've lost a man."

It hits her again. How the music is failing to lift her, though she can feel the pulse echoing in her body, lights are flashing, and dancers are moving in spasmodic patterns. Everything feels a bit tired and world-weary. A bit distant, even the smell is more of bodies than excitement.

She scans the room vaguely, getting ready to leave, and then she sees him.

Tony is standing across the dancefloor, near the fire exit, talking to another, slimmer man.

The smaller man has a look on his face, a sort of rabbit-in-the-headlights frightened look. Tony is holding the man's shoulder. A conversation is ricocheting between them. Even from this distance it looks like the sort of discussion which usually ends up with the bouncers joining in.

Then, they both turn to stare at Tracey. She returns the look, a feeling runs through her, a billowing of concern and uncertainty.

Without thought, still watching them, unsure of what she is seeing, Tracey reaches for her drink. Tony releases the man with a push, he stumbles back, then turns and runs through the exit door. It swings, hanging open, then slowly closing leaving a slot of light which crawls from large to a single small line.

Tony glances at the door, then at Tracey, then starts running towards her.

She jerks backwards, blinking, instinctively looks behind. Tony is pushing through dancers, annoyance and anger in his wake, someone grabs for him, and he shrugs the hand away. Still, she sits, rooted, trying to pull sense out of what she is seeing

His eyes are fixed on her. Without thinking, she raises her glass to her lips, willing normality to the abnormal. And he is there, large and tense, breathing heavily, she catches a smell of sweat. His hand snakes out, and she shrinks back, expecting a blow, but he grabs her wrist.

"Don't drink that - it's spiked". For a moment his voice surprises her and his grip hurts. In one corner of her eye, she sees Clare touch the shoulder of the man she is with, and they both stop dancing.

Tracey takes a moment to process what he said, but her first thought and words are, "You're hurting my arm. Let go." There is surprise but also anger in her voice.



"Sorry", he releases her and smiles. Despite herself, and everything that has just happened, she knows it is a smile she could get to like.

"You alright Babes?" Clare has come across the floor, and behind her the man she had picked up. He hovers, a little uncertain. Probably wondering if Clare is worth the aggro that this new man might mean.

Tracey considers 'Tony' again. He let go of her as soon as she cried out, is looking more concerned than frightening. There is a softness in his stance now, he has stepped back a little. He hasn't turned to challenge Clare and her partner. He's probably ok, Tracey nods.

"Yeah, fine Clare, thanks, catch you later?" Which means that they won't leave without checking on the other.

"Sure - ok, yeah, catch you later." Clare turns to her man; he takes her hand and starts back to the dance floor.

"So," She asks, voice pitched between challenge and question, "What was that all about?"

Tony smiles again, yes a good smile, and jerks his head towards the back bar,

"Easier to chat through there."

She hesitates, still not sure, he picks up her glass with two fingers, barely touching the rim.

"Honest, don't worry, I'm a policeman."

Tracey feels a flush of surprise, but yes, he looks fit enough to be in The Force. Tony sighs slightly, raises his eyebrows a fraction, probably in question. Finally, she nods.

They walk through the arch, into the slightly quieter area and out of sight of the dance floor and Becca and Clare.

Before Chapter 3

Dec 4<sup>th</sup> 1990

Ian opens his eyes, he doesn't want to, but is tired of holding them shut. Outside there are sounds he can't recognize and when he looks, strange shadows flash across the floor, thrown from light cast under a gap at the bottom of the door. He thinks of flames and listens for the sound of sirens and screaming.

He isn't sure when he woke, how long he has lain there willing himself to stay in the blackness. He does know that he was pretending that when he opened his eyes it would be Before.

But it isn't. it is the room he'd been put in last night. He lies, feeling something twist inside him, an emptiness, but also something else. Mammy said to give them colours, this is not the red when he wants to hit, it is the black when he wants to hide.

Before is still there in his mind, more real than now. Now is a place which shouldn't be.

There is a bump and crash from somewhere in the house, a sound like the door to Mr Rally's flat when he went out in the evening. Ian jumps, and for a moment he thinks he is going to wet himself; he looks down, a small damp patch has appeared on his pyjamas.

He closes his eyes again, but the noises only grow louder, and now there is the faint smell of his pee. Here and now are not going away, no matter how much he needs them to.

He pushes the blankets back, the room is warm, almost too warm, he climbs out of the bed. Despite the heat a shiver runs through him. His mind jumps to the day before, the train ride, this house, Mary, Jim. Finally, his thoughts settle on the boy, Andrew, the boy like a snarling dog.

Ian stands in the middle of the room. He wants to go to the toilet, and wonders if he will have to go downstairs in his damp pyjamas.

"Come on Little Mouse, be a brave Mouse now." The voice comes from nowhere, he spins around, then realizes, it is just a memory of Mammy. It feels golden though, better than white, better than orange, the colour of laughter, it is the best colour.

His breathing steadies and he listens again. There are new noises outside, sound with movement. He concentrates, the sound becomes two voices, whispering.

He can't make out the words, they swing back and forth, not getting louder but firmer, more solid. It is a little like the way Mammy and Dadda would talk at night in the other room, talking of money or the bad men.

Then there is silence again. Ian stands still, waiting to see what is going to happen. A thin crack of light is already catching dust motes in the air, and for a second they take his attention. Then the door eases wider, more light spills into the room.

Two small dark shapes are by the door, children he guesses. For a moment Ian thinks one is Andrew from yesterday, and feels his heart beat faster, but neither is as tall as Andrew. They stand in the door unmoving, but one must have pushed it.

"What do you want?" Ian asks. His voice comes out loud and angry, pushed out by something inside him, something he didn't know was there.

They jump back, look at him, then each other, and he studies them. His fists have clenched and he feels his shoulders and legs tighten, then begin to bounce slightly, like he is ready to spring forward. If they come in, he will hit them, he knows he will, even if he doesn't want to. Mammy isn't here to tell him what to do.

One of the boys is about Ian's age, slim, short blonde hair, vague freckles, light eyes and perhaps even an idea of a smile on his face. The other is a little older, perhaps eight. He isn't quite fat, but plump, a round face and his jumper is tight on his body. Both are wearing the same style clothes, black trousers, pale blue shirt and slightly darker jumpers, school uniform.

The younger one speaks, a high-pitched voice. "Hello. I'm James, this is David." They both stand at the door. They edge forward as if to come in, and again Ian feels himself tense, but then James stops and David halts too.

"You need to be dressed." says James. "It's getting up time."

Ian looks at them unmoving, the urge to do something, to strike out at them, has eased, his body no longer pulses him up and down as it did a moment before

"Wash, dress, breakfast, school." says David. "That's what we all have to do." Then

"What's your name?" Ian studies them, feeling tears prickling inside his eyes, he blinks them back.

"It's ok little Mouse." Again, the voice. Mammy's not here, but Ian knows that is what she would say. It is good to hear her voice, even if she is not here to speak.

"Ian," he says, again the word barks out louder and harder than he meant. David takes a step back and James blinks. Ian breathes slowly, then says again. "Ian Thompson". The boys accept the name, fall quiet. None are sure what to say next.

A girl's voice from a short way away, breaks into the quiet. There is something in the sound of the words that makes him tense again, they are high pitched, spoken fast. She is complaining, arguing about something. Ian can't catch what she is saying.

"Sarah." says David, turning to James. They fall quiet. The girl's words are a bit louder now, Ian remembers how his Mammy's voice went when she talked on the phone sometimes, when she ended up pretending she wasn't crying.

"James, David, are you up yet? Dressed, ready? And what about you Sarah?" It is Mary's voice, coming from a distance away, echoing slightly. It isn't an angry voice, it is cajoling, pushing. "Have you met our new friend Ian yet?" The voice continues, growing louder and Ian can hear heavy footsteps, feet coming up a flight of stairs perhaps.

James and David look at each other, turn, start to leave. Instinctively Ian follows them to the door. The hallway has a high roof, it is lit by bulbs set into the ceiling, the floor is covered by a dark brown carpet. The walls are a pale brown, but also have posters and pictures stuck to them. Some of the pictures are hand drawn, others seem cut from magazines and newspapers. At one end of the hall there is a flight of stairs going down, at the other another flight, twisting upwards.

Ian hovers, still uncertain. He can hear Mary climbing from below, her breath a little heavy. She stops for a second as David and James push past her, then continues upwards. As she does, Ian hears a noise from further back up the hallway.

On his side there are three doors, his, one with "Gemma" written on a piece of paper. The page has a picture of a smiling girl with elaborately styled hair. Next to that a door with

“Sarah” on it. This has a picture of a skull and cross bones and, “keep out – private”, in black and underlined.

As Ian watches as the door with ‘Sarah’ on it opens. The boy from last night, Andrew, is backing out, slowly. Ian pulls himself into his own door, glances down the other way. Mary’s head is just appearing above the level of the steps, she is looking down as she leans on the banister, breathing heavily.

At the other end of the hallway. The boy has stopped, hand still on the door handle, halted in his movement. For a moment everything seems frozen, Andrew sees him and stares.

Ian feels himself moving forward, then calling out without thinking.

“Hello Mrs...Mary, I, I was looking for the...toilets.” His voice is loud. Mary looks up, distracted from her focus on the climb, pulling herself up the last few steps.

“Oh, good morning, Ian, I was just coming to see...” She stops, looking beyond Ian, who feels a movement behind him. He jumps with shock, and again feels a little pee wet his pyjamas, a hand lands on each of his shoulders, then spins him round.

“That way.” The accent is strong, but not as harsh as last night, the boys’ movement was fast though and dizzies Ian a little.

“Andrew, careful.” Mary’s voice rises but Ian can’t tell if it is in fear or laughter. He smiles, hoping that is right.

“Don’t worry Mary, I won’t break him.” Andrew laughs and nods at Ian’s pyjamas. “Though it looks like he’s leaking a bit to me. Got another piss.”

Before Chapter 4

Dec 4<sup>th</sup> 1990

After finding the toilet, the bathroom back down the hall, and clothes in a chest of drawers in his room, Mary leads Ian downstairs.

Mary comes down heavily on each step, breathing hard, “It’s these stairs Ian, they always get me. On the flat I’m fine, but my mountain climbing days are over.” She laughs, and Ian copies a moment later.

They walk along the hallway to the door with the L word on it. Ian stops. Trying to sound it out. Mary sees him, smiles.

“Lounge Ian, It means lazing, in Latin.”

“Lounge.” Ian repeats, he’s not sure what Latin is, but doesn’t want to ask, too many new things to hold in his head at the moment. There is something inside him, like a worm or a snake of electricity. It might be he is hungry or maybe it is telling him he should be worried, frightened, he isn’t sure, and Mammy isn’t here to help him.



The lounge is painted yellow and bright, even in the dull of a December morning. To the left of the door are three settees arranged in a U shape, facing a wall with a television on it. There are also some smaller chairs and very large cushions that someone could sit in. There is a big cupboard with no doors and Ian can see boxes of what are probably games and jigsaw puzzles.

Directly opposite the door are large windows, reaching up to the high ceiling, and opening into an alcove with a bench like seat around it. Large orange curtains hang down, they are open, and Ian can see the front of the house, the garden and road beyond.

“This way Ian”. He feels Mary’s arm on his shoulder and jumps again.

“My, you are a nervous little thing aren’t you...well I suppose.” Ian doesn’t know what she supposes and looks up at her. She falls quiet, and he follows her gaze to the right side of the room, where a long table stands. It is wooden and has chairs lined up around it, some pushed carefully underneath, others sticking out as if abandoned.

On the far wall is a blackboard with the date, ‘4<sup>th</sup> December’ and “Menu”, written on it in chalk. “Hotpot or ....” “Fruit, Apple pie, or Sponge”. Ian reads, struggling with one of the words. Mary looks at him again, smiles.

“A right little reader, aren’t you? Do you know that word, with the L”. He shakes his head.

“Las San Yah,” she spells it out for him. It should be La Sag Nee he thinks, but nods his head.

“Hello Mary, who’s this?” A bright voice calls out, and he looks up.

A girl is sitting alone at the table. She is older than Ian, but still young, maybe nine or ten he guesses. She has short dark hair, a thin face and dark eyebrows. Her eyes are brown, and she has a small nose and thin lips. She is wearing a thick track-suit type top with a rabbit on it. She crinkles a smile at him, and he notices she has toast and a smear of butter around her lips.

“Ah hello my little Gem Star, and how are you, tummy a bit better is it?” Mary asks.

The girl shakes her head back and forth, and her face makes a strange shape, her lower lip pushed over her upper one and her eyes looking upwards. Ian isn't sure what this means, perhaps she is still not well.

“Oh, well, still, better than yesterday I think, see you tucking into the toast there.” Mary smiles at her and the girl nods emphatically, taking another bite.

“This” Mary says, “is Ian. Ian's going to be staying with us. Ian, this is my little Gem Star, Gemma.”

The girl looks at Ian, tilting her head to one side, smiling again, she peers over the toast,

“Hello Ian.” She is staring, not in a hard way, almost like she knows him.

“Hello, Gemma.” He copies the smile, though there is something in the girl that brings it without trying. He feels the grin reach his eyes and his tummy; it is a nice feeling.

“Now Gemma, last day off school today. Can you be a good girl and help Ian with his breakfast whilst I sort out a few things with Jim?”

Gemma nods and smiles. For a moment a different look crosses her face but again Ian doesn't know what it means, and he's not even sure Mary saw it.

"Yes, I can." Gemma jumps down from the chair and looks at Ian. "What do you want, toast? Or there's cereal, cornflakes, Weetabix, Shredded wheat." As she speaks, she points to a sideboard with cereal boxes on it, also some bowls and plates. Next to it is a trolley stacked with a few dirty plates and bowls.

"There might be a bit of scrambled egg or other stuff in those." She waves vaguely towards three large grey metal boxes with lids on. "But that goes quickly."

Ian stands looking at everything. Mammy had always given him breakfast. The glass jugs look heavy and he's not sure he could lift one without spilling it.

"Er, could I have toast please". He speaks easily, the gold feeling is just hovering somewhere nearby, and for a second, he thinks he sees Mammy standing by the door.

"Of course, it's easy, come on, I'll show you." Gemma bounces from the chair, her voice is bright and she smiles again. She puts her hand out, and after a few moments Ian realises she wants to lead him. He takes her hand. It is warm and smooth, and she squeezes his fingers gently.

"Perhaps she'll be a friend Little Mouse?" He hears Mammy's voice in his head, but doesn't look round, he knows she isn't there. He nods a fraction.

Gemma leads him past the sideboard with the cereals and bowls to a large white machine with silver levers.

“Here’s what we do.” She drops two pieces of bread in the top and pulls the levers down with a little clanging noise. “Right, do you like dark or light toast?”

“Dark.” The first choice is easiest.

She nods and twists a small knob with numbers on it. “Number five it is.” Then she turns to him.

“Where you from then Ian?”

“Trent Street, that’s in London, near...” he thinks, he knows the word, can see the place, the park by the busy road, the traffic and roadworks. “Brixton Hill Road.”

“London? I’ve never been there, me and...” Now Gemma stops, and her lips purse together, her eyes suddenly look brighter, shinier.

“I’ve not gone to London, only Cambridge, St Ives once, by the river, you been there?”

Ian shakes his head. “Toast will pop when it’s done, do you want a drink. There’s, orange, milk, water, teas all gone.”

“Erm, milk, er...” He looks at the jug, it’s big and half full, looks heavy.

Gemma follows his eyes, then leads him back to the table.

“Here, I’ll help you.” She laughs a little and he sees a smile like Mammy’s on her face.

They sit there for a moment; Gemma tells him he should grow his hair longer and Ian nods.

She has a moustache of milk on her top lip, and he doesn’t know if he should tell her.

He is just deciding when something reaches out to him. Something dark and full of hurt. A smell, the smell of burning and pain, the hard smell of smoke. Moments later there is a shrieking piercing noise, high-pitched and painful. Ian shrieks, closes his eyes, and presses his hands to his ears. He crouches low, cringing.

Gemma spins around, he feels her move and looks. Dark smoke is coming from the toaster. She looks at it for a second, then runs and pushes a switch on the wall, then turns back to Ian.

Mary comes running in through the front door, waving a tea towel, flapping it at a small white box in the ceiling, around which a haze of black smoke still weaves back and forth.

Ian peers up at the smoke, his heart beating fast in his chest, tears on his face. But he is not as frightened as he had been. Gemma has her arms wrapped around him, clumsy but comforting, his head is pushed into her track-suit top, and she is talking to him in quiet words. "Don't be frightened, it's alright, don't worry Joshy, you'll be ok, I've got you."

He hides in her jumper, the smell of the smoke slowly being replaced by something different, and nice. He pulls away, and smiles at her.