

The Roman and the Runaway

A. J. Braithwaite

Smashwords Edition

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For Jill.

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PART I: The Roman

Chapter One

"And what the bloody hell d'you call this?"

Luke Brownlow shut the front door behind him and felt his start-of-the-summer-holidays happiness seeping away. He turned to see what his father was shouting about and recognised the object he was waving as his school report. The happiness was replaced by a rising feeling of gloom as he prepared himself for another argument.

In the living room, the unwelcome greeting had brought forth frightened wails from Luke's toddler sisters. He watched his mother rush out from the kitchen to soothe the girls, with a stressed and reproachful expression on her face. Luke decided that avoidance was the best response to his father's question and made for the stairs. His dad could move remarkably quickly for a big man and he intercepted Luke at the foot of the staircase. "Oh no, you don't. In there." He pointed at the kitchen and Luke slouched inside.

"Well?" Dad asked, looking furious. He usually seemed to look furious when he was talking to Luke these days.

"It's my school report," replied Luke, sulkily, choosing to answer the original question literally. His father didn't appreciate this.

"It's appalling," he snarled. "I don't believe you've done a single day's work at that school in the two years you've been there."

As this was almost true, Luke did not bother to reply. His mother, having calmed down the twins, came back into the room, still looking worried and upset.

"Hi, Mum," Luke ventured, trying to introduce a bit of friendliness into the conversation.

But Dad turned out to have Luke's mother playing on his team. "Your mother and I are very concerned about your lack of progress."

Mum nodded and added, "I can't understand it, Luke, when you used to do so well at the village school."

Luke knew he wasn't going to be able to explain the differences between the two schools to them. He might have tried if it was just his mother, but he wasn't going to attempt it with Dad there. His father seemed to be on at him about something or other all the time.

"Is the work so much harder, Luke?" his mother asked, her forehead creased with concern.

"Of course it isn't," Dad snorted. "He's just bone idle, that's all. Uncool to work hard is it?"

This was uncomfortably close to the truth, but Luke wasn't going to give his father the satisfaction of knowing that. He stared at the floor in silence.

"Dumb insolence, as usual," his dad decided. "Well, I warned you that there would be consequences if you didn't get your act together. For starters you're not going to be spending any time this summer with your so-called friends."

"What?" said Luke, startled into speech. "You can't stop me seeing them!"

"I'm also looking into finding you a different school to go to in September," added Dad. "It seems to us that a clean break is the only thing that's going to work, now."

Luke was horrified at this prospect. "You're fucking joking!"

He hadn't meant to swear and instantly regretted it as his father lost his temper completely and dealt him a heavy, open-handed blow to the side of his face. Luke cried out in pain and staggered sideways, pressing his hand to his cheek. The three of them stared at one other, all

equally shocked by what had just happened. Luke had never sworn at his parents like that and his father had never struck him before.

Dad spoke first, breathing hard and looking annoyed with himself. "I apologise for that, Luke, but I think you've just made up my mind for me. Get out of my sight."

Luke dashed upstairs to his bedroom, only too willing to get as far away from his father as possible. He slammed the door shut and threw himself heavily onto the bed, trying to hold back angry tears.

After a couple of hours of confinement in his small, hot bedroom, Luke couldn't bear being in the house any longer. He could hear the girls across the landing in the bathroom, splashing and chattering away as Mum got them ready for bed. The cover of their noise provided him with a good opportunity to try to escape. He quietly opened the door and crept down the stairs, keeping to the edges to avoid making the ancient treads creak. On reaching the half-landing where the stairs turned down to the hall he spotted his dad's legs protruding from underneath a newspaper. He was sitting on the bench by the front door and was clearly waiting for Luke to come down, probably to demand an apology.

Luke couldn't face another row. He silently reversed his course and slunk back to his bedroom. Desperate now to get out of the oppressively warm and stuffy little room, Luke leaned out of the open window and looked at the drop below him. Although it was upstairs, the ceilings of the cottage were so low that the room was not a long way above the ground. A pile of sand due to be used to build a patio was heaped directly beneath the window, conveniently placed to break his fall. The room immediately below his was Dad's study and would not be occupied since he knew his father was stationed on guard duty in the hall. Without thinking any more about it, Luke climbed on to the window sill, lowered himself backwards through the window and dropped softly onto the pile of sand.

He considered his next move. The cottage was one of several flint-faced homes in a short terrace, meaning there was no way out of the garden apart from through the house. The garden was fenced and surrounded by other people's properties, but the cottage next door was the end one of the terrace. If he was going to escape, it made sense to shin over the fence in that direction. That house was sometimes let out as a holiday cottage, with Luke's mother acting as housekeeper for the absent landlord, but Luke was fairly sure there weren't any tenants this week and he was confident he would be able to sneak out of its side gate without running into anyone. Getting as far away from his parents' cottage as possible was the only thing on his mind.

The twins' plastic push-along car was resting against the fence on that side, making it easy enough to clamber up onto it, grab the fence and pull himself over. Luke tried not to think about how he was going to get back into the house or about what was going to happen when his parents discovered he wasn't in his room.

As he dropped down on the other side of the fence Luke realised he was heading towards a newly-planted flower bed. Trying to avoid treading on too many of the young plants, he overbalanced and landed heavily on his knees in the damp soil, squashing several more plants in the process. It seemed that someone had recently watered the bed. Luke looked down at the large number of plants he had managed to obliterate in his fall and at his mud-coated trousers and let out a further string of swear-words.

"As I've just spent all afternoon weeding and planting that bed, I can approve the sentiment, if not the vocabulary."

Luke looked up to see the owner of the cottage standing in the doorway with a watering can in his hand. "Perhaps you'd like to get off the flower bed, before you destroy any more of my plants," suggested the man.

"Oh, yes, right. Sorry." Luke managed to say, stepping hastily on to the patio.

"It's Luke, isn't it?" asked his neighbour.

Luke nodded, dumb again, this time with embarrassment and with the certainty forming in his mind that this encounter was going to result in yet another unpleasant confrontation with his parents; presumably after an initial row here over the decimated flower bed. However his neighbour did not seem to be in a rush to send him back next-door; nor did he appear to be particularly angry.

"My name's Graham Kelly," the man introduced himself, "but most people call me Ned."

"Why?" asked Luke, puzzled.

"You'll have to look it up one day and find out," replied Mr Kelly with a smile. Fat chance of that, thought Luke. He felt extremely uncomfortable and was keen to get out of this situation as fast as possible.

The next-door neighbour, however, seemed unfazed by the sudden arrival of a sweaty, foul-mouthed (and now muddy) teenager in his back garden and did not seem to be in any hurry to let him go.

"I was going to make myself a drink. Would you like one? I've only just got back today, so there's only milk or water, I'm afraid."

Luke didn't like to say 'no', since the man was being so polite and didn't seem to be in a big rush to hand Luke back to his parents. "Er, yeah, thanks. Milk would be fine."

The neighbour smiled and gestured to the wooden chairs on the patio. "Take a seat," he said, "I won't be long," and with that he went indoors.

Luke sat down, feeling stupid, and wondered if Mr Kelly was, at that moment, calling his parents, or maybe the police. He was considering running off again, through the side gate, when his neighbour returned with two glasses of milk and a packet of biscuits. Luke hadn't had anything to eat since he'd got home and was grateful for the biscuits. He devoured a handful of them rapidly, as Mr Kelly sat at the patio table, drinking his own milk and watching him.

"Thanks," Luke said, as he ate the last of his pile of biscuits.

"Do you often climb out of your window and over the fence?" asked his neighbour. Luke wasn't sure if this question was going to be the start of the lecture he was expecting, but the man's demeanour remained relaxed and his tone was pleasant enough.

"Er, no," replied Luke, "I've never done this before." He felt more explanation was needed. "There was a bit of a row."

Mr Kelly was looking at him closely and Luke became more conscious of the swelling that was forming on the left side of his face, where his father's hand had connected with his cheek. "Mostly my own fault," he admitted. Then the question that was bothering him forced its way out. "Are you going to tell my parents?"

"I don't think so," replied the man. "Have you thought about how you're going to get back into your house?"

"No," said Luke. "I don't know if I want to. Dad's going to kill me."

His neighbour smiled. "I think you're being a bit overdramatic. Now, I want to go and have a chat with your parents anyway, it's been years since I've seen them. How about if I go round and talk to them now, giving you time to sneak in through the front door behind me while we're catching up with each other?"

Luke stared at him with a huge feeling of relief and gratitude. "Would you?"

"I don't see why not." Mr Kelly took a sip from his glass and looked at Luke with a serious expression on his face. "We all make stupid decisions sometimes. The important thing is not to repeat the mistake."

Luke found now that he wanted to explain why he had tried to escape. In a low voice, for fear of being overheard by his parents, he tried to justify his actions. "They want to send me to a different school! He wants to stop me seeing my friends!"

His neighbour frowned. "And how are you getting on at the school you're at now?"

A thought that had been lurking on the sidelines of Luke's mind suddenly stepped onto the field and he remembered his mother telling him that Mr Kelly was a teacher. Knowing that the man had a professional interest in the answer to this question brought his embarrassment flooding back, turning his face bright red. He had no intention of answering anyway and remained silent. But Mr Kelly appeared to be impervious to the dumb insolence which so enraged Luke's dad. He seemed to think Luke was blushing because he was ashamed of his performance at school.

"Perhaps it's not such a bad idea then, to make a fresh start somewhere new." Luke's expression remained glum and the man changed the subject. "I can't do anything about your muddy clothes, I'm afraid, but at least we can get your shoes clean before you go back."

He helped Luke remove the worst of the mud before leaving to perform his role as a distraction for Luke's re-entry to the cottage. As Mr Kelly went into the living room with Mum and Dad, Luke slid into the house, swiped a Cornish pasty from the fridge and made it safely back to his bedroom without detection. He left his muddy trousers in a heap on the floor. His last thought before falling asleep was that if Dad caught sight of them, there was going to be another almighty row in the morning.

Chapter Two

As he woke up, Luke couldn't remember immediately why he felt so upset, when it was the beginning of the summer holidays and he had six school-free weeks ahead of him. Then the dull ache in his left cheek brought the events of the previous evening back into his mind and he realised he was going to have to face his parents.

His mud-grimed trousers were on the floor where he'd left them. Luke carefully turned them inside-out and then took his duvet cover, pillowcase and sheet off the bed. He hid the dirty clothing inside the duvet cover and took the bundle of bedding downstairs to the washing machine.

His mother was in the kitchen, cutting up bananas for the twins' breakfasts. When Luke walked in with the washing and began loading the machine she smiled and said "I was going to change your bed on Monday, sweetheart, but thanks for doing it anyway."

Luke felt undeserving of this praise, but smiled back, put detergent in the machine and set it running.

"Where's Dad?" he asked, unable to avoid voicing his main concern. The smile vanished from his mother's face, replaced by a frown of worry, and he wished he hadn't spoken.

"He went to get his paper from the shop. Oh Luke, I do wish you'd be more considerate of his feelings. He's only trying to do what's best for you, you know." She came up to Luke and held his hands. "We really do think that a change of school is going to make all the difference for you."

Luke still felt mutinous, but his mother clearly thought this plan was brilliant and he couldn't see any way of persuading her otherwise. A very small part of him thought she was probably right, which didn't help.

"Oh, I know what I meant to tell you," she continued. "Ned from next door came round last night."

Luke tried to look like this was news to him. "Did he?"

"Yes, he's going to be staying in his house himself this summer. He wondered if you'd be willing to help out in his garden for some extra pocket money during the holidays."

Luke thought of the flowers he'd destroyed during his escape attempt the previous night and couldn't help smiling. "Er, yeah. I s'pose so."

Mum went back to slicing the bananas. "He hasn't been back here for years and the garden could certainly do with a bit of attention, so you'll be busy, I should think. Oh, here's your Dad now."

Luke took one look out of the kitchen window, then grabbed a couple of bananas and made a hasty retreat up to his bedroom, despite Mum's objections.

Later that morning, when he heard his father playing with the twins in the back garden, Luke left by the front door and went round to his neighbour's house to thank him for his help the previous evening.

"Did your mother tell you about my suggestion for some help with the garden?" asked Mr Kelly, as he invited Luke in. Luke followed him through to the cottage's tiny kitchen and smiled.

"Yeah. I probably owe *you*, for the things I flattened last night."

"Yes, I was rather sorry to see them wiped out like that. Have you made things up with your parents?"

"I haven't spoken to *him* yet."

Mr Kelly frowned, then said "Well, perhaps a cooling-off period is best." He hesitated for a moment, then added "I'm planning on taking a hike over the Seven Sisters today. It's a circular route that'll take about three hours. You can come along if you like."

Luke really wasn't sure about this. He liked walking, and had often hiked over the Downs with his mother in past summer holidays, but there hadn't been much opportunity since the twins had been born a couple of years ago. And the idea of getting away from his father for three hours was definitely appealing, but did he really want to spend it in the company of Mr Kelly, a person he barely knew? And a *teacher*, for goodness sake!

"I won't be offended if you say 'no'," smiled his neighbour, apparently reading his mind. "I know you used to do quite a lot of hiking with Suzanne, but if you'd rather not, that's fine. You can come and help me with the garden tomorrow."

The memory of his long walks with his mother came back to Luke strongly at these words and he felt inexplicably emotional at the way things seemed to have changed so much since those days. "No, I mean, yes, I'll come. Please." Luke managed to twist his mouth into a smile.

"Great. I'll fix us some sandwiches and you can go and check with your mum that it's OK."

Luke dashed back home and was relieved to find his mother alone in the kitchen. He told her of the plan.

"Really?" she laughed. "Well, nobody knows the walks round here better than Ned. He used to go on hikes with me and my brother when we were all teenagers. We used to tease him because he was always trying to get us interested in the plants and birds, when all we wanted to do was get away from our parents. He was the same: his dad was a complete nightmare and Ned wouldn't spend any time in the house if he could help it." She stopped and looked shrewdly at Luke. "I hope you'll be more polite to him than we were."

"Course I will, Mum," said Luke and he went back to Mr Kelly's house before she could reconsider.

Mr Kelly was loading up a rucksack with foil-wrapped sandwiches and some bottled water when Luke came back into the kitchen. He picked up a well-used map and unfolded it on the kitchen table.

"I used to know the countryside round here off by heart," he said, "but I haven't been back for so long that it might be wise to take the map with us." With his finger, he traced out the route he was planning to take so that Luke could see where they would be going. "We'll go out along the cliffs and then back through the woods. That way we'll be in the shade when it gets hotter this afternoon. It's about eight miles in all. D'you think you can cope with that?"

It had been a long time since Luke had walked so far, but he wasn't going to chicken out now. He hoped he wouldn't embarrass himself by collapsing from exhaustion half way round. "Think so," he replied.

They headed out of the village together and soon found their way to the abrupt edge where the green hills became cliffs of stark white chalk. To the left, balanced on the brink of Beachy Head was the lighthouse of Belle Tout. Mr Kelly told Luke how the lighthouse had been moved nearly twenty metres back from the edge of the cliff in 1999, to prevent it from falling into the sea.

"Of course it had already been nearly completely destroyed in the war," he added.

"By the Germans?" asked Luke, trying to be polite.

Mr Kelly laughed. "You'd think so wouldn't you? No, it was the Canadians."

Luke's knowledge of history wasn't wonderful, but even he was fairly sure that the Canadians weren't fighting against the British during the Second World War.

"How come?" he asked, getting interested, despite himself.

"They had dummy wooden tanks lined up for artillery practice on the cliff top near Belle Tout," explained Mr Kelly. "They were supposed to be shooting at those, but the lighthouse got hit, too. Sounds like they needed the practice."

Luke laughed.

"Have you ever walked along the base of the cliffs?" Mr Kelly asked him.

"No."

"We can't do it today, because the tide will be in soon, but it's quite a good walk. Harder than this one, though and takes a lot longer. There's a German submarine down there, you know."

"A whole submarine?"

"No - just bits of one. Well, to be frank, they look like they could be any old bits of scrap metal. But it makes a good story."

By the time they got back to the village, Luke's leg muscles were complaining and his feet had stopped talking to him altogether.

"How are you feeling?" asked his neighbour.

"Honestly? Absolutely knackered," replied Luke, who was no longer feeling the need to be scrupulously polite to his new acquaintance. "But I think I'll be fit enough to come round and help in your garden tomorrow."

Luke did do some work for Ned Kelly in his garden that summer, but both of them preferred the grander scale of nature laid out for them on the chalky hills and cool woodlands of the South Downs. After his long absence from the area, Mr Kelly seemed to be enjoying rediscovering his teenage haunts and Luke often went with him. He could not help but be entertained by his neighbour's enthusiasm for the history and geography of their surroundings and by his dry sense of humour. Mr Kelly showed Luke how to read a map and, after their first few walks, gave him the responsibility of navigating them home. Luke was surprised at how much he enjoyed the hikes they were taking and it wasn't long before he was thinking of his neighbour as 'Ned' rather than 'Mr Kelly'.

The arguments between Luke and his parents were continuing to make their house an unpleasant place to be and it was always a relief to get out and spend some time away from them. And from Dad, in particular. Luke was brooding over the latest row with his father when he was next out walking with Ned. His resentful thoughts about his dad reminded him of his mother's comment about Ned's father. He felt comfortable enough now in their relationship to be able to question his neighbour about him.

"What was your Dad like?" he asked. "Mum said you didn't get on too well."

Ned frowned and for a moment Luke thought he had said the wrong thing and that Ned wasn't going to answer. He was worried he shouldn't have mentioned it but, after a long pause, Ned replied. "I think I'll need some sustenance before I even try to address that subject," he said. "Let's have lunch."

They sat down on the grassy slope of the hill and unwrapped their sandwiches. Ned ate some of his in silence, then gave Luke a thoughtful look.

"Since I've been back in the cottage," he began, "the thinness of the walls between our houses has become obvious and I can't help but be aware that there are some pretty major rows happening on your side of them."

Luke lowered his gaze to his sandwich, embarrassed.

"Which made me realise," continued Ned, "that your mother and her family must have been equally well aware of the major rows that used to happen in my house when I was around your age."

At this, Luke's interest was aroused and he looked back up at Ned's face. Ned gave him a sad smile. "I don't want to bore you with my entire life history," he said, "but some of my experience then might be relevant for what you're going through now."

"My father was over fifty when I was born and I don't think that large age gap helped us understand each other. He had been a trawlerman since he was fifteen and I hardly saw him when I was small. When I was ten, my mother died and he retired from work. We moved here and were thrown together, almost as strangers, and fairly quickly finding we had little in common."

"Our relationship got worse, rather than better, as time went on. He couldn't see why I wanted to stay on at school and then, later, go to university. He thought a man should go out and get work as soon as possible." Ned ate another mouthful of sandwich before continuing. "We fought about it constantly. In some ways it was exactly the opposite of the fight that seems to be going on in your house."

"I was miserable living here with him and my reaction (like yours last night) was to run away from the situation. I had some very supportive teachers - at the school you're at now, as it happens - and they helped me get scholarships so that I could study overseas without my father's assistance. I left home to go to America when I was eighteen and I didn't come back here until after my father's death. Our relationship had deteriorated so much that he never even told me that he was dying."

Ned sighed and rubbed his forehead with his left hand. Luke noticed a white scar there.

"Did he give you that scar?" Luke couldn't help asking.

"Yes, his parting gift just before I left. Although that particular fight, to borrow your words, was mostly my own fault." Luke looked intrigued and Ned laughed.

"Oh, it's not a very stirring tale, I assure you. I got home extremely late after a last evening out with my school friends before we all went our separate ways. I'd had a great time and a wonderful moonlit walk home." Ned stopped talking for a moment, apparently lost in the memory of that evening, then seemed to pull himself together again.

"I was feeling buoyed up about being on the verge of leaving for America. I thought I could do anything and my common sense had been diluted with too much beer. So, when my father started on at me for getting back so late, I told him exactly what I thought of him."

Luke's face screwed up and he winced in sympathy for Ned's eighteen-year-old self. Ned nodded in acknowledgment, "Yes, it was another one of those stupid decisions we were discussing the other day." Ned put his hand up to his head again. "He knocked me down and I gashed my head on the hearth. I left for good a few days later and it's only recently I've felt able to spend any time in that house, even though he's been dead now for ten years. Don't let things get that bad between you and your father, Luke."

Thinking about this, Luke realised that on the night they had met, Ned must have been strongly reminded of his fights with his own father and, when he had helped Luke avoid another argument with his dad, he must have been thinking of his own difficult teenage years. It didn't make Luke feel any happier about his relationship with his father, but it did make him appreciate being allowed to tag along with Ned even more.

*

Only once did he jeopardise the whole thing. On a day when he and Ned had planned a hike, Kyle Dawson, one of Luke's school friends, rang to invite Luke to hang out in the nearby town with a gang of other friends from school. Luke knew his dad wouldn't let him go, so he didn't bother asking either of his parents. Instead, he explained to Ned that he wouldn't be able to go on the hike, but would walk with him as far as the bus stop on the main road and go into town instead. He didn't see any reason to lie to Ned about where he was going.

The first part of his plan worked fine; Luke met up with his friends at the entrance to the pier on the seafront. As usual, they spent an hour or two feeding coins into the slot machines of the amusement arcade. Then, also as usual, they left the pier considerably poorer and invested their remaining funds in stocks of hot dogs, hamburgers, chips and sugar-laced soft drinks to consume on the beach.

"Where've you been all summer, Luke?" asked Kyle, licking spilt ketchup from his fingers. Heads turned in Luke's direction to hear his reply.

"My parents have banned me from seeing you guys," Luke told them, going on to explain about the plan to send him to a new school. He was gratified at the expressions of outrage that greeted these revelations.

"So how come you're here now?"

"I sneaked out - they don't know I'm here."

"Cool," said Kyle. "Oh, that reminds me." He dug into one of the pockets of his cargo pants and produced a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. "I lifted these from my old man's jacket this morning."

Kyle passed around the cigarettes from his dad's packet and the boys lit them.

"What you gonna do about this school thing?" Kyle's attention was back on Luke.

Luke watched the smoke curling up from his cigarette. He had been giving this question some serious thought. "I'm gonna prove to Dad that it won't make any difference. I'll make sure I do just as badly at the new school so he sees it's a waste of money. I might even try to get myself expelled."

His friends, who usually made a point of never being impressed by anything, were genuinely admiring of Luke's current and planned acts of defiance. They entertained themselves in a discussion of the most effective means of getting permanently excluded from school.

Luke basked in the sunshine and in his friends' attention. This was where he belonged. He knew his parents' plans were wrong, however well-intentioned.

It would have been a perfect day if Luke had not missed the last bus back to the village (there were only four each day). He was stranded in the town with no money left and no way of getting home apart from walking. Realising he was going to end up doing a hike after all, he walked the five miles back to the village, glad that it wasn't raining, but wishing that the day was not quite as hot and sunny as it was. As he approached the terraced row of cottages, footsore and grimy, he found himself hoping hard that Ned had gone for a longer walk than usual and that Mum and Dad had not seen him return without Luke.

He opened the door to the cottage and immediately heard his father's voice, sounding angry, coming from the living room. When he heard Ned's voice replying to his dad he knew for certain that his illicit trip into town had been discovered. "Busted," he muttered to himself. His first instinct was to turn around and walk out of the house again. Unfortunately, Elsie, one of his sisters, walked out of the kitchen and spotted him in the doorway.

"Lu-lu!" she shouted, enthusiastically, pinpointing his location with unnerving precision. The conversation in the living room stopped and was replaced by a pounding of heavy feet and

the appearance of his dad in the doorway, with the customary expression of fury on his face. Luke snatched up Elsie in self-defence and blew a loud raspberry on her stomach, much to her delight.

The adults appeared considerably less delighted. Mum swung down upon him, detached Elsie and took her off into the back garden with Molly, her twin, without saying a word to him. Luke was left alone with the two men. He was beyond caring about what his father thought of him, but was deeply uncomfortable about having dragged Ned into this situation.

"I'm sorry-" he began, talking to Ned, but his father cut across him.

"Just shut up, you disobedient little brat."

Luke shut up. He wasn't sure what he'd been going to say anyway. His dad positioned himself next to the open front door and turned to Ned, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

Ned nodded at Luke's dad as he left, and gave the teenager a look which seemed to say "I expected better of you than this," without the need for expressing the thought in words. The likelihood of going on any more Downland walks, his only means of escaping from his family this summer, seemed to be leaving the house along with Ned, and Luke knew he had only himself to blame.

Dad's embarrassment and anger were now vented at Luke, who was told, at length, exactly what his father thought of him for sneaking off without permission. Luke, who was tired and also now very conscious of the thinness of the cottage walls, did not shout back, so for once the lecture did not escalate into a full-blown row. Luke spent another evening in his bedroom, without supper, and was forbidden to leave the house for the next seven days.

It was a week of chores. Dad seemed to think hard work would keep him out of trouble and he devised a plan of housework and maintenance jobs for Luke to undertake. While mowing the front lawn on the evening of his third day of confinement, Luke finally got the chance to talk to Ned, who was returning from a shopping trip and walking up the path beside the lawn to his own front door, laden with bags of groceries. Luke stopped mowing and hurried over to apologise.

"Look, Ned, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have got you involved. It was so stupid."

Ned regarded him with that serious look of his, but said nothing.

"I'm grounded for a week, but I really want to carry on hiking with you, after that, if you'll let me." The words tumbled out of Luke's mouth in a rush. "Please," he added, with a note of desperation.

"I'll think about it," Ned replied eventually. "But you'll need to ask your parents' permission, too." He shook his head. "It really was an incredibly thoughtless thing to do, Luke. As I said to you before, we all make stupid decisions sometimes. The important thing is..."

"...not to repeat the mistake," completed Luke. And with a small smile Ned entered his own house and left Luke feeling slightly more cheerful. Until his father came outside to see why he'd stopped mowing the lawn, that is.

He was allowed to go out on hikes again with Ned after his week of servitude. Luke suspected Mum had persuaded Dad to agree, as his father was still embarrassed about the whole affair and would have preferred to have stopped all of Luke's excursions. At first, Luke felt awkward about what had happened, but Ned was as informative and easy-going as ever and soon he enjoyed the hikes as much as he had before.

Luke never discussed the issue of his new school with Ned. For one thing, he didn't want to think about it, and for another, he suspected Ned would be likely to side with his parents and he didn't want to have the same arguments out on the Downs that he was having within the walls of the cottage. He preferred to pretend that if he ignored it, the problem would go away. Mum and Dad had managed to get him into a private school some distance from their house, as his father was friendly with one of the governors. This meant Luke would have to stay away from home during term time. When he found this out, the rows had broken out again. The idea of being permanently at school for weeks at a time seemed dreadful to Luke. But eventually he gave up arguing, as his parents were both determined he would go to this other school, and there seemed to be little he could do about it.

The last two weeks of the summer were the worst. Ned had let his cottage out to holidaymakers again and had returned to work himself, leaving Luke alone with his family and the realisation that he would be leaving for a new school at the end of the first week of September. Luke now wished he'd talked to Ned about the ways private boarding schools differed from state day schools. He regarded with bewilderment the piles of clothes and sports kit his mother had bought for him: he certainly seemed to need a lot more in the way of stuff.

Chapter Three

The second Saturday in September arrived all too quickly and Luke's father loaded the trunk into the back of his car. He had decided to leave his wife and the girls at home and take Luke himself. Luke wondered if he thought that Mum would have changed her mind if he had entrusted her with the job instead. He kissed and hugged her and the twins, before turning dejectedly to the car.

The journey was not a comfortable one. His dad attempted to make conversation every so often, but Luke was not in the mood to humour him and a large lump of homesickness and trepidation seemed to have settled in the back of his throat, making it difficult to talk in any case. At least when he'd started at his last school he'd been one of a whole group of new students, some of whom he'd been with at primary school. This time he would probably be the only new kid in the whole year and it would be that much harder to make friends.

Dad made one last effort to talk to him. "You know Luke, I don't care what you do once you've completed your education. If you want to go and pick grapes in France, build skyscrapers or collect rubbish for the council, that's all fine by me. What I really *don't* want is for you to come to me in ten years' time and ask why I didn't give you the chance to choose your future life by making sure you got the most out of your education."

Luke said nothing, but his father continued, undeterred. "You were born while your mother and I were still at university, but we both continued studying because we knew it was going to be the best way of ensuring we could give you a good life once we left. If you mess your education up now, then your choices in life are going to be severely limited."

"I don't care!" Luke said.

"You don't care right now because you don't know what you're talking about," Dad said, managing to keep his tone civil. "While we've got care of you, it's our responsibility to do the best we can. The university career your mother and I continued with, despite having a baby to look after and hardly any money, means that now we can pay for better educational opportunities for you. Once you get to school leaving age, then it's up to you what you do."

The rest of the journey passed in silence. They carried the heavy trunk between them into the grand front entrance of the school. It had once been a stately home, Dad had informed Luke on the way there. Luke felt small, grubby, and insignificant as they walked up the steps. In the entrance hall they joined a short queue of other new pupils and parents who were being told where to go and what to do. When Luke and his dad got to the front of the line they were greeted by the woman who seemed to be in charge.

"Hello, I'm Mrs Lloyd and I'm the administrator here. Welcome to Hawley Lodge." She smiled warmly down at Luke. "What is your name, dear?"

Luke swallowed down the lump that was threatening to stop him talking altogether and told her his name. Mrs Lloyd checked it against her list.

"Brownlow, Brownlow, Brownlow. Yes, here you are. You're going to be in the Romans house. Oh, and the headmaster wanted to have a word with you after you've dropped off your stuff and said your goodbyes."

Luke looked at her, then at Dad, in surprise, but his father seemed as bemused as he was, and Mrs Lloyd was busy getting out a photocopied floor plan of the school to show them where to go. The building was shaped like a capital H, with the dormitories on the top floor, arranged so that one school house was in each of the four wings. Mrs Lloyd explained that there were

staircases on either side of the building which would be the usual way for Luke to get around the floors, but that they could use the goods lift to get his trunk upstairs today.

His dad helped Luke get his trunk up to the room he would be sharing with the other year nine students of the Romans house. There were trunks at the ends of three of the four beds, so they stowed his at the end of the other one and made their way back down the staircases to the hall for further instructions from Mrs Lloyd. She briskly shook Luke's father by the hand and wished him a good journey home, leaving him no option but to say good-bye to Luke. Much as he resented his father's recent actions, Luke felt slightly abandoned as Dad patted his shoulder and assured him that half-term would be here in no time and they would see him soon.

Once his dad had gone, Mrs Lloyd came back to Luke and gave him directions to the headmaster's office, which was on the first floor.

"Does he see all the new students?" Luke managed to ask her.

"No, dear, I don't believe he does – but I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Off you go."

Not at all reassured, Luke climbed the ornately-carved wooden staircase that led upwards from the main entrance hall to the first floor, wondering why on earth he'd been singled out. A sick feeling settled in his stomach as he remembered the abysmal school report that had sparked off this chain of events. Maybe his parents had sent a copy of it here and he was already in trouble. As he neared the top of the stairs it occurred to him that this was his first chance of making a bad impression on the man who would have the power to send him home permanently. He resolved not to waste the opportunity, although the thought of intentionally doing so made him feel sicker still.

The headmaster's office was on one side of a corridor which connected the two side wings of the school. The door to the office was open and Luke was glad of that, because he was so nervous now that he didn't think he would have had the courage to knock on it if it had been closed. He walked through the doorway and found himself in an ante-room, where a friendly-looking young woman was sitting behind a desk. A brass plaque at the front of the desk was engraved with the words 'Headmaster's secretary'.

"Hello, you must be Luke. I'm Miss Croft. Go on through." She gestured towards a door to her right, which was also open, and Luke walked through it into a large and imposing room. It had four tall windows which gave a view over the sunny courtyard enclosed by the two wings on the south side of the building. The walls were lined with books, in the style of an old-fashioned library, and a wooden desk covered in papers stood at the far end of the room. In the centre was a large table, surrounded with green leather chairs. As he entered, the black-robed figure of his new headmaster rose from behind the desk and moved forwards to greet him.

"Hello, Luke," said a very familiar voice and Luke was hugely shocked to recognise his new headmaster as the next-door-neighbour he had spent the summer getting to know.

"Ned!" said Luke in amazement, before becoming completely perplexed. "But, how-?" His powers of speech deserted him.

Ned was grinning in a most unheadmasterly manner. "I only found out last week it was our school you were joining. I'm really pleased, Luke. I'm sure you're going to get on splendidly here." He was sensitive to Luke's confusion and tried to reassure him. "I'll phone your parents and explain the situation. I believe my deputy was in charge when they came to visit the school last month."

Luke nodded, still unable to speak. Part of him was glad to see a familiar face in these unfamiliar surroundings, but another part was beginning to wonder whether he'd ever be comfortable in Ned's company again. Ned had had more time to consider the circumstances and

tried to alleviate his fears. "It's alright, you'll really only see me at a distance here, at assemblies and mealtimes and so on. In the holidays I'll be Ned your neighbour, and here I'll be Mr Kelly your headmaster. Two different people, really. I wanted to talk to you today to explain the situation, but I doubt very much we'll have any reason to speak to each other again until we're back at home, Luke."

Luke finally felt happy enough to be able to form words again. He smiled back at his neighbour. "OK, I think I can handle that."

"Good. You're going to find it very different here from your old school, Luke. I think this place might be just what you need. Oh, and I really don't want to interfere in your life here at all, but it occurred to me today that if you want to keep practising your map-reading, you might like to think about joining the orienteering club. It'll give you a chance to explore this area too."

"OK," said Luke again, having no idea what orienteering might be and beginning to feel bewildered again.

"Now off you go to your common room and meet your fellow year nines. Work hard, Luke and make your parents proud of you."

Luke found his way back to the top floor, still rather stunned by this turn of events, but a little comforted that he knew at least one person in this new world. His original plan of getting himself expelled as soon as possible was already forgotten; there was no way he was going to deliberately make Ned think badly of him.

The common room was at the end of the top floor. It was a noisy place, with many of the boys of the Romans house already there, catching up with each other after the long summer break. A very old-fashioned looking television was blaring out a music channel in one corner of the room, while at the tables to Luke's right an arm-wrestling championship seemed to be in progress.

An immensely tall black boy dressed in what appeared to be a calf-length striped skirt and sandals levered himself out of a saggy-looking armchair and approached Luke.

"You're the new year nine, right?" His voice was deep and seemed to vibrate the floor.

Luke thought this boy looked as though he'd stepped out of a documentary about Africa. He found himself unable to speak again and just nodded. "I'm Toranda. Mrs Lloyd asked me to look out for you." The tall boy turned and shouted to the room at large. "Any year nines here?"

Three boys who had been watching the arm-wrestling contest turned around. Toranda beckoned them over and they came, looking curiously at Luke.

"This is your new room-mate. Show him the ropes will you?" Toranda seemed to consider that making this perfunctory introduction had fulfilled his obligation to Luke and he turned back to his seat, leaving the four boys staring at each other. Luke thought he had better tell them his name.

"I'm Luke Brownlow," he stated.

"Hi Luke. I'm Jay Trenton," said the tallest boy of the three, who was slim, with longish blond hair and brown eyes. He gestured to the short boy next to him, who had a thickly freckled face, dark hair and grey eyes. "This is Fred Wright and this-" here he pointed at the tall, dark-skinned and dark-eyed boy next to Fred, "is Taj Verma. D'you want a guided tour?"

"Yes, please," said Luke.

"OK – we'll start here. This room is called the Forum," said Jay. "It's the Romans' common room, you see."

Luke didn't see, and evidently this was apparent from his face.

"There are four houses, right?" explained Fred. "The Normans' common room is called the Keep, the Vikings' is the Longhouse and the Saxons' is the Stockade. They're all at the far ends of the top floors. You can see the Stockade over there." Fred pointed at the equivalent room to theirs on the opposite of the school. "The Longhouse and the Keep are right at the front of the school".

"Oh, I see."

Jay, Taj and Fred took Luke all over the school, passing on invaluable information about the way things were done and where Luke would be expected to be at particular times. The classrooms were in the wings of the lower two floors, with the top two floors reserved for accommodation for staff and students. The Romans explained to Luke that the central corridor on the first floor of the school (the cross-bar of the H) was out of bounds for students, which meant that getting from the first-floor classrooms in the west wing to those in the east involved going first down the stairs to the ground floor, then across the entrance hall and up the stairs on the other side.

"We call that corridor Death Alley," Fred explained. "The headmaster and the deputy head's offices are on that corridor, and so's the sick bay. Basically you only end up there if you're in deep schtuck, one way or another."

Luke thought of his recent visit to the corridor, but said nothing about it. He didn't think it was going to be wise to talk about his unusual relationship with Ned Kelly to his new acquaintances, somehow.

There was a sign-up sheet for school clubs in the entrance hall and Luke put his name down for the Orienteering Club, even though he still had no idea what he was volunteering himself for. Taj, Jay and Fred showed him all the classrooms, described their teachers and took him down for their evening meal in the main hall at six o'clock.

"What's the food like?" asked Luke, who had been scarred by his previous experiences of school dinners. The idea of eating stuff like that for every meal of every day for the next six weeks was quite distressing.

"Pretty good, actually," said Fred, whose figure suggested that he was quite fond of his food. Luke was reassured, and Fred proved to be quite right. Maybe this place won't be as bad I thought, Luke decided.

Chapter Four

Hawley Lodge School was small, with barely a tenth the number of pupils that had been in Luke's previous school. It was possible to know every student and impossible to be an anonymous face in the crowd. This took some getting used to for Luke, who found he could not coast along without doing much work as he had done in his old school. Expectations of the students were made plain and Luke got the feeling that the staff here had more time to make sure all the members of their classes were engaged and keeping up with their work.

In some ways the school seemed old-fashioned. Rules about uniform were stricter than Luke was used to and he found it odd that Ned wore a black gown around the place. The boys were expected to stand when a member of staff entered a classroom and to call their male teachers 'sir'. The students themselves were usually addressed by their surnames. All of these traditions struck Luke as relics of a bygone time; teachers at his old school had never insisted on such things. Most of the boys were boarders, although there were a few that lived close enough to attend as day pupils.

He found he missed having girls around, although he'd never spent much time talking to them in his old school. There were a few girls in the sixth form who attended as day pupils, but they seemed terribly grown up to Luke. There were some female teachers and there were other women on the staff: Mrs Lloyd the administrator; Miss Croft, the headmaster's secretary; the school's Matron and the terrifying Mrs Mould, who cleaned the boys' dormitories and who was justly feared by all who crossed her path. Mrs Mould took her duties seriously and Luke got into trouble with her almost immediately by leaving a half-finished can of coke in his bedside cabinet. Instead of simply telling him that no food or drink was allowed in the dormitory, Mrs Mould informed the Romans' housemaster, Mr Wilmot, of her discovery. Mr Wilmot was also the tutor for the year nines and he held Luke back one break-time to let him know the rules and to warn him that there would be consequences if any other contraband items were found in his room.

"Why couldn't she just tell me herself?" Luke complained to his room-mates later.

"It's not the way she works," Taj told him. "She loves running to the housemasters with the sordid details of our crimes. Don't try to use your boyish charm on her, either. She's immune to it."

Taj said this in the tone of someone who had already tried to get round Mrs Mould and failed.

"And why was she poking around in my bedside cabinet anyway?" Luke wondered.

"Get used to it," advised Fred. "There is no privacy in this place."

As Ned had predicted, Luke rarely saw him except during assemblies and mealtimes, and they did not speak to each other again, but Luke was keenly aware that however distant Ned might appear to be, it was highly likely that he would be keeping an occasional eye on his progress. He still didn't care what his father thought of him, but he didn't feel the same way about his neighbour. Luke was interested to see what his classmates thought of Ned and was quietly pleased to discover that his neighbour was treated with a good deal of respect by them, having a reputation for being fair and consistent.

Orienteering turned out to involve running around the countryside while navigating between checkpoints marked on a map. Luke enjoyed it immensely and quickly became a member of the Romans' orienteering team. When it came to school work, however, Luke found,

as he'd feared, that he was a long way behind his colleagues and was having to work hard to catch up.

Ned had clearly spoken to Luke's mother, as he received a letter from her towards the end of his first full week of term.

Dear Luke,

I'm sure you were as surprised as we were to find out your new headmaster was none other than Ned Kelly! I had no idea – I hadn't linked up Graham Kelly MSc with our Ned at all! I'm really happy you have him there to keep an eye on you, although I'm sure you won't need it (please!).

The girls and Dad are all fine and send their love. Elsie and Molly have been asking 'Where's Lulu?' every single morning. Missing you so much and looking forward to your half-term break,

Speak soon,

Lots of love,

Mum

This letter reminded Luke of the day he had met Ned and the way his neighbour had suggested he should look up the name Ned Kelly. He had an IT lesson that morning, so as the class settled themselves at the computers he searched for the name on the Internet. The first result took him to an online encyclopaedia, where he read the story of the famous Australian outlaw. The photograph of that Ned Kelly, taken on the day before his execution, portrayed a man with a huge bushy beard and a mass of thick, dark, wavy hair. The contrast with the headmaster's clean-shaven face, balding head, glasses and short fair hair was so extreme that Luke nudged Jay, who was sitting next to him, and showed him the picture. Jay was just as tickled as Luke and they both burst into a fit of helpless laughter which turned the attention of the whole class in their direction and brought their teacher, Mr Wilmot, striding over from the front of the room.

Luke hastily shut down the web-browser window, but Mr Wilmot turned out to be more technically capable than any other teacher Luke had met. He re-opened the program, displayed the history of pages which had been visited that day, sorted them by the order in which they had been viewed and brought back the most recent one: the encyclopaedia entry on Ned Kelly, together with his extremely hairy photograph.

Although Luke knew he was getting himself into trouble, the treacherous laugh was building up inside him again as the photograph re-appeared and he had to bite his lips together hard to stop it from spilling out. He didn't dare to look at Jay or at Mr Wilmot.

"What's so amusing about this entry, Brownlow?" asked Mr Wilmot. His voice was quiet, but somehow full of menace. Luke suddenly found he wasn't in the mood to laugh any more and wondered if he could get himself out of trouble by simply telling the truth. His mind refused to come up with any other options, so he went with his first instinct.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't know the story, so I searched for it and when I saw that photograph, well, he looks so different from our Mr Kelly that it made me laugh." He looked hopefully up at

Mr Wilmot to see if this disarming honesty might work on him. The housemaster was a short man, with a temper to match. Most of the boys in Luke's year were already taller than Mr Wilmot and the rumour was that he had grown his goatee beard to stop people mistaking him for a student. Luke wasn't sure he really liked his housemaster very much, but didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with him so early in the year.

"I'll thank you to stick to the work in hand in future," Mr Wilmot replied. He returned to the front of the class without another word and Luke wiped imaginary sweat from his forehead with his fingers as he glanced over at Jay.

The lesson proceeded without further incident and Luke found that Jay was beside him as they went down the stairs to lunch.

"I can't believe you managed to get us out of that." Jay sounded impressed.

Luke grinned. "Me neither. Maybe he's being soft on me because I'm new."

Jay snorted. "I don't think Wilmot's ever soft on anyone. I don't know how I didn't burst out laughing again when he brought that page back up."

"That was a bit creepy," Luke admitted. "I've never known a teacher who could do that before. Though he probably wasn't expecting to find an encyclopaedia page."

Jay laughed. "That's it! He thought you were looking at something you shouldn't have been. I bet he was really disappointed he couldn't make an example of you for breaking the school's rules on Internet use."

From that point on, Jay and Luke spent a lot of their free time in each other's company. But although he'd gained a friend and escaped a punishment, the episode in the computer room had also marked a turning point in Luke's relationship with Mr Wilmot. His position as the year nines' tutor and the Romans' housemaster gave him the opportunity of keeping a closer eye on Luke than he had done before, as if expecting to catch him out somehow, and Luke began to feel slightly resentful about it. He was careful to obey all the rules and regulations of the school, making sure the man would have no reason to jump on him.

In fact, it was Jay who unwittingly ended up getting Luke into trouble with Mr Wilmot again. Jay turned out to be very skilled at manipulating digital photographs. Unbeknownst to Luke, Jay had taken the image of Ned Kelly from the online encyclopaedia and merged it with a picture of the headmaster that he'd taken from the school's own website, creating a weird hybrid of the two Ned Kellys which had the headmaster's face and the outlaw's luxuriant hair and beard. He then printed it off and carefully painted a Wild West-style 'Wanted' poster around the image which he gave to Luke a few days after the computer lab incident. Luke thought the poster was excellent and put it up on the pinboard above his bed.

That night, while the year nines were relaxing in front of the television in the Forum, their dormitory was raided by a party of Vikings intent on plunder and mayhem. This was an occasional hazard of life in the school. The year nines returned to their room at their designated bed-time and discovered that the beds had been wrapped in toilet paper and the contents of a paper shredder had been scattered all over the room. Each of the windows had been daubed with honey in the shape of a capital letter V, to which more of the tiny fragments of paper were sticking.

The members of each dormitory were responsible for keeping the room clean and tidy. Mrs Mould came in every weekday morning to empty the rubbish bins and to check on the general condition of each room. As Luke had already discovered, Mrs Mould was not a person to

be trifled with and all the boys knew that if their rooms were left in anything other than a pristine state, she would go straight to their housemaster in the morning to report them.

In his rush to help clear up most of the mess before Mr Wilmot saw that their lights were still on, Luke did not immediately notice that Jay's poster had been taken by the raiders. The clean-up job made all the year nine Romans late for bed that night and they had to get up much earlier than usual to finish the task in the morning. By the time their room was looking tidy enough to meet Mrs Mould's exacting requirements they were all very late for breakfast. As they made their way blearily past the main school notice board outside the school hall Luke was intercepted by Mr Wilmot.

"Come with me, Brownlow," said the housemaster, and Luke found himself being led towards the display of staff photographs. Jay, wondering what was going on, followed them, while Taj and Fred headed into the hall, more concerned about getting some breakfast before the start of morning school.

"I take it this is *your* handiwork?" Mr Wilmot hissed in Luke's ear.

In front of them, fixed over the usual photo of the headmaster, was the Wanted poster which Jay had produced, publicly declaring that Ned Kelly was guilty of crimes against fashion and cruelty to children and offering a £500,000 reward for information leading to his arrest.

"Er," said Luke, trying to think of a response that would not incriminate them but finding his sleep-deprived brain slow to respond.

Jay's was clearly not functioning properly either, because he blurted out "How did *that* get there?" which landed them well and truly in the frame.

"We didn't put it there, sir," Luke said hurriedly, attempting to limit the damage Jay had caused. "But it is my poster, yes. Just a joke, you know." He smiled optimistically, but sensed immediately that this time they weren't going to escape as lightly as before.

"This," said Mr Wilmot, ripping down the poster, "is defacing school property." He held up the artwork and tore it in half, with a sickening look of satisfaction on his face.

Luke thought of the graffiti which had disfigured many areas of his old school and felt this verdict was a bit strong. He was also annoyed to see Jay's poster destroyed and highly irritated that they were clearly about to become the scapegoats for some Viking idiot's idea of a joke. His temper got the upper hand and he found himself replying angrily. "Oh come on, it's not that bad. Nothing's damaged. Apart from my poster, that is."

Mr Wilmot looked coldly back at Luke. His expression suggested that he thought Luke had finally shown his true colours.

"Sir," added Luke, as an afterthought. Much too late.

Mr Wilmot's eyes narrowed and Luke felt Jay shift slightly beside him, as though his body was recommending to his brain that it was time to make a swift exit.

"You will both report to me at seven o'clock every morning for the rest of the week. I expect your uniforms to be immaculate." He surveyed their appearances and both boys became conscious of their uncombed hair, hastily-done-up ties and the small pieces of shredded paper that were still clinging to their shoes and sweaters. "If you turn up looking like this I will arrange for you to have a detention on Saturday with the headmaster." He glanced at his watch. "Likewise if you are late for registration this morning."

With that he turned and stalked off to their classroom, crushing the remains of Jay's poster into a tight ball. Luke looked at his own watch and saw they had precisely five minutes before registration was due to start. "Damn, no time for breakfast. We'd better follow him. Hang on." He stopped and straightened Jay's tie. Jay grinned.

"Thanks, Mum." He returned the favour and they walked glumly down the corridors to their tutor's classroom, which was at the far south-west corner of the school.

"Sorry about that," said Luke, feeling he'd handled the situation really badly.

"Not your fault," replied Jay. "If I'd kept quiet we might have got away with it. Wilmot's a complete pain in the arse. If I ever find out who put that poster there, I'll..."

Luke regarded Jay, whose long hair, slender build and slightly nerdy appearance didn't make him look terribly threatening, even though both his fists were tightly clenched. "Well - what will you do?"

Jay looked back at Luke, who was shorter but a lot broader than he was and said "Easy, I'll set you on them!"

With that they had arrived at Mr Wilmot's classroom and neither of them said another word. Both their stomachs were rumbling loudly by the time the mid-morning break came around and Jay was looking quite pale by then.

"No-one should be forced to do chemistry on an empty stomach," he complained as they hurried to the tuck shop to buy something to eat which would last them through to lunchtime.

Much of the school had seen the poster on their way to or from breakfast and news of Luke and Jay's encounter with Mr Wilmot had clearly spread. Several people congratulated them on the stunt and Fred Wright and Taj Verma, their fellow Roman year nines, huddled round to commiserate with them and to plan revenge on their Viking raiders.

Luke would have none of this, however. The last thing he wanted to do was to get into any more trouble. He had more reason than the others for not wanting to be sent to see Mr Kelly.

"Look guys, it wasn't deliberate. Those Vikings didn't know Wilmot would recognise that picture straight away and know it was us. It was just a silly prank for them, and bad luck for us, that's all. And they'll be expecting us to do something now. Let's wait until they're off their guard."

The others seemed impressed by this magnanimity, which made Luke feel a bit of a fraud. He suspected that if it had been anyone but Ned sitting in the headmaster's office, he would have been leading a raiding party against the Vikings that very night. He was also aware that one of the Viking boys, Benjamin Wharton, had been sitting at the computer behind his in the IT lesson, which meant that the consequences of the prank might not have been as much of an accident as he was making out.

Once their week of early morning starts and inspections by Mr Wilmot had finished, the rest of the half-term passed relatively peacefully. Luke's entire family came to collect him and he showed them all around the school before they went home. He managed to be polite to his father (it actually seemed quite easy, after dealing with Mr Wilmot) and was delighted to be with Mum and the girls again. The week at home was enjoyable, but Luke was not sorry to be heading back to the company of Jay and the other year nines once the short break was over. The twins both seemed to have increased in volume since he had been away at school. Or perhaps it just seemed like that because his father was shouting less.

"You really take after your Daddy," he informed them.

Chapter Five

Half-term week was a busy one for the staff of the school. It was always a chance to catch up with jobs which were hard or impossible to do when the school was full of students. The caretakers got on with repairs, the school's Matron re-stocked her medical supplies and the teaching staff planned lessons and started to prepare reports on all the students. The headmaster spent his time meeting with all the other members of school staff and catching up with piles of paperwork. One of his last meetings of the week was with the four housemasters. It was an opportunity to chat about how the term was going so far, to make plans for the forthcoming half-term and to discover whether any particular problems had come to light.

Three of the four housemasters had been with the school for some years, and Ned knew them all very well. John Wilmot had joined the school the previous year and Ned was not sure that he had yet got into his stride in the job. Wilmot had been a pupil at the school himself, which had swayed the board of governors into giving him the post, despite Ned's personal misgivings. He would rather have promoted the year seven tutor and French teacher, Ellen Richmond, but Wilmot's old-boy credentials and (Ned suspected) his gender, had won the day.

Rachel, Ned's secretary, was serving out biscuits and coffee to everyone and Ned was handing out agendas. "The Saxons are putting up a good performance this term, Charlie," he observed. The first item on the agenda was the inter-house competition. Although the school was so small, there was a fierce rivalry between the houses. Charlie Garnet, the head of the Saxons house smiled smugly.

"Not bad, headmaster. But the Romans are running us a close second," he conceded, with a nod towards John Wilmot.

"How's your hockey team shaping up, John?" asked Ned. The next half term would see the houses compete in hockey, swimming and orienteering.

"Pretty well," Wilmot admitted, "though I have higher hopes of the Romans' orienteering team this year – our new year nine is turning out to be quite a natural."

Ned thought of all the hours he and Luke had spent map-reading on the South Downs and permitted himself a small glow of pride at these words. "How's he getting on generally?" he asked, not quite able to resist the question and quite as interested in his colleagues' assessment of Luke as Luke had been in his friends' view of Ned.

Wilmot frowned. "I think he might turn out to be a disruptive influence, but that's probably down to his educational background up to now. I'm keeping my eye on him."

"Wasn't he the boy who put the wanted poster up?" chipped in Rhys Thomas, the Vikings' housemaster and Ned's deputy. "I thought that was rather cleverly done, myself."

Wilmot's lips pursed in disapproval and Ned turned to Thomas for clarification. Thomas laughed. "You mean you didn't see it, headmaster? It was jolly good. They'd morphed your face with Ned Kelly, the outlaw's, and turned it into a wanted poster – then they stuck it over your photo on the board downstairs for everyone to see as they went into breakfast."

"I'm sorry I missed it," smiled the headmaster, remembering how he had told Luke to look up Ned Kelly's story on the night that Luke had landed in his flower bed.

"I don't think Brownlow put it there, to be fair," said Wilmot, grudgingly. "But he was extremely insolent when I tackled him about it. That's what comes of a state education, I suppose. But I think I've got the measure of him now."

The headmaster felt slightly concerned about this confidence of Wilmot's, but now was not the time to pursue the matter. He returned to the agenda and the meeting continued without further mention of Luke.

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The next half term started well for Luke. The Romans won the inter-house orienteering challenge and Luke was chosen to join the school team. The competitions took him away from the school on several Saturdays and the training for the team was giving him an excellent opportunity of exploring the surroundings of the school. The Chiltern Hills in which the school was situated were similar in many ways to the South Downs of home and Luke thoroughly enjoyed these sessions. The only person who seemed unhappy about his joining the school team was the other year nine member of it: the Viking student, Benjamin Wharton. Wharton, too, had joined the team that year, having spent two years as a member of the orienteering club beforehand. He seemed to feel that Luke should have served a longer apprenticeship before being allowed to join the team. Wharton took every opportunity to put Luke down and to criticise his performance.

Luke continued to put in a lot of effort, with Jay's help, on his school-work and gradually he began to catch up with the other year nine boys. He also managed to keep his head down and his mouth shut while in the presence of Mr Wilmot, although this was quite a struggle, on occasions.

Early December brought a cold snap to the south of England. The boys began to wonder if they would see snow before Christmas, something that had not happened for many years. On a Friday lunchtime it began to fall, thickly and steadily. Luke and his classmates spent more time staring out at the snow than they should have, excited at this rare sight and desperate to get out and make the most of it. The heating in the school had been turned up high and the classrooms were getting unbearably stuffy.

The afternoon dragged by until it was the last teaching period of the day. Mr Wilmot, who taught them maths and had been covering quadratic equations that afternoon, announced that he needed to leave the class to attend a housemasters' meeting.

"Please continue to work on the sheet of equations you've just started for the rest of the lesson. You can hand them in as your homework to me on Monday morning. I expect you to work in silence. I'll be back in half an hour."

The door swung shut behind their teacher and the boys tried to concentrate on their sheets of equations. Luke stared at the page but the numbers seemed to be moving around and they were making no sense to him at all. He gazed hopelessly at them for fifteen minutes without solving a single equation. It was too hot. Luke's seat was near one of the tall windows and he gave up on the work to look longingly out at the snow, imagining the feeling of the fresh air on his face. Before he even really knew what he was doing, he found he had risen from his seat, crossed to the window and pulled the heavy sash upwards.

A cold draught of air and a billow of fat, fluffy snowflakes washed over Luke in a refreshing shower. Outside, a smooth blanket of unblemished whiteness stretched away behind the school into the falling darkness of the early evening. It was too inviting to resist. Invigorated by the cold, Luke climbed over the low sill of the open window and jumped out into the snow. He felt fantastic; liberated. He reached down, scooped a handful of snow into a ball, then turned to face the school building. All his classmates had left their seats and were gathering at the open window, watching him. He laughed at their astounded faces and threw the snowball straight into their midst, deliberately aiming it at the smirking face of Benjamin Wharton. The missile

exploded on Wharton's head in a most satisfactory manner, splattering everyone near him with snow. Shouts went up at this unilateral declaration of war and, as though an enchantment had been broken, the whole class clambered out through the window.

A massive snowball battle ensued. The Romans and Normans forged a temporary alliance and fought against the combined forces of the Vikings and Saxons. The sheets of quadratic equations lay, forgotten, on their desks.

*

The meeting in the headmaster's office had ended and Ned stood up to see his colleagues out. A movement outside caught his eye and he went over to one of the long windows to see the year nines' snowball fight in full fling at the far end of the courtyard below.

"Do this lot belong to any of you gentlemen?" he asked, gesturing through the glass.

The housemasters gathered at the windows to establish the identity of the miscreant class. Mr Wilmot flushed and cleared his throat. "Ah, I'm afraid they're mine, headmaster. I did leave them some work to get on with..."

"Perhaps you'd like to show them up here, John?"

Ten minutes later, the year nine students were filing past Miss Croft. Luke caught her eye and received a small frown in return; a stark contrast to the friendliness of her welcome in September. Mr Kelly was standing behind his desk, making eye contact with each boy in turn as they came in and gathered in a loose semi-circle in front of his desk. As he did so, they all dropped their gazes to their feet. Luke hadn't been able to meet the headmaster's eyes at all and had fixed his own on the pattern of the carpet. When the last boy had entered the room, Mr Wilmot shut the door behind them.

The spacious office felt crowded with the whole class inside it. The year nines were panting and were all spattered with snow which was quickly melting into dampness on their clothes and spreading into dark patches on the carpet around their shoes. Their faces were red with the cold and the sensation in their fingers was beginning to change over from numbness to burning pain as they started to warm up again.

"I understand Mr Wilmot left you some work to do," began the headmaster. "Did any of you manage to finish it?"

No-one moved or spoke. The bell for the end of school rang in the courtyard outside.

"You had only thirty minutes to wait before you could have been enjoying the snow quite legitimately," Mr Kelly pointed out. And as if to force the point home, the shouts of the rest of the school began drifting up to the office from the courtyard. "You will all return to your classroom and finish the work you were set. And none of you is to go out into the grounds until Monday morning." He stared sternly round at them. "Unless any one of you feels he is more to blame than the rest?"

There's your cue, thought Luke miserably to himself. A slight change in the positions of the boys around him suggested that they thought so, too, although no-one was unkind enough to look directly at him. He took a deep breath and looked up at Ned's face for the first time.

"It was my fault, sir. I climbed out of the window first and threw the first snowball."

Luke had once thought that he would never be able to address Ned as 'sir' and keep a straight face, but the word had fallen out of his mouth automatically in this particular set of circumstances.

Ned gave Luke a very hard stare indeed, while the attitudes of the other boys relaxed somewhat as they sensed the imminent lightening of their own punishments.

"Right. The work will still be completed tonight, and Mr Wilmot will stay with you all to see you do it properly. The rest of you will stay in this evening but can go outside at the weekend. Everyone except Brownlow can go back to the classroom with Mr Wilmot now."

The class filed out, ushered by the grim-faced housemaster. When the door shut behind them all, Ned came out from behind his desk and sat on the front of it, still treating Luke to a frowning stare. "What on earth were you thinking of?"

Luke tried to explain what had happened. His face was still red, but was now burning with embarrassment rather than cold. "I – I was just so hot. I couldn't concentrate. It looked beautiful outside. I opened the window and then – I guess I just lost it. I couldn't resist jumping out into the snow."

Ned sighed. "Well, don't. I mean it Luke. This sort of thing might make you popular with your peers, but it won't do your school career any good at all. Trouble has a knack of attracting more trouble, if you're not very careful. I've seen it happen and it can be a rapid and slippery slope. Do you understand me?"

Luke nodded. "I'm really sorry. It was just a moment of ..."

"Stupidity, yes, and one I'm sure you are not intending to repeat. I will look into the temperature issue, but your punishment stands and I will expect to find you spending most of your weekend working in the library on some extra maths I'll get Mr Wilmot to set you. I don't want to see you in this office again, Luke. Or climbing out of any more windows, for that matter. Now go back to your class."

Luke left and returned to Mr Wilmot, trying to ignore the fun that the rest of the school seemed to be having outside. By the time he had managed to finish the equations he was the only boy left in the classroom. He handed in his work and left quickly, before Mr Wilmot could pass any comment. He was, however, treated to a black look from the housemaster and knew their relationship had hit a new low.

He got back to the Forum, where the Roman year nines had been temporarily joined by most of the year nines of the other houses, to find, as Ned had predicted, that he was extremely popular. The rest of the class seemed to think the whole affair had been an excellent escapade. He tried not to enjoy the moment, but failed completely and eventually gave up, figuring he'd have the rest of the weekend in which to feel suitably repentant.

Chapter Six

Ned was true to his word and the temperature in the school was brought down to more reasonable levels over the next few days. By Monday the weather had returned to its more usual December state and the snow was turning to a wet slush. After the morning break Miss Richmond was taking the year nines for French. As the class were taking their seats, she passed on a message to Luke.

"Luke, the headmaster wants to see you after this class." His classmates' heads turned towards him, some of their faces looking curious, others sympathetic. Luke wasn't sure how to feel about this summons; although he was fairly confident that he had a clear conscience, for once, having dutifully stayed inside all weekend.

After French, Luke climbed up the main staircase in the entrance hall, feeling as though a spotlight was shining on him, the way the others were watching him. Miss Croft, Ned's secretary, greeted him in a friendly fashion this time, which made Luke more assured that this visit was not going to be an unpleasant one. He went through to Ned's office.

"Hello, Luke," Ned greeted him. "Sorry to drag you up here again, but I wanted to ask you whether you want a lift back here in January. I'm not going to be at the cottage until after Christmas, but I plan on spending the New Year there, and could bring you back with me, if it suits you and your parents. I thought I'd better check with you now, to give them some notice."

"That's fine by me," Luke said.

"OK, I'll phone them this afternoon," said Ned.

Luke joined his friends in the hall for lunch.

"What was that about?" asked Jay.

"Oh, nothing much," replied Luke. "He was just checking something about my parents." Luke still wasn't comfortable enough with Jay, or with anyone else, to want to explain about his out-of-school relationship with the headmaster.

The term ended on the following Friday, by which time the snow had all melted and December had returned to its usual grey, damp nature. Luke's family came to take him home.

On the following morning Luke was supervising the twins' breakfast when the morning's post landed on the front door mat. Luke went to collect it and deliver the envelopes to his parents, who were enjoying a peaceful cup of coffee in the living room. He returned to the kitchen to find that in his brief absence Molly had taken it upon herself to feed her own porridge to Elsie, who was not co-operating. More porridge was making its way into her blonde curls than into her mouth. Luke laughed at the mess they were making and carefully moved Molly's chair to a safe distance from Elsie's before wiping Elsie's hair and face clean with a damp dish cloth.

Once he had managed to get a sufficient quantity of food inside his sisters, Luke cleared up their breakfast things and took the girls to join his parents in the living room. A small pile of opened mail lay on the coffee table in front of them and Luke immediately recognised the coat of arms of Hawley Lodge on the topmost piece of correspondence. His parents were reading through a small booklet which bore the same emblem. His school report.

Luke thought of the snowball fight and of the incident with Ned Kelly's wanted poster and his stomach clenched uncomfortably around his own share of the breakfast porridge. He scanned his parents' faces anxiously, anticipating a repeat of the row that had erupted over the last school report they'd received.

Mum and Dad looked up as he entered the room and both of them smiled at him.

"This is good, Luke," said Mum. "Much better than the last one."

Luke collapsed into an armchair in relief.

"Still some room for improvement," said Dad, "but they think you're coming along well."

They passed the report over to Luke. The first page was divided into three sections for overall comments from his form teacher, house master and from the head. Luke's eyes skipped over the precise and familiar handwriting of Mr Wilmot and went straight to the last paragraph, where a different, more loosely-formed hand had written:

Luke has settled into Hawley Lodge very well and has already proven himself to be a tremendous asset to the school's Orienteering team. His progress in academic work has been rapid and I am confident that he will sustain this level of achievement in the remainder of Year 9.

Delighted with this endorsement from Ned, Luke went back to read Mr Wilmot's words. These were less full of praise but were, nevertheless, positive in nature. The remainder of the booklet gave more detailed analysis of his performance in each subject.

"Are you happy?" asked Mum.

"You bet," said Luke, with a grin.

"I'm very pleased with this, Luke, and if you want to see Kyle or any of your other old friends during the holiday, then you can," Mum told him. A flicker of a frown flitted across Dad's face but he did not revoke this renewal of Luke's freedom to associate with his former school friends. Sensing that his father was about to start telling him how justified they had been in their decision to send him to Hawley Lodge, Luke excused himself.

"I'll call Kyle now," he said.

Two hours later, Luke, Kyle and a handful of other friends were mooching around one of the big shopping malls in the town. Luke did not enjoy the trip as much as he had thought he would. The frisson of excitement he'd felt when he'd gone into town in the summer was missing now that he had his parents' approval. The other boys spent a lot of time laughing about things that had happened at their school; things which needed to be explained if Luke was to understand them. After a while, he gave up saying "So what happened?" because even when the joke was explained, it didn't mean much to him. He was teased about not having been expelled yet and the others were outraged at the fact that he had over a week's more holiday than they did. Luke didn't dare to tell them that he would have nearly a month off at Easter and two months over the summer.

The teasing turned more unpleasant when the group went outside to smoke the cigarettes that Kyle had, as usual, stolen from his father.

"No thanks," said Luke, as the packet was passed to him.

"Gone soft, Brownlow?" Kyle asked. He didn't often call Luke by his surname.

"I'm kind of in training," Luke tried to explain, "I'm on the orienteering team at school, so-"

Jeers and snorts of laughter greeted this admission. "You're on a *team*?"

Luke had forgotten this group's attitude towards joining any kind of organised school activity. His attempts to explain were shouted down and he subsided into silence. Shortly afterwards he left his former friends and took the early bus back to the village. He didn't call Kyle again.

After the New Year, Ned came round to the house to see if Luke was interested in going for a hike. Having spent three weeks inside the house with his small sisters' sea of pink plastic, and having done his best not to provoke his father in any way, Luke was glad to get outside and go for a walk with his neighbour. He thought things might feel a bit awkward, but it was almost as though the intervening weeks at school were part of other people's lives. They seemed to pick up the relationship they'd had in the summer as if they hadn't seen each other since then and neither of them talked directly about anything that had happened at Hawley Lodge, although they did discuss the orienteering competitions in which Luke had been taking part.

Term was going to start on a Tuesday; Ned drove Luke back to Hawley Lodge the day before. As they got near to their destination, the thoughts of both neighbours returned to school matters.

"I understand you worked out who Ned Kelly was," commented Ned, recalling his half-term conversation with the housemasters.

"Did you see the poster?" Luke asked.

"No, but I heard about it," replied Ned. "I don't think Mr Wilmot was too impressed."

Luke laughed. "No, he wasn't. I should have told him it was all your fault for suggesting I look him up."

Ned parked in the area reserved for staff cars on the eastern side of the school. As Luke got his rucksack out of the car's boot, he became conscious that he was being watched. He looked up to see the Viking orienteer, Benjamin Wharton, on the steps leading up to the door on the east wall of the school, carrying a bag and looking curiously over at Luke and Ned. His heart sank. What would Wharton make of this situation?

"Thanks for the lift!" he said to Ned, before shouldering his backpack and heading towards the school. Wharton had gone inside before Luke reached the entrance, but he was waiting for him as Luke went through the door.

"Doesn't Kelly trust you to get here by yourself, Brown-nose?"

Luke ignored him and went to climb the staircase up to the next floor.

"Or is it that your parents can't afford a car and so one of the staff has to come and pick you up?" Wharton continued, dogging Luke's footsteps.

Luke said nothing, refusing to rise to his jibes.

"So that's how you got onto the orienteering team, was it? You're best buddies with Kelly?"

They'd almost reached the first-floor landing and were about to round the corner to the next staircase. This last comment needled Luke into making a response.

"Piss off, Wharton," he said, just as Mr Wilmot came down the stairs in the opposite direction. He stopped them both.

"That sort of language is unacceptable, Brownlow. Apologise to Wharton."

Luke regarded the smug smile on Wharton's face and had great difficulty in forming the words of the apology. "I'm sorry I swore at you."

"Next time, Brownlow, it will be a detention," said Mr Wilmot. "Keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Yes, sir," Luke replied, thinking that the new term could hardly have started in a worse way. Was Mr Wilmot *always* going to be near him whenever he did something wrong? He continued up to his dormitory, with Wharton's unwelcome presence and mocking laughter accompanying him up the stairwell.

Despite this unfortunate beginning to the term, it was good to be back with Jay, Taj, Fred and the other students. Luke soon got back into the routines of school life. Wharton was the only real nuisance; their rivalry in orienteering seemed to be spilling over into day-to-day life more regularly. In orienteering competitions they were well-matched and their determination to out-perform each other was proving beneficial for the school team, as their fitness and their speed and skill improved.

At a competition shortly before the Easter break, Luke found himself at the start line with Wharton. Competitors set off at timed intervals and the person due to start before Wharton was a tall, slim, dark-haired girl of about their age who was from one of the other schools. Wharton appraised the girl's figure with an expression of distaste on his face. "God, they could have given me someone worth chasing. She's got no arse and probably no tits either."

The back of the girl's neck flushed red.

"Shut up, Wharton," said Luke, embarrassed on the girl's behalf.

She set off and soon afterwards, Wharton, and then Luke, made their starts.

Luke was making good progress around the course when he heard a whistle blowing. All the runners carried whistles, which were only supposed to be used in emergencies. Luke carried on running, as the noise was in front of him. In a minute or two, he was very close to the whistling, which was coming from somewhere just to the right of the forest path he'd been following. There was a steep slope on that side; Luke stopped and scanned the area to see who was sounding the alarm, and why.

The tall girl who had been at the start line in front of Wharton was sitting a short way from the path, her hands wrapped around her left ankle and her whistle in her mouth.

"Are you alright?" Luke asked, although it was fairly obvious she was not.

The girl removed her whistle and said, through clenched teeth, "Sprained ankle."

It was one of the main rules of orienteering that competitors should always stop and help anyone who had been injured. Luke went down to the girl and offered her his hand. "Come on, let's get you back to the path and get some help."

He pulled her upright and she put her arm across his shoulders, leaning her weight onto him as she hopped on her right foot. Like this, they made their way back to the path. Luke checked his map and saw that they were not far from the finishing point, although there was still more than half of the course to complete.

"Look," he said, showing the girl the map, "we've only got about four hundred metres to the finish. Do you think you can make that distance, walking like this?"

The girl nodded and they started back down the hill Luke had just climbed. The next competitor was coming towards them. He was a year eleven boy from Hawley Lodge called Connor Reid, who was in the Normans' house. He stopped when he saw Luke and the girl.

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

"No, it's OK, I think we'll be fine like this," said Luke. "You carry on."

"At least you two stopped," observed the girl. "That horrible boy who started in front of you just looked at me and laughed and then ran on without asking if he could help!"

This was a serious breach of orienteering rules and Luke glanced at Connor, who was frowning.

"It was Wharton, wasn't it?" asked Connor.

Luke nodded, but said nothing. He would leave it up to Connor to decide whether to report Wharton's failure to stop.

"Good luck, Reid," he said and he and the girl continued their limping journey to the finish line, where she was whisked away by the event organisers to the first aid tent. Luke went over to Mr Pettit, the sports teacher and orienteering club leader, to explain why he had failed to finish the course.

Wharton appeared twenty minutes later, crowing about his excellent time. Then he noticed Luke and his jubilation evaporated. "How did you get back before me, Brownlow? You didn't pass me on the course. Did you cheat?"

Luke said nothing, but gave Wharton a look of contempt. Reid came through the finishing line a few minutes afterwards and then went straight to talk with Mr Pettit. After a short consultation, Mr Pettit came across to Wharton and Luke.

"I understand you both came across an injured competitor today?"

Luke nodded, but Wharton attempted to brazen it out. "No sir, I didn't see anyone!"

"Come with me, Wharton," said Mr Pettit, and he walked over to the first aid tent to verify the injured girl's story.

Connor Reid came up to Luke. "The little squirt will get disqualified for that," he said. "With any luck Pettit will kick him off the team as well."

Reid's predictions proved to be correct. Mr Pettit was horrified that a member of his school team had ignored one of the fundamental rules of the sport. Everyone in the minibus was subjected to a long lecture on the subject on their way back to the school, in which Wharton's conduct was compared unfavourably with Luke's, much to Luke's discomfort.

Luke hoped that with Wharton off the orienteering team, the enmity between them would come to an end. This was not the case. If anything, Luke's involvement in his dismissal made Wharton even more determined to get his revenge on his rival. The traditional, healthy school competition between the Roman and Viking houses seemed to be personified this year and focused on these two individuals. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the other Roman year nines were still wanting to get revenge for the raid on their dormitory which had taken place at the beginning of the school year. Luke continued to be reluctant to take any action, having managed to avoid getting into any trouble in the spring term.

Luke had an unpleasant sense of foreboding that the situation with Wharton was not going to be resolved without physically fighting him, but knew any such conflict would be bound to land him in trouble with Mr Wilmot and probably with Ned, too; a situation he was anxious to avoid if possible. He hoped the Easter break would give Wharton time to cool off, or perhaps to find a new target on which to vent his frustrations. And for a while all seemed peaceful on their return to school for the summer term, until the unspoken truce was broken again in early June.

Chapter Seven

On the first Monday in June, as Luke and the other year nine Romans went down the stairs to breakfast, they found an altercation going on in the entrance hall. A short man with a neatly clipped moustache was arguing with Mrs Lloyd, the school's administrator. He seemed to be holding a white vest in his hands, of the type the students wore for running. As the boys got closer, Luke noticed that the singlet had a green stripe across the front of it; the mark of the Romans' house.

"Uh-oh," muttered Luke to the others, beginning to have a bad feeling about the scene that was playing out in front of them.

Just then, Ned Kelly appeared from the direction of the hall and went over to greet the man and attempt to placate him. Luke and the others reached the bottom of the stairs and started walking towards the hall.

"Who's that man?" Luke asked.

"Old Pritchard," Jay explained. "He's the owner of that country club across the road. A right little Hitler, I've heard."

"Did you see what he was holding?" asked Taj. "I hope this isn't going to have anything to do with us."

Luke found himself looking towards the entrance hall, his gaze irresistibly drawn to the source of the disturbance. He saw that Ned was now holding the sports vest and reading the name sewn into it. With a horrible sense of foreboding, somehow knowing exactly what was about to happen, he watched Ned look up and stare straight back at him. The headmaster raised his hand and beckoned Luke over.

"Oh, shit," Luke said, under his breath. "I knew it was going to be mine. See you later guys." He left his colleagues and walked towards the irate little man and the headmaster, trying to arrange his face into an innocent expression, but feeling sure he was being completely unsuccessful, even though he *knew* he hadn't done anything wrong.

"Perhaps you'd like to come up to my office, Mr Pritchard," Ned was saying, as Luke came up to them. Luke followed the two men up the ornate wooden staircase, conscious of the curious looks of the students passing through the entrance hall. The headmaster said nothing more until the three of them had climbed the stairs and were inside his office. There, he turned to Luke, handing him the incriminating vest top.

"Do you have any explanation for the fact that your sports shirt was found on the statue outside the front of Mr Pritchard's hotel this morning?"

"What?" said Luke, looking down and registering that the top was indeed his. "No! Of course not. I've never been in the place." He looked up at Ned, sincerely hoping he would be believed. "Why would I do something so stupid as put my own shirt on a statue?"

"It's a Henry Moore!" Mr Pritchard interjected. Luke stared at him, confused.

"I'm sure that it is a very valuable statue indeed, Mr Pritchard," soothed Ned, "and I am very sorry that one or more of my students has clearly trespassed upon your land in order to temporarily spoil its appearance. I assure you that I will do my best to discover who put it there and take appropriate action."

Luke relaxed, relieved that Ned, at least, didn't seem to think it likely that Luke was involved. Mr Pritchard, however, was less convinced.

"It could be a double bluff!" he shouted triumphantly, shaking his pointed index finger under Luke's nose. "He put his own shirt there, relying on the fact that no-one would believe anyone could be stupid enough to incriminate themselves!"

Ned and Luke stared at the man, who seemed to be almost unhinged.

"I really didn't, Mr Pritchard," Luke told him, earnestly, "and I'm very sorry it ended up there." He turned to Ned for help. Ned jerked his head towards the door and Luke gratefully took the cue, leaving Ned to mollify the indignant Mr Pritchard.

Back in the hall, Luke grabbed a bowlful of cereal and sat down next to the other Roman year nines, who had almost finished eating. Luke updated them on the situation, while scanning the faces of the other students, trying to detect the real perpetrator.

"Look and see if anyone is paying us particular attention," he told the others.

"Half the school saw you towed off to Kelly's office," objected Taj, "so of course you're getting attention. Although..." he paused, "don't all look round at once, but I'd say Wharton might be your man."

Luke glanced over at the group of Viking year nines who were getting up to leave on the other side of the room. They did seem to be looking quite gleeful about something. He sighed. It looked as though the situation with Wharton was escalating again.

Their lessons were interrupted later in the morning by a visit from the headmaster. The class rose to its feet and Mr Kelly spoke briefly to Mr Wilmot before motioning the boys to sit down.

"As some of you may know," he began, "Mr Pritchard, our neighbour and the owner of the country club, paid us a visit this morning. He was most distressed because a member of this school had trespassed upon his property and disfigured an expensive statue there. I am sure you are all aware that the country club is strictly out of bounds to all pupils of this school. I am particularly disappointed that there seems to have been a deliberate attempt to implicate one of this class in this act; a person I believe to be innocent of any involvement."

Luke felt hot under the collar at this vote of confidence from Ned.

"If those responsible are willing to own up, then they should come and see me or their housemaster by lunchtime today. Otherwise this whole class will be subject to an hour's detention each evening for the rest of this week."

The headmaster left and the class continued with their work in silence.

During the mid-morning break there was a general outcry amongst the year nines at the prospect of a week's worth of detentions. Those who were late to the story crowded round in the corridor to find out what was going on and to discover the identity of the innocent party Mr Kelly had mentioned. The Romans explained what they knew about the incident, while scrutinising the reactions of their classmates. It seemed obvious to all of them that the Vikings were acting differently from the members of the other houses.

"Going to own up then, Wharton?" Taj asked.

"What are you talking about, Wormer?" sneered Wharton, making fun of Taj's occasional difficulty distinguishing between 'v' and 'w' sounds. Jay, Fred and Luke closed ranks with Taj, the other year nines looking on in interest.

"Was it you, then Wharton?" enquired Guy Beeston, who was in Saxon house.

"As if I'd tell you lot, if it was," Wharton retorted. "I think Brown-nose there knows more about this than he's letting on." He pointed at Luke. "Thought it would be clever to put his own shirt on the statue, I expect, so no-one would think it *could* be him. Kelly's little pet," he spat.

Fred, his courage fortified by the presence of his three Roman companions, spoke up in Luke's defence. "At least he had the guts to own up after that snowball fight. Looks like we can't expect the same from you. That explains why the Vikings' shirts have a yellow streak on them, I suppose."

The rest of the class laughed at this remark and Wharton's face twisted in fury. He lunged forward to grab at Fred. Luke, Taj and Jay stepped towards him to break up the imminent and ill-matched fight. As they did so, Mr Wilmot appeared on the scene, summoned from the nearby staff room by some sixth sense that was unfailingly alert to the slightest sign of trouble. Wharton hastily stepped back and tried to look innocent. Mr Wilmot glanced suspiciously from the four Romans to Wharton.

"What's going on here?"

Luke found himself wondering if anyone ever gave an honest answer to this type of question. And, as was traditional, on this occasion no-one did. The entire class stood in silence around the small group of Romans and Wharton. Fortunately, the situation seemed not to have deteriorated far enough to merit any punitive action on Mr Wilmot's part. The housemaster merely said "I suggest you all go outside right now, get some fresh air and *cool off*."

The class trooped off down the corridor and went out into the courtyard, which they had to themselves as the morning was windy and, certainly, cool. The Romans huddled into a corner, trying to get some shelter from the breeze.

"Luke-" began Taj.

"I know!" snapped Luke. "We've got to do something about Wharton. I'm on it – just let me think about it for a bit."

Taj didn't push the matter, but the glances he gave both Jay and Fred told Luke that the others had previously been discussing the Romans' lack of response to the Vikings' various acts of aggression between themselves. He felt he was being forced into corners whichever way he looked.

By lunchtime Luke found he had the germ of an idea about how to get some revenge on the Vikings. As they made their way to the hall for lunch he told the others that he thought he had a plan.

"What?" they asked.

"It needs a bit of thought," Luke told them. "We've got cross-country this afternoon – let's talk about it while we're running."

Fred sighed heavily. He hated cross-country running.

Fred's running was never very fast and on the run that day he seemed even slower than usual and the Romans gradually fell behind the other year nines. By the last half mile their run had become a walk and Taj turned to Luke with a questioning expression on his face. It was time for Luke to explain his plan.

"Well, I don't know if this idea's any good, but I wondered if we could plant some cigarette butts in the Vikings' dormitory rubbish bin. You know what old Ma Mould's like, the way she goes through the bins. She'd be bound to tell Mr Thomas about what she'd found and then the Vikings would have a lot of explaining to do."

Smoking was one of the more serious breaches of discipline in the school. Luke's friends from his previous school had fairly regularly got hold of a packet of cigarettes and smoked them in their leisure-time meanderings around the town, but it wasn't something he'd done often enough that it had become a habit. So far, he hadn't heard of anyone at Hawley Lodge being caught smoking.

The others considered this plan.

"Well I think it's a great idea," said Jay, "but where are we going to get them from?"

"Just pick some up on the roadside?" suggested Fred.

"No, we need them to look as though they've been freshly smoked," Taj objected. "And it would look weird if they were all different brands."

"There's the pub in the village," Jay pointed out, "but we won't be able to get there until Saturday, and even then, it would be difficult to collect any without being noticed by any of the others."

"Maybe we could get some from the country club instead," Luke said.

"You must be joking," Jay told him, "after what happened today? If we get caught in there we'll be in deep shit, especially you, Luke. Don't even think-"

He stopped then, realising that their conversation was being overheard by a girl who was standing next to the wall near them.

Luke looked over at the girl as Jay stopped talking and wondered whether she might be the answer to their problem. "Excuse me," he said, "but do you live around here?"

"Er, yes, I do. So what?" replied the girl. It didn't seem a promising start, but Luke persevered, looking round at the other Romans for support. "What if we ask her to do it?"

"Do what?" demanded the girl, beginning to sound thoroughly suspicious.

Taj moved into full-on charm mode and smiled reassuringly at her.

"We are trying to exact revenge for a cruel trick that was played upon my friend here by some of our colleagues."

"Were they the ones with the yellow bands?" the girl asked, unexpectedly.

"Why, yes," said Taj, surprised at the question. He quickly recovered, though. "And I can see they have caused offence to you in some way, too. We have come up with a plan to get back at them, but we are in need of some materials which are hard for us to obtain, but which might be easy for you to find."

The girl stared at him warily. "You're not talking about drugs are you?"

All four boys hastened to assure her that no, they were not talking about drugs. Luke explained that what they wanted were some cigarette butts from the ashtrays of the pub in the village. The girl pulled a face.

"What's in it for me?" she demanded. The boys looked at one another.

"What do you need?" asked Taj, pragmatically.

"Books," she declared.

All four boys burst out in derisive unison: "*Books?*"

"Yes, books," she replied, defiantly. "You've got a library in that school of yours, haven't you? Well I'd like to borrow some books to read. I'm here on holiday and I'm bored. I'll gather up some *freshly-smoked* cigarette butts for you, if you bring me some books."

"Excuse us for a moment," said Taj, and the Romans formed into a small huddle to discuss the situation.

"What d'you think?" asked Jay.

"Seems like a good plan to me," Fred said.

"I'll be doing a training run on Wednesday for orienteering," Luke told them, "I could bring some books for her then."

"OK," Taj agreed, "so you'd better talk to her about meeting up."

They broke up and went back to the girl, whose mouth was twisted into a sarcastic smile.

"I've got a training run on Wednesday afternoon," Luke said. "I could bring you some books at around three."

"OK," replied the girl, "I'll meet you here at three with the cigarette butts. And don't bring me any rubbishy books – some decent stuff please."

"Where are you staying?" Luke asked.

"At the country club," the girl said. "But that's out of bounds for you, isn't it? So I'll meet you here."

With that, they parted and the boys ran the last few hundred metres back to the school, where they were all thoroughly shouted at by their sports teacher, Mr Pettit, for being more than ten minutes behind everyone else in their class. Luke got the brunt of it, as his good performance in the orienteering runs meant Mr Pettit had high expectations of him. He was told he'd be off the school team if he didn't perform better in the future.

"Sorry, Luke," muttered Fred as they got changed.

During the afternoon break, Luke went to the school's library and asked the librarian for some good books. If the man was surprised at this sudden enthusiasm for reading, he did not show it, finding Luke four volumes that seemed to meet his needs. After school the year nines reported to the school hall for the first of their week's worth of detentions. A number of black looks were directed from the rest of the class at Wharton, who ignored them all.

PART II: The Runaway

Chapter Eight

"I can't cope with him any more, Shelley," said Pagan Randall, burying her face in one of the squishy cushions on Shelley's bed. "I've got to get out of there before I go nuts."

"Why don't you tell your Mum what he's like around you? I bet she'd kick him out like a shot if she knew," suggested Shelley, who was busily painting her fingernails a vibrant shade of blue.

"She wouldn't believe me," Pagan sighed. "She thinks he's the best thing that's ever happened to her. You ought to hear her: 'Brian's such a help around the house. Brian's so good with his hands'," she shuddered. "Honestly, it makes me sick to listen to it. *And* she's started dyeing her hair. She always used to despise women who did that. And you should see the clothes she's wearing now – most of them would look too young on me!"

"But you can't just leave," Shelley pointed out. "Where would you go? What about school?"

"I've been thinking about it," Pagan said. "I don't think I'd need to go for long. Just long enough to make Mum realise it's because of that creep I've run away. I reckon I could live rough for a couple of weeks."

"But where would you go?" Shelley asked again. She had put down the nail varnish brush, unable to concentrate on her nails as the conversation had got more interesting.

"I'm planning to buy a tent and camp out in the woods," Pagan confided.

Shelley laughed, "What woods?"

Pagan smiled enigmatically, "I can't tell you, but I've been doing a lot of planning on the computers at the library and I think I've found a good place."

"But there aren't any woods anywhere near here!"

"Course not. That's the whole point – I need to go somewhere far enough away that there's no chance of them finding me immediately. They're bound to ask you where I went, so I can't tell you exactly. But I'm going to need your help."

"How?"

"Well, I think I'm going to need to get my hair cut and maybe dye it a different colour, so I'm not so instantly recognisable. D'you think you could help me with that?"

"Sure!" Shelley felt on more familiar ground with this request.

"And there's something else," Pagan's voice dropped. "I think the police will ask you questions about me. I don't want you to lie to them, but I don't want you to tell them I've changed my hair. If they ask you why I've run away, then you need to tell them it's because of Brian. I don't think it's going to be possible to get through to Mum any other way."

"God, you're really serious about this, aren't you?" said Shelley.

"Yes, I am. If he comes up behind me and puts his hands on my hips like that one more time I'm going to scream. Or stab him with the bread knife."

"Probably best to use the carving knife," advised Shelley, "it'd do more damage."

*

Later, when Pagan got home, she found her mother and Brian in the kitchen, eating their evening meal.

"Yours is on the side," her mother said.

Brian patted the bench next to him. "Come and sit down, girlie," he said.

Pagan picked up her plate of macaroni cheese and pointedly sat down on the opposite bench, next to her mother.

"We've got some good news for you, sweetheart," said Pagan's mother. "Brian's boss is looking for a part-time worker on a Saturday. If you want to, you could work with Brian at the hardware store for a few hours for some extra cash."

There was a self-satisfied smile on Brian's face. Pagan tried not to imagine how horrible it would be to be sandwiched in amongst the narrow aisles of the hardware store with Brian 'accidentally' brushing past her. The macaroni she was eating had suddenly lost its flavour, making her feel as though she were eating a mouthful of maggots. With difficulty, she swallowed the food down.

"Oh, right," she said. Then, not wishing to sound too ungrateful, she added, "Thanks."

Pagan forced herself to eat the rest of the meal, realising this was the crisis point she had been expecting. She would not be able to refuse this offer of work without a good reason and the idea of being forced to spend several hours every Saturday in Brian's unwelcome touchy-feely company was unbearable.

"We thought we'd go to the cinema tonight, Pagan," said Brian. "D'you want to come?"

"Erm, I've got a load of homework to do," Pagan replied. This was true, although Pagan had no intention of actually doing any of it. She was relieved she would have the house to herself. Finishing her meal, she got up and loaded her dirty plate and cutlery into the dishwasher. "Have fun, you guys," she said.

When Pagan heard the car pulling out of the drive she went to her mother's bedroom. In the back of the wardrobe was a small cash box which was where her mother kept an emergency supply of banknotes. It was well hidden under a heap of sweaters and Pagan was fairly sure Brian did not know about it. She took it out and counted the notes inside it. There were several hundred pounds. Pagan took about half of the money and carefully replaced the box under its protective camouflage.

Reckoning she had about two hours before the adults returned, Pagan went back to her own bedroom and methodically started laying out the things she thought she would need for her period of exile. Then she found her largest rucksack and began to pack everything inside it. There was some space left in it, but she was planning to buy a small camping stove which would fill that.

She dialled Shelley's number on her mobile phone. "Shell, it's going to happen tomorrow."

"What is? WHAT? You're kidding? You're really going to go through with it?"

"Yes, I've got to. I'll explain tomorrow. Can we do the hair thing without your Mum seeing me?"

"She's going to be at Gran's tomorrow afternoon."

"Great. I need to go and get some stuff in the morning. I'll come over after lunch, about one?"

"Okay, see you then. I can't believe you're going to do this Pagan."

"See you tomorrow. Bye."

Pagan rang off, hid her backpack in her wardrobe and went to bed, her mind busy with plans for the following day.

*

She stayed in bed until after nine the next day so that Brian would have left for work before she got up. Pagan showered and dressed and then went downstairs to let her mother know

she was planning to hit the shops with Shelley. This raised no suspicions with Mum, as Pagan and Shelley made fairly regular trips on the bus to the large indoor shopping centre that was situated a few miles from their home.

Pagan caught the bus, very aware of the bundle of stolen notes in the small rucksack on her back. At the shopping centre she ignored the boutiques and accessories shops the girls usually frequented and went straight to the camping and outdoor store instead. Here, she bought a camping stove set which came with two small pans; a tent designed for two people (the smallest one she could see); a bedding roll; a vacuum flask; a can opener and a plastic plate, bowl, mug and folding cutlery set. Everything fitted into the small rucksack apart from the tent. Her next stop was the pharmacy, where she dithered for a while, overwhelmed by the range of different hair dyes and colours that were on offer. Eventually she settled on a boring-looking semi-permanent brown, on the basis that it would make her look less noticeable than any of the other colours.

By now it was lunchtime. Pagan got on the bus and went straight to Shelley's house. Shelley's mum had already gone and Shelley answered the door.

"Shell, I need to leave this stuff here. I'm going to go home and get my other bag. See you in a bit." Pagan left without another word and went back to her own house.

Her mother was tending to her vegetable patch in the back garden and did not notice Pagan coming back. Pagan swiftly retrieved her rucksack from her bedroom, gave her cat an affectionate goodbye hug and then returned to Shelley's house, feeling excited but also already sorry for the worry she knew her mother would experience when she did not return that evening.

Pagan's hair was blonde and hung down her back in a straight sheet.

"Are you sure about this?" Shelley asked, as she stood over Pagan with her mother's hairdressing scissors in her hand. She had always been deeply envious of Pagan's hair and found it hard to believe Pagan could want to disguise it.

"Get on with it," snapped Pagan, who was beginning to have serious second thoughts about her whole plan, but didn't want to admit them to Shelley.

Shelley bit her lower lip and started to cut Pagan's hair so that it came to just below her ears. When she had finished they both stared in awe at the pile of yellow hair on the floor. Pagan carefully picked it all up and stuffed it into a pocket of her rucksack.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Shelley, bemused.

"I don't want the police finding it," replied Pagan. "I'll bury it once I find a campsite."

The hair-dyeing took longer than the hair-cutting, as the dye had to be left on Pagan's hair for twenty minutes. When it was done, the colour was not quite as dark as Pagan had hoped, but the girl staring back at her from the bathroom mirror looked very different from the one who had arrived at the house earlier.

"Well *I* wouldn't recognise you," decided Shelley.

Pagan packed the hair dye box and her morning's purchases into her large rucksack and strapped the tent on to the top. Struggling a little, she managed to get them on to her back, then she pulled a baseball cap onto her newly-brown hair.

"Thanks, Shelley," she said. "I won't be calling you, and my phone is going to be off, because I don't want them to trace me through it. But I will have it with me in case of emergencies." She hugged her friend and left before Shelley could try to change her mind.

At the railway station Pagan bought a return ticket to London. She was planning to get off the train before it got that far, but thought that buying a return to the capital would attract less

attention than buying a ticket to anywhere else. The ticket put another big hole in her funds. There was a small food store in the station forecourt where Pagan purchased some basic supplies: enough food and water to sustain her for the next day or two.

The journey south seemed to go very quickly. Pagan had been planning this trip for some time and knew roughly where she was going to be pitching her tent. She got off the train at its last stop before London and then caught a smaller, local train. It, too, was going to London, but she got off it long before it had left the countryside, at the small station she had identified from her forward planning on the Internet.

Pagan climbed the steps at the station and walked along the edge of a narrow road for a few hundred metres. A few cars drove past her as fellow passengers left the station and drove home. She felt suddenly jealous of them and a sharp twinge of homesickness stabbed her as she thought of her mother and of the bed Pagan would not be sleeping in that night. A few tears of self-pity fell down her face before she pulled herself together and started looking out for footpath signs. A bridle path opened off the road on the left; Pagan followed that, relieved to get away from the traffic. After a few more minutes the path split, with a narrower footpath branching off to the left. It seemed to be heading towards a wooded slope in the distance. Pagan had decided that camping out in the woods would be a good idea, so she headed off in that direction.

It was now the early evening and Pagan was beginning to get very tired. The path was heading north and skirting the western edge of a large golf course, where Pagan could see a number of people pulling golf bags along behind them. Every few hundred metres there were large signs declaring that the golf course was the property of 'Pritchards Country Club: Member's Only'. Pagan began to get irritated by the signs, which she felt were spoiling the scenery. She was also fairly sure that whoever had written them had failed to understand the correct use of the apostrophe. Her mother was always complaining about missing or unnecessary apostrophes and this thought renewed her feelings of homesickness and guilt.

The footpath curved round to head east and on the left the land became more densely wooded. The southern boundary continued to be defined by the golf course and its irritating signs. There appeared to be woodland on both sides of the path further on, where the golf course stopped. It occurred to Pagan that if the woods on the right-hand side of the path belonged to the Country Club, then they might be more private than those on the left, given the club's attitude towards trespassers. As she approached the woods beyond the golf course, she could see they were protected by a fairly tall dry-stone wall. The inevitable 'member's only' signs were posted along the wall at regular intervals. There was no-one to be seen along the path; Pagan scrambled up the wall and carefully climbed over the top of it. There were stones on their edges at the top, which made it awkward and uncomfortable, but soon she was on the other side.

Here, it seemed quieter than on the footpath. The trees were densely packed, with thick undergrowth beneath them and there was no sign of a pathway. The area looked as if no-one had visited it for years. Perfect, thought Pagan.

She struggled through the undergrowth to find a place to pitch her tent. She did not want to be too close to the wall, in case someone should look over it and see her campsite. After scrambling through brambles and bushes for about fifty metres she glanced back and was satisfied that she was no longer visible from the wall. Clearing a space for the tent was difficult, as the undergrowth had many brambles in it and Pagan's hands were soon scratched and sore.

The tent was easy to put up, although the soil was shallow and full of lumps of chalk, making it difficult to anchor the tent pegs securely. By the time it was up and her bed made, it was beginning to get dark and Pagan was exhausted, hungry and thirsty. She drank the last of the

water she had bought at the station and gobbled down a sandwich and a sausage roll, before climbing into her sleeping bag and falling instantly asleep.

*

Pagan's mother was having the worst evening of her life. By eight o'clock, when Pagan still had not returned, she was beginning to get concerned. She rang Pagan's mobile phone, which switched straight to the answer machine. She left a message there and then telephoned Shelley's home. Shelley's mother answered the call.

"Hello Naomi. Is Pagan there?"

"No, Julia, she isn't. I haven't seen her today."

"Didn't she go shopping with Shelley?"

"I don't think so. Hold on, I'll check with her." She held the telephone away from her ear, covering it with her hand and called her daughter. Shelley appeared from the living room, reluctantly, as she suspected this was the phone call she had been dreading ever since she had said goodbye to Pagan.

"Darling, have you seen Pagan today?"

Shelley nodded. "When did she leave?"

"About 2.30," Shelley replied, honestly.

Naomi relayed this information to Julia and Shelley could hear Julia's shout of "WHAT?" from where she was standing.

"Put Shelley on the phone," Julia told Naomi, who passed the receiver over to her daughter, looking worried.

"Shelley, do you know where Pagan was going when she left you?" asked Julia.

"Mrs Randall, I think she was running away," Shelley said, her voice shaky. Her mother was looking at her with an expression of absolute horror on her face.

Julia took a deep breath and tried to keep her own voice level. "Do you know where she was going?"

"No, she wouldn't tell me. She's got a tent and is planning to camp out for a couple of weeks."

Julia suppressed all of the words she would have liked to have directed at Shelley and asked to speak to Naomi again. Shelley passed the telephone back to her mother.

"Julia, if there's anything I can do to help..." Naomi began.

"Yes, there is. Make sure Shelley stays in the house. I think the police are going to want to talk to her."

Naomi stared grimly at her daughter. "She's not going to be going anywhere in a hurry, I assure you."

"Good, I need to call the police now, Naomi. Speak to you soon." And Julia rang off.

The expression on her mother's face told Shelley that her plans for a peaceful evening in front of the television were going to be the first casualty of the storm that was being unleashed by Pagan's disappearance.

Julia Randall's next call was to the local police, who were supportive and professional, promising to send an officer over within the hour. Once this call was made, Julia collapsed into a chair, trying to understand what had happened.

Brian came home and found Julia staring at the television. Which was not switched on.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Pagan's run away from home. The police are on their way," Julia told him. "Why, Brian? Why would she do something like this? I don't understand."

Brian hugged her, but did not reply.

The doorbell rang and Julia answered it to two police officers.

They sat down with her and Brian in the living room and went through a long series of questions about Pagan, covering her appearance, her friends, her family, her last known location and any reasons for her disappearance. Julia gave them Pagan's most recent school photograph.

"Does your daughter have access to a bank account or any cash?" the woman police officer asked Julia.

"She does have a savings account. Oh," she said, as a thought occurred to her, "hold on."

Julia went upstairs and came down a few minutes later.

"She's taken some cash with her. About £300."

"What?" Brian asked. "What cash?"

"Just an emergency fund I have," Julia replied. "She clearly thought this was an emergency, for some reason."

Brian subsided into silence. The male police officer said "We need to talk to this friend of your daughter's, Shelley. Can you give us her address, please, Mrs Randall?"

Julia told them Shelley's address and the officers left, assuring her they would be in touch if there was any news about Pagan.

Shelley's mother had had much to say about Shelley's involvement in Pagan's disappearance and Shelley had spent most of the evening in tears. When the telephone rang again, Naomi rushed to pick it up.

"The police are heading over to you," Julia told her, before Naomi could even ask whether there was any news about Pagan. "Please tell Shelley to tell them everything she can."

Five minutes later, the officers had arrived and were asking Shelley careful questions about Pagan's intentions. When they asked whether Shelley knew why Pagan had left, Shelley hesitated.

"She didn't like Brian," she told them. "She said he was creepy: always making comments about her appearance when her Mum wasn't around, kind of flirting with her, sometimes touching her when she didn't want him to. She couldn't talk to her Mum about it, so she thought if she ran away for a short time, the situation would, you know, come to a head."

The police officers exchanged glances and Naomi looked horrified.

Chapter Nine

On the Sunday night of Pagan's disappearance Julia Randall had barely slept, wondering where Pagan was spending her night and whether she was alright. Neither she nor Brian went to work the next day. Two people were at her doorstep again on the Monday morning. This time, they were both women and neither of them was wearing a police uniform.

The taller of the two women introduced herself as Detective Inspector Clarke and explained that she was accompanied by Mrs Finch of the local social services department. Once in the living room, the inspector asked Brian if he would mind making them a cup of coffee so they could talk to Julia on her own. He frowned, but left to comply.

DI Clarke sat down next to Julia on the sofa and watched her closely. "Mrs Randall, it has been suggested to the investigating team that Pagan might have left because she no longer wanted to share a house with your partner, Brian. What is your reaction to this?"

Julia appeared confused. "What? But they get on OK. He thinks the world of her."

There was a pause as the inspector framed her next question carefully.

"Do you get the impression Pagan feels the same way about him?"

"No, she isn't particularly enthusiastic about him," admitted Julia. "But there were never any rows or anything like that between them." She looked over at Mrs Finch. "I'm sorry, but I really don't understand why the Social Services are involved in this at all."

Detective Inspector Clarke gently explained.

"Mrs Randall, Social Services have to be informed if there is any chance that a child who is missing from home has been the victim of abuse or exploitation. Information we have received during our preliminary investigations suggest that your partner may have been behaving towards Pagan in an inappropriate manner and that this is what has caused her to run away."

"No," said Julia, flatly, refusing to believe any such thing. "No, she would have talked to me about it."

Mrs Finch spoke for the first time. "Mrs Randall, it may have been very difficult for your daughter to do that, especially if she feels you are happy in your relationship with Mr Colson."

"There don't seem to have been any problems at school or with her friends," the inspector told Julia. "The only lead we currently have is the way your daughter feels about Brian."

"I just want you to FIND HER!" Julia retorted, her voice rising into a shout.

Brian came back into the room at that moment, bearing a tray of mugs, which he placed on the coffee table in front of the DI.

"We are looking for her, Mrs Randall," replied the inspector. "But I hope you can see we are also concerned for your daughter's continuing welfare."

Julia bit her lip and gazed up at Brian with a trusting expression on her face.

"Brian, they're saying Pagan left because of you. You never did anything to hurt her, did you?"

"Course not!" Brian responded.

The inspector changed her approach. "Would it be possible for me to see Pagan's room, Mrs Randall?"

"Er, yes, I suppose so," said Julia. She got up and showed DI Clarke Pagan's bedroom, leaving her there to search for any clues to her daughter's whereabouts or state of mind.

When she returned to the living room, Mrs Finch asked her about the events preceding Pagan's disappearance.

"Can you tell me what happened the day before Pagan left?" she enquired.

Julia had been replaying the day in her mind in a continuous loop and was easily able to obey this request. "The only thing that was slightly different from normal was that Brian told Pagan she might be able to get a job in the hardware store on a Saturday. I thought she'd be pleased, but she didn't say much about it really..." Julia looked up at Mrs Finch and then across at Brian. It suddenly became hideously clear to her that the two women had been right. "There is something wrong between you and Pagan isn't there?" she accused Brian. "What have you done to her?"

Brian raised his hands in protest. "Nothing, Julia, nothing! I've given her the odd squeeze, I admit, but nothing more serious than that. She's a lovely girl!"

Julia stared at Brian as if seeing him properly for the first time. Her face was white. "You really don't think you've done anything wrong, do you? I think you had better leave. Now. And stay away from both of us."

Brian glanced from Julia to Mrs Finch and then slammed his way out of the house. Julia dropped onto the sofa and sobbed into her hands. The social worker came to sit next to her and patted her arm in silent comfort and support. A short while later, Inspector Clarke re-entered the room and Julia managed to pull herself together. The police officer correctly interpreted the situation and sat down on Julia's other side. "Is there anyone you can call to come and be with you?" she asked.

Julia shook her head, tears spilling into her lap. "Please," she said, "just find my daughter."

"We can share her photograph with the news media, if you want us to," the inspector told her. "There's often a good response from the media and from the public when the missing person is as young and as attractive as your daughter."

Julia cried even harder at this, but nodded her consent to the idea of sharing Pagan's picture with the news organisations.

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Birds woke Pagan very early that same Monday morning with loud singing. It was barely light. Pagan rolled over in her sleeping bag and her head fell off the end of the tiny pillow, landing uncomfortably on a stone underneath the floor of the tent. As this meant Pagan was now fully awake, she sat up and decided to explore her surroundings. She picked up her empty water bottle, hoping she would find a way of refilling it.

The June morning was cool and dewy as Pagan continued through the woods in the same direction as she had travelled the night before. The woods were not as large as she had first thought and soon she was at the edge, next to a building she thought must belong to the country club. There was no-one around and she went closer, to see what it was. The building was labelled 'Squash Courts' and another sign declared that its opening hours were 6.30am to 9pm. Squash courts implied changing rooms, toilets and showers to Pagan's practical mind and she was delighted with this find. It was still an hour until the advertised opening time, so Pagan continued her exploration. She found that the main building of the country club was half a mile further on, but did not dare to go too close to that, for fear of being spotted from one of its many windows. The entrance to the country club was close to that building and Pagan could hear cars on a road which bordered the club on its eastern edge. She retreated back into the woods to wait for 6.30am and see what would happen.

At 6.25 a small van arrived at the squash courts and two women climbed out, removed a box of cleaning materials and what looked like a laundry basket full of towels from the back,

went over to the building and entered it. Half an hour later, they emerged, loaded up the van and drove away. Pagan's heart was beating hard as she crept back to the building. The front door was now open and she entered. Sure enough, there were men and women's changing rooms, with showers and lavatories. Better still, there were clean towels piled up for the use of the country club's members and tiny bottles of shampoo, conditioner and shower gel.

Hardly daring to believe her luck, Pagan used the toilet and then took the quickest shower of her life, leaving her used towel in the basket provided for them and putting the partly-used bottles of toiletries in her pockets. She filled up her water bottle and then quickly left, making her way back to her woodland hideout before any country club members came to use the squash courts. Back at the tent, she boiled some water with her new camping stove and made herself a cup of weak black tea, beginning to dare to believe she would be able to survive on her own in this place that she had found.

After fortifying herself with another sausage roll, Pagan worked to hide her tent more thoroughly than she had had time to, the previous night. She spent an hour artfully arranging the brambles and undergrowth until the tent was hard to see even close up. Once she had finished, she was ready to explore again and to find the small village she remembered seeing on the maps she'd studied of this area.

Pagan set off to find her way back to the road she'd seen earlier, which she was fairly sure led to the village. She rolled a large log over to the dry-stone wall and used it as a stepping-stone to pull herself to the top. She looked carefully up and down the path before heaving herself back over the wall. Making sure there was still no-one in sight, she collected a small piece of chalk from the side of the path and marked a horizontal line on one of the stones of the wall, at about shoulder height, so she would know where to climb back over it again. With her rucksack on her back now much lighter than it had been the day before, she set off eastward, hoping to join up with the road which she'd seen from inside the country club's grounds.

It was only a short walk of perhaps two hundred metres to the road. It wasn't busy with traffic, but Pagan was surprised she had not heard any cars at all from her tent. The trees had a deadening affect on the noise. Pagan adjusted her rucksack to make it sat slightly higher on her back and then headed south on the road, following the wall of the country club, which was even higher here. Another wall bordered the road on the opposite side and soon Pagan passed the entrance to Hawley Lodge School. She nodded in approval at her new neighbours. Rich kids and a country club, she thought, nice!

In a short time, she passed the main entrance to the country club on her right. The principle building was a hotel: a grand affair which must have been part of a huge country estate in times gone by. A tall, strangely-shaped statue, perhaps supposed to be a woman, stood in the driveway in front of the building. It seemed to be wearing a white vest, which struck Pagan as a rather odd embellishment.

The village was about a mile from Pagan's campsite. She was pleased to find it had a small shop. Inside the shop she bought some cans of soup, some cheese, a loaf of bread and a tub of margarine. The woman behind the counter was deep in a scandal-mongering conversation with the previous customer and paid little attention to Pagan, which suited her just fine.

After packing her purchases into her bag, Pagan continued her exploration. The village was very small, but had a picturesque pond, a pub and a bus stop. She walked on, exploring the main part of the village. A small lane led to a common area surrounded by houses. There was a children's playground in the centre with a number of well-cared-for allotment plots around it. Pagan eyed these neat rows of vegetables with interest: perhaps she would be able to swipe some

lettuces or peas to supplement her diet. She returned to the road and followed it around in a large square, of about a mile in perimeter, back to the pond. By now she was getting hungry again and it was quite late for lunch and she decided to head back to the tent.

She walked back up the road to the country club, looking in at the main entrance again. She noticed the statue had lost the vest it had been wearing earlier. Some men were unloading suitcases and golf bags from sporty little cars, while a group of smartly-clothed and expensively hair-dressed women laughed loudly together at the front of the building. Pagan thought of the illicit shower she had taken in the squash courts that morning and smiled to herself, wondering what these wealthy types would say if they knew she had been gate-crashing their facilities.

As she approached the school on her right, she saw a group of four teenage boys in white sports strips with blue stripes across their chests turning into the school entrance. Another group of four, these with red stripes, were jogging down the road towards her. Four more, this time with yellow bands, emerged from the footpath which led back towards her camp as she continued walking. They were obviously doing some sort of cross-country run. Pagan suddenly felt vulnerable and alone in the face of these boys. The boys with red stripes stared at her with open curiosity as they followed the blue team into the school entrance. Pagan kept her face down as she passed them. One of the yellow-striped bunch addressed her directly:

"Got room in your sleeping bag for me, gorgeous? I'll keep you warm tonight." The boys with him laughed sycophantically.

Pagan ignored him, but was annoyed to find herself blushing. She heartily hoped the crack about the sleeping bag was just a lucky guess. When she got to the footpath she glanced up it, ready to walk on up the road if there were any other boys running down it. The path was deserted and Pagan started to walk towards the place in the wall where she could climb over to reach her camp. She had almost reached it when another group of four boys rounded a slight bend in the path. This lot had green bands on the front of their vests.

This group were walking, not very quickly, and were so deeply absorbed in their conversation that they failed to notice Pagan, who stopped walking and couldn't help overhearing what they were saying.

"Well I think it's a great idea," the tall, blonde one was saying, "but where are we going to get them from?"

"Just pick some up on the roadside?" suggested the tubby, dark-haired boy.

"No, we need them to look as though they've been freshly-smoked," said one of the others, who looked Indian to Pagan. "And it would look weird if they were all different brands."

"There's the pub in the village," said the tall blonde one, "but we won't be able to get there until Saturday, and even then, we'd be likely to be spotted by one of the others."

"Maybe we could get some from the country club instead," the fourth boy suggested. He was more athletically-built than the others, Pagan noticed, and had dark blonde hair.

"You must be joking," the tall boy said, "after what happened today? If we get caught in there we'll be in deep shit, especially you, Luke. Don't even think-"

He stopped then, having finally noticed Pagan. She stared defiantly back at them, daring them to make a crude remark like the previous group.

The boy whose name was Luke regarded her with interest. "Excuse me," he said, "but do you live around here?"

Taken aback by this politeness, Pagan could only reply "Er, yes, I do. So what?"

The boy looked at his friends. "What if we ask her to do it?"

"Do what?" demanded Pagan, ready to get angry if necessary.

The Indian-looking boy gave her a charming smile. "We are trying to exact revenge for a cruel trick that was played upon my friend here by some of our colleagues."

"Were they the ones with the yellow bands?" Pagan found herself asking, remembering the crude remark from that set of boys.

The boy seemed surprised. "Why, yes. And I can see they have caused offence to you in some way, too. We have come up with a plan to get back at them, but we are in need of some materials which are hard for us to obtain, but which might be easy for you to find."

Pagan glanced at him suspiciously. "You're not talking about drugs are you?"

The boy called Luke explained that what they wanted were some cigarette butts from the ashtrays of the pub in the village. Pagan didn't like the sound of that, but it didn't sound too difficult a task and there might be an advantage in playing along with them.

"What's in it for me?"

"What do you need?" asked the Indian boy. Pagan thought about this.

"Books," she decided.

All four boys burst out together: "*Books?*"

"Yes, books. You've got a library in that school of yours, haven't you? Well I'd like to borrow some books to read. I'm here on holiday and I'm bored. I'll gather up some *freshly-smoked* cigarette butts for you, if you bring me some books."

"Excuse us for a moment," said the Indian boy, and the green team retreated to discuss the matter.

Pagan watched them in amusement, wondering where this was going to go next and rather enjoying herself. The boys broke apart and came back to her. Luke seemed to have been appointed spokesman, this time. "I've got a training run on Wednesday afternoon," he said. "I could bring you some books at around three."

"OK," replied Pagan, "I'll meet you here at three with the cigarette butts. And don't bring me any rubbishy books – some decent stuff please."

"Where are you staying?" Luke asked.

"At the country club," replied Pagan in her haughtiest manner. This was, after all, strictly true. "But that's out of bounds for you, isn't it? So I'll meet you here."

The boys thanked her and started jogging back towards the school. Pagan waited until they were out of sight before finding her mark on the wall and climbing over it, back to her tent. There she unpacked her purchases and made herself a late lunch. Bored of her tent, she went for another walk in the afternoon, but this one was uneventful and she returned to her campsite in the early evening, beginning to think camping was rather dull. Not being as tired as she had been on the previous night, it took Pagan a while to get to sleep. She was tormented by feelings of guilt about running away from her mother and it was difficult to get comfortable enough to drop off.

The following morning, Pagan made another trip to the squash courts, this time arranging to arrive there shortly after the cleaners had left. Feeling more bold than she had on Monday, she took a longer shower and was still out of the building before any early-morning squash players arrived to disturb her. This time she borrowed the damp towel she had used, thinking she could use it as another layer of padding underneath her bedding roll, to shield her body from some of the stones underneath the tent.

Back at her campsite, Pagan made a cup of tea and then had bread and margarine for her breakfast. Toast would be nicer, she thought to herself. The idea of staying alone in the tent all morning with nothing to do was unappealing, but Pagan knew there was no point in going to the

pub in the village until later in the day, when the smokers would have had time to visit it. She was utterly bored by lunchtime and was beginning to look forward to Luke bringing her some books the following day with eagerness.

At one o'clock she walked back towards the village. The pub was open when she got there; she went inside and ordered a glass of orange juice. She took the drink outside and sat on one of the benches in front of the pub, deliberately choosing one with a used ash-tray on it. She removed a plastic bag from her rucksack, held it open under the table, quickly tipped the contents of the ash-tray into it and returned the bag to her rucksack. None of the other tables were occupied and she was fairly sure no-one had observed this slightly peculiar behaviour of hers. It was now a warm, sunny afternoon. She found herself greatly enjoying her drink and the sense of achievement at fulfilling her mission.

Pagan couldn't bear the thought of spending all afternoon in her tiny tent and she decided to take a trip out of the village. She walked over to the bus-stop to see when the next bus might be arriving. It was due to leave at just before two o'clock, so Pagan waited for it and, when it arrived, bought a return ticket to the town. The ride was a short one, which took her past the station she had arrived at on Sunday night (which seemed a long time ago now) and then on into the small town.

When the bus stopped on the high street, Pagan got out and went to explore. The town was not large, but it had a natural history museum in it, which was free to enter. Pagan traipsed around the museum. It had many displays of stuffed animals, which started off being interesting, but after a while Pagan found herself becoming depressed by all the dead animals, some of whom were from long-extinct breeds. She spent quite a while watching the formicary in the insect gallery, where hundreds of tiny leaf-cutter ants were busily carrying small pieces of leaves back to their nest. It was one of the few parts of the museum that seemed to be alive.

After about an hour in the museum, Pagan left and walked slowly down the high street, looking for somewhere to stock up on food. A small shopping precinct led to a supermarket, where Pagan was pleased to be able to purchase fruit, bread, biscuits and some more canned food at a more reasonable price than she could get them at the small shop in the village. She also felt more anonymous in the larger store. Now that her rucksack was comfortingly heavy again, Pagan thought about heading back. The next bus to the village was at quarter past four, which gave her time to walk the whole length of the high street and back.

There were not many shops and most of them seemed to be estate agents or charity shops. There was an electrical goods store on one corner and Pagan stood outside watching the televisions for a while. A news channel was playing on them and Pagan gasped as her own face appeared on the screen, captioned with the words 'Missing Teen'. She turned quickly away from the window and walked back to the bus-stop, now terrified she would be recognised and that someone would call the police. She pulled her hat further down over her face and sat waiting for the bus, impatient for it to appear and allow her to return to the sanctuary of her tent.

The short journey back to the village seemed to take an age. There were a number of school children on the bus and Pagan felt conspicuous, as they were all wearing school uniforms and she, although clearly of school age, was not. Some of them got off at her stop and she sensed them watching her curiously as she walked away from them towards the country club. I hope none of them will be watching the news tonight, thought Pagan.

The following day, Pagan stayed near her tent, glad she had enough food to last her for a few more days and nervous about being seen by anybody. She was hugely bored by mid-

afternoon, when she climbed over the wall with the bag of cigarette butts and waited to see if the boy with the books would show up.

PART III: Retribution

Chapter Ten

Luke headed to the Forum for a break before his Wednesday afternoon orienteering training run. The room was fairly full of Romans, many of whom were watching the television. Luke picked up one of the newspapers that were lying on a coffee table near the middle of the room, intending to look at the football pages.

He unfolded the paper. On the front page was a school photograph of a pretty girl with long blonde hair, smiling out self-consciously. The hair was different, but Luke immediately recognised the face as that of the girl they had met on the path. He spread the paper out and read about the missing Pagan Randall and how concerned her mother and the police were about her safety. Briefly checking that no-one was watching him, Luke folded the paper over to hide the front page and went to the year nine's dormitory.

Here, he placed the newspaper into his rucksack with the books he had borrowed from the library. He returned to the common room and tried to act normally, although his mind was now distracted with speculation about Pagan. At two Luke set off for his run. By three o'clock he was back at the country club's wall, where Pagan was waiting for him.

"Hi," Luke greeted her, coming to a stop, breathing heavily.

Pagan smiled shyly at him. Precisely the same smile as the one in her photograph in the paper, Luke thought. "Did you get some books?"

"I hope they're OK," he said, handing her four hard-backed volumes. "I asked the librarian for some good stories and he gave me these. You'll have to tell me what happens in them, because he's bound to ask what I thought of them."

"Thanks!" she said, sounding pleased. "Oh, here are the things you wanted." She passed him the bag containing the cigarette ends.

"I found something else," Luke said, tucking the bag into his rucksack and removing the newspaper. He unfolded it to show her the front page.

Pagan went white and put her hand on the stones of the wall for support. She took the paper from Luke, read the story and then stared up at him.

"Have you told anyone?" Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"No, of course not," said Luke, whose sense of fair play and solidarity had been finely honed by his time at Hawley Lodge. Pagan sagged against the wall in relief, then looked up and down the path.

"I'm camping in the woods here," she confided in him. "Temporarily, until things at home sort themselves out. Look, I don't want to be seen, can you come back to the tent?"

Luke's eyes rested on the 'Pritchards Country Club: Member's Only' sign above their heads and he hesitated.

"It's OK," she said, "I'm only just inside the boundary and I've never seen anyone here."

She climbed over the wall, pointing out her chalk-mark and Luke carefully checked the path was empty before following her over. Pagan led the way to her well-disguised tent.

"D'you want a cup of tea?" she asked, as though Luke had popped around to see her at her mother's house.

Luke grinned at her. "OK," he said.

Pagan carefully set up her little gas stove, lit it and filled one of the small pans with water. Then she found her flask and put a tea bag inside it.

"Why did you run away?" Luke asked, sitting down on the ground in front of Pagan's tent.

Pagan's face looked sad and her mouth twisted into a small grimace.

"I was having problems with my Mum's boyfriend," she said. "But I really don't want to talk about him."

"Are you planning on staying here long?"

"I can't stay very long," Pagan told him, "because I'll run out of money. But I'm alright for a week or so, I think." She changed the subject. "What are you planning to do with those cigarettes?"

Luke explained the situation he'd been placed in on Monday with his sports shirt being used to decorate the statue in the front of the country club.

"Oh, I saw it on the statue!" Pagan told him. "It's a pretty weird-looking sculpture, isn't it?"

Luke nodded.

"But it's supposed to be really valuable. He said it was a... Henry something."

"Henry Moore?" asked Pagan. "I've heard of him – my Mum took me to the sculpture park near Wakefield, once." She fell silent and Luke saw she was missing her mother badly.

"It's the only thing I don't like about this school – not seeing my mum and sisters," he confided.

"How old are your sisters?" Pagan asked, snapping herself out of her sorrow.

"They're twins and they're nearly three," Luke said.

"Wow, that's quite an age gap between you and them!"

"Yeah, I think they had to have fertility treatment or something," Luke said, "and that's why they ended up with two. They're a bit of a handful and noisy as hell."

"What about your dad?"

"What about him?"

"Well I notice you didn't say that you missed him."

Luke made a face. "I don't get on with him that well. I really didn't want to come to this school and we had a lot of rows about it last year. He seems a bit happier now that I'm getting on alright here though. What happened to your dad?"

"He died of cancer when I was eight," Pagan told him. "Brian, my Mum's boyfriend, moved in about a year ago." She sighed. "I really hope Mum's kicked him out by now."

"Can't you phone her and find out?" asked Luke.

"I'm not using my mobile in case they track me down," said Pagan. "And I checked the public phone in the village this morning, but it wasn't working."

"We have to keep our phones locked away during the day," Luke told her, "but if there's someone I could phone for you..."

Pagan smiled at him. "Thanks, I'll think about it."

The water in the pan was now boiling. Pagan made the tea and poured them both a cup. They sat and drank in silence for a while.

"What made you come here?" Luke asked. "It said in the paper you're from Manchester."

"I did some research on the Internet," Pagan explained. "I wanted somewhere secluded that was on the way to London. Somewhere near the railway, but not too heavily populated. This place looked good on the map and on the satellite pictures."

Luke stared at her with respect. "Wow, you're amazing," he said, meaning it, then becoming embarrassed at his over-enthusiasm, and blushing.

Pagan smiled back at him. "Thank you," she said, simply.

Then the two of them lolled in the afternoon sunshine for a while, chatting about their schools, their families and Pagan's recent experiences.

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At four o'clock, the year nines were gathering in the hall for their third detention of the week.

"Where's Luke?" muttered Taj to Jay and Fred. They both shrugged their shoulders and got out the work they were going to be doing during their hour of imprisonment.

The teacher supervising this detention was Mr Thomas, the deputy head and the housemaster for the Vikings. As the boys settled down he did a quick head-count and realised he did not have a complete set. "Has anyone seen Brownlow?" he asked.

No-one answered. He turned to the three Romans with raised eyebrows.

"He went out on a training run, sir," said Jay, honestly. "Maybe he forgot about the detention because of it being Wednesday and not having classes this afternoon. Shall I go and find him, sir?"

"No, because then I'll have two renegade Romans on my conscience," replied Mr Thomas. "Get on with your work." He went over to the internal telephone at the end of the hall and had a short conversation with someone. The three Romans exchanged anxious glances.

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Luke checked his watch and was startled to see he'd been with Pagan for over an hour.

"I'd better get back to school," Luke told her. "When d'you think you'll be finished with the books?"

She grinned at him. "I expect I will have finished these by the end of the week," she said.

"I've got school on Saturday morning," Luke told her, pulling a face, "but I could drop round in the afternoon, if you like. If you haven't left by then, that is."

"I expect I'll still be here," she smiled. "I'll see you then."

Luke smiled back at her and then turned away to scramble through the woodland undergrowth back to the stone wall beside the pathway. He had, indeed, completely forgotten about the year nines' detention. He entered the school through the door on the east side and went straight up the students' staircase towards the dormitories. As he neared the top of the first flight of stairs he almost bumped into Mr Wilmot, who was on his way down.

"Where have you been, Brownlow?" demanded Mr Wilmot in an unfriendly tone.

"I went on a training run, sir," replied Luke.

"You were expected in the hall for detention fifteen minutes ago."

Luke's lower jaw dropped. "Oh, sorry sir, I completely forgot about that. I'll just get changed and go down."

Mr Wilmot's eyes narrowed in suspicion as he peered more closely at Luke. "Why are you carrying a rucksack?"

"A bit of extra weight, sir, to help with the training," Luke lied.

Unfortunately, Mr Wilmot's sixth sense of trouble-detection seemed to have kicked in, or perhaps Luke was simply a terrible liar. "Take it off."

Luke's stomach seemed to be falling down towards the ground floor. He slipped the backpack off his shoulders and placed it into the housemaster's outstretched hand. Now the books and the newspaper were in Pagan's possession, the bag was not very heavy at all. Mr Wilmot's eyebrows elevated themselves into an expression of polite disbelief as he gauged its weight for himself. He handed it back to Luke. "Open it."

Luke unzipped the bag and held it open so Mr Wilmot could see inside. The housemaster removed Pagan's plastic bag and peered into it. He lifted his head and stared at Luke. "Why are you carrying these?"

Luke could not think of a single innocent answer to this question. He couldn't believe his bad luck at running into Mr Wilmot at this moment.

"Perhaps you'll find it easier to talk to the headmaster about this."

Luke would have protested, would have admitted everything rather than have to face Ned, but Mr Wilmot had already turned away and was walking through the door which led from the east wing to the corridor known to the students as Death Alley, where the headmaster's office was. Feeling sick, Luke followed him through the usually-off-limits entrance.

Ned was working at his desk and did not appear happy to see Mr Wilmot with Luke in tow. "What's the matter?" he asked, peremptorily, then focused his attention upon Luke. "Aren't you supposed to be in detention right now?"

"Brownlow skipped the detention and I found him with these in his possession," Mr Wilmot declared, placing the bag of cigarette ends onto Ned's desk.

Ned examined the contents of the bag. "Why on earth are you carrying these around with you?"

Luke did not want to give an answer to this, but Mr Wilmot supplied one for him.

"Isn't it obvious, headmaster? He must have been smoking!"

Ned turned to the housemaster with a small frown. "I've never met a smoker who carries their smoked cigarettes around with them." He directed his hard stare back to Luke. "Is this something to do with the vest-on-the-statue incident?"

Luke swallowed and nodded. "Yes, sir,"

"Would you care to elaborate?"

No, I really wouldn't, thought Luke, remaining silent.

"No?" said Ned. "So, let me guess, you were going to plant these in the possession of those you thought responsible and get your revenge upon them by making it appear they had been smoking in school?"

Luke nodded again.

"And is anyone else involved in this plan of yours?"

Luke thought of Pagan and of the other Romans and firmly shook his head. "No, sir."

"Then where, may I ask, did you get these from? They don't look as though you picked them up from the road. As far as I can see," continued Ned, inspecting the cigarette ends, "these look as though they have all come from the same packet and have been smoked quite recently."

A horrible realisation struck Luke: now he had lied to protect Pagan, the trap the Romans had carefully prepared for Wharton was going to close neatly and painfully around himself.

"This suggests either that they have been smoked by you or that you have just visited the public house in the village to collect them." Ned's tone of voice was level and reasonable, but as the year nines were only allowed to visit the village at weekends, admitting to either offence seemed likely to land Luke in detentions for the rest of the term. While Luke was trying to decide which of the two options was going to be the least damaging, Mr Wilmot unexpectedly ruled out the first.

"I didn't actually smell tobacco on the boy, headmaster."

Ned gave Luke a questioning look. "So you were out of bounds?"

Luke thought of his visit to Pagan's campsite inside the walls of the country club that afternoon and was able to honestly reply: "Yes, sir, I was."

The headmaster frowned at Luke. "Acts of retaliation are, as you know, unacceptable under our school behaviour policy. Non-attendance at a detention is also a serious matter, while being out of bounds is something I have had to remind your class about only this week. I'm appalled by your behaviour."

Luke had no response or defence to offer. He couldn't bear to meet Ned's eyes and dropped his gaze to the carpet, whose pattern was beginning to become sickeningly familiar. He waited to hear what his sentence would be.

"Since you have clearly abused your orienteering training session today to visit the village without permission, you will no longer be a part of the school team."

Luke felt devastated but not surprised at this pronouncement. He looked sadly up at Ned, expecting additional punishments for his other crimes. "You will have two further detentions on Monday and Tuesday of next week to make up for missing today's and you will not be permitted to go to the village for the next two weekends as a consequence of your planned act of retaliation."

Luke nodded in acceptance. None of this seemed terribly unfair and it seemed as though he might still be able to get out to meet Pagan again on Saturday. He had feared he would be gated - confined to the school grounds - which would have made it impossible to see her again.

The very worst thing about the situation was that he was sure he had managed to completely destroy any chance of re-establishing a friendly relationship with Ned. With Mr Wilmot in the room he could not talk frankly, but he tried to address the neighbour underneath the headmaster's gown with his next words.

"I'm really sorry. I've let you down."

The look Ned gave him was hard to interpret. "You have," he agreed. "And if your behaviour doesn't improve I will be talking to your parents about whether this school is the right place for you to be. You can go."

As he trudged dejectedly back up to the top floor to shower and change, Luke reflected upon the fact that he was now as desperate to stay at Hawley Lodge as he had been to stay at his old school last year. He was lying on his bed when his room-mates came to find him after their detention had finished.

Jay flopped down onto his own bed. "What happened?"

Luke gave a small groan at the prospect of reliving the past two hours again, but proceeded to tell his friends the edited highlights of his afternoon's experiences, carefully leaving out any information as to the identity of the girl in the woods. They made a good audience; expressing their sympathy in colourful language which made Luke feel slightly better.

"Why didn't you tell Kelly you got the fags off that girl?" asked Fred, reasonably.

Luke shrugged. "It probably would have sounded like a lie anyway. What are the chances of bumping into someone who'd be willing to swipe the contents of an ashtray for me?"

The other boys nodded understandingly and Luke's thoughts drifted to Pagan again. He knew he would be risking his future at the school by climbing over the country club wall to see her on Saturday, but there was something about her that was more addictive than any cigarettes he had ever smoked.

Chapter Eleven

After lunch on Saturday most of Luke's year were heading off to the village to stock up with their week's supply of sweets and soft drinks from the shop. Luke waited until they had gone and then set off up the path alongside the country club. After making sure there was no-one in sight, he climbed over the wall and waded through the brambles to Pagan's campsite.

He found Pagan preparing a meal: cutting oddly-shaped slices from a loaf of bread and heating up a can of mushroom soup. She grinned at Luke as he arrived and excitedly showed him a handful of small white mushrooms.

"Look what I found in the woods!" she said. "Proper forager's food!" Luke smiled back at her and admired her harvest as Pagan chopped up the mushrooms and stirred them into her soup. "D'you want some?" asked Pagan.

Luke wasn't all that keen on mushrooms, but didn't want to hurt Pagan's feelings. "Well, I've had lunch, so I'm not that hungry – but maybe a little bit, just to keep you company." Pagan looked pleased and Luke knew he'd said the right thing.

Pagan busied herself with buttering the bread and then, when it was ready, she poured the soup into the two plastic cups from her Thermos flask. They toasted each other and sipped it, enjoying the peace of the woods and the warmth of the sunlight that was filtering down on them through the trees.

"What happened about the cigarette ends?" Pagan asked, suddenly.

"It all went horribly wrong," admitted Luke. "But thanks for getting them, all the same."

Pagan demanded to hear the story and was horrified to hear that Luke had lost his place on the orienteering team by telling his headmaster he had been into the village to get the cigarettes from the pub himself.

"But you didn't go into the village!" she cried. "That's terrible."

Luke smiled awkwardly. "I was out of bounds when I came here, though," he said, "so it doesn't make a lot of difference."

Pagan looked at him with an expression of affection. "If you'd told him about me you might not have lost your place on the team."

"I'm not going to risk anyone finding out you're here if I can help it," Luke promised her.

Pagan leant over and gave him a light kiss on the cheek as a reward for his gallantry.

"Are you thinking of going home soon?" Luke asked.

"I think I probably should," sighed Pagan. "I've enjoyed camping out here, but it will be nice to have a proper bathroom again, where I can enjoy a long shower or bath without worrying that someone is going to catch me and throw me out. I'm looking forward to sleeping in a bed again, too. I hope Mum will have got rid of that creep by now, so I think I'll head back tomorrow." She looked at Luke. "I'll miss you, though. Will you keep in touch with me once I get back home?"

Luke smiled at her. "Course I will. And if the creep is still there, you let me know and I'll come up and tell him what I think of him."

Pagan put on a soppy, simpering look, fluttered her eyelashes in the style of a silent movie damsel in distress, clasped her hands together under her chin and breathed: "You're my hero!"

Luke threw what was left of his bread at her in mock disgust and they playfully wrestled with each other for a short while, until the wrestling became hugging and the hugging became kissing.

After a period of no talking at all, Pagan remarked "Your headmaster sounds really strict."

Luke thought about this. "He's fair, I think," he said. "He makes it clear what's expected of everyone, and we know what will happen if we don't live up to it. It's a bit weird for me though, because I knew him outside of school before I came here."

He went on to explain to Pagan the odd relationship he had with Ned and how he thought he might have ruined it for good in the past week. It was a relief to be able to talk to someone else about the situation.

"It might not be as bad as you think," she reassured him. "He's got to be tough on you to prove to himself he's not treating you differently from everyone else."

Luke snorted. "I don't think there's any danger of that. I think he was really serious about expelling me if I get in trouble again."

Pagan sat up and gave Luke a headmistress-ish look herself. "And here you are out of bounds again! What are you thinking of? Get back to school at once! I don't want you in more trouble because of me."

Luke raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. Pagan handed him back his library books and they exchanged telephone numbers, email addresses and a few more kisses before Luke reluctantly fought through the undergrowth to get back to the path. His way was clear; he gave Pagan one last wave and trotted back to the school, resolving to be a model student for the rest of the term.

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That evening, Luke had been asleep for an hour when he was woken with a tremendous pain in his stomach, an overwhelming wave of nausea and the certain knowledge that he needed to get to a toilet, fast. Doubled over with cramps in his lower abdomen, he scuttled as quickly as he could to the bathroom, which was at the end of the corridor nearest to the stairs. Once inside, it became clear that his body was doing its best to completely clear itself of any food he might have eaten that day. Luke was fairly sure he had never been as violently ill as this in his life.

When the first paroxysms of sickness and diarrhoea had passed, Luke leant his head against the side of the toilet cubicle, feeling washed-out and trying to think about what on earth could be wrong with him. No-one else seemed to be suffering, so it didn't seem likely that he was ill from food-poisoning as a result of anything he'd eaten at school.

Then a vivid memory formed in his mind, of Pagan putting her foraged mushrooms into the soup at lunchtime. It must be the mushrooms that were making him so sick. He groaned out loud as he thought of poor Pagan, stuck in the woods with these same symptoms but with no access to modern plumbing and with no-one to turn to for help. Luke staggered to a washbasin and rinsed his mouth and face. He looked into the mirror. It was hard to focus on his reflection, but what he could see of his face was pale and shiny with sweat.

Now that he had a suspicion of the cause of his illness, he knew he needed to get help for himself and for Pagan. He didn't know much about mushrooms, but was aware from the conversations he'd had on his hikes with Ned that some of them were lethal. He couldn't afford not to tell someone about it. His first thought was to go straight to Ned, but there were school protocols involved in these things and he knew it would be seen as highly improper for a student to go and disturb the headmaster without having first spoken to his housemaster. Mr Wilmot's apartment also had the advantage of being in the corridor just around the corner from the Romans' dormitories. Luke pulled the reserves of his strength together and stumbled towards Mr Wilmot's quarters, still bent double with the pain in his stomach.

Mr Wilmot answered his door to Luke. As usual, his first response was an angry one. "What are you doing out of bed, Brownlow?"

Before Luke could reply, Mr Wilmot became aware that something was very wrong. "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"Poisonous mushrooms," Luke managed to say, before he found he really needed to be sick again. Realising this was the case, Mr Wilmot ushered him into the bathroom of his small flat, while assuring him that he would call the Matron. Luke emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later to find the school's Matron already there. She must have summoned the headmaster, too, as Ned Kelly was standing next to her. He was dressed in more casual clothes than Luke had seen him wearing at the school, making him seem much more like his next-door-neighbour than the headmaster who had punished Luke on Wednesday.

Ned guided Luke into a chair and looked at him closely. "Mr Wilmot tells us you think you've eaten poisonous mushrooms, Luke. Are you able to describe them to me?"

"They were small and white," Luke said. He grasped Ned's upper arm in his urgency to transmit his news. "But I'm not the only one who ate them. There's a girl hiding out in the country club's woods. She picked them and cooked them and I think she ate more of them than I did. You've got to find her, Ned."

The Matron and Mr Wilmot were both looking shocked, perhaps at Luke's news, perhaps at the familiar way in which he was addressing the headmaster. Luke was feeling so dreadful that he was beyond caring about keeping up the pretence of a separation of their home and school lives.

Ned glanced over at the laptop computer that was open and glowing on Mr Wilmot's desk. "Can I borrow that for a moment, John?"

Mr Wilmot brought the machine over to Ned, who quickly typed a few words into it and then showed the screen to Luke. A photograph of an innocent-looking white mushroom dominated the page and Luke nodded in recognition. He couldn't help but notice that the caption above the photograph read 'Destroying Angel'.

Ned glanced over at the Matron. "Gwen, you need to call an ambulance. Tell them we've got two suspected cases of *Amanita virosa* poisoning." He put the laptop back on the desk and scribbled down the name of the mushroom on a post-it note for her. The Matron pulled a phone out of her pocket and made the call.

"Where precisely is this girl, Luke? We need to find her and get her to the ambulance."

"Go up the path next to the country club for two hundred metres," Luke said, thinking in orienteering terms. "There's a chalk line on one of the stones in the wall, about a metre from the ground. You have to climb over the wall and head due south for about fifty metres." He bent double and moaned as his stomach cramped painfully. "She's got a small green tent. She's fourteen years old and her name's Pagan."

"Pagan," repeated Ned. He looked sharply at Luke. "Do you mean Pagan Randall?"

Luke nodded, the cramping rendering him unable to speak.

"John, you'd better come with me and help get this girl out of the woods. Gwen, get Luke downstairs, ready for the ambulance, but don't let it go until we bring Pagan back here."

The two men left and Matron came over to Luke and helped him to his feet. "We'll go down in the lift," she said.

*

Pagan was convinced she was dying. She lay in a tight ball of pain and misery with her sleeping bag wrapped around her shoulders. She badly wanted her mother to be with her but knew there was no point in phoning her when she was so far away. Presently, she became aware of a light approaching her tent from the direction of the footpath. Pushing her upper body off the ground, she shielded her eyes and tried to make out who was holding the torch.

Two men came into view and she turned on her own flashlight to help them see where she was. She didn't care who they were, she just knew she was in urgent need of help.

"Pagan?" One of the men knelt down next to her. "We're from the school. Luke sent us to find you. Can you walk? We need to get you to the ambulance."

Pagan nearly cried with relief. She struggled to her feet and the two men helped her back to the wall, which she climbed with some difficulty, her arms and legs shaking. As they supported her along the pathway back to the school, Pagan asked, "Is Luke sick too?"

"Yes, he is," replied the man on her right. "We've got to get you both to hospital as soon as possible or there's a good chance you will die."

Pagan's legs wobbled more at this news and the man said "Hold on, John." They stopped and Pagan took a deep breath, trying to pull herself together. "You're doing brilliantly," the man told her. "Not far to go now and we'll get you into the ambulance with Luke." As he spoke, the darkness of the night was pierced with flashing blue lights from the direction of the road. This sight and the prospect of being reunited with Luke, even under these grim circumstances, spurred Pagan into action and she began to walk forwards again.

*

As Luke was assisted into the ambulance he heard crunching noises from the gravel driveway and turned to see that Ned and Mr Wilmot were approaching the circle of flashing blue light around the vehicle, supporting Pagan between them. Once both of the teenagers were securely fastened into the ambulance, Ned knelt next to Luke.

"I'll call your parents and then I'll follow behind in my car. I'll see you at the hospital." Luke tried to thank him, but Ned had already gone and the ambulance was moving.

Luke looked across at Pagan and found her staring back at him. "I'm sorry-" they both started to say. Then they both stopped. Pagan tried again. "I'm really sorry I poisoned you."

"I'm sorry I had to give you away," Luke replied.

"I'm not," Pagan said. "From what that bald man said, if we don't go to hospital we're likely to die."

"Really?" asked Luke, feeling sicker than ever.

Pagan stared at him. "He wasn't kidding, Luke, I can tell. What if we die anyway?"

Luke groaned as another cramp caused his guts to spasm. "I think being dead might be an improvement on the way I'm feeling right now."

It was not long before they arrived at the hospital where they were swiftly admitted and taken to the intensive care unit. In a bewilderingly short period of time Pagan and Luke found themselves hooked up to intravenous drips, gastric tubes and a blood-filtering machine. A kind-faced young doctor explained to them that there were two different types of poison in the mushrooms they had eaten.

"One is what has made you so sick today," she said, "but the other is much more dangerous and would kill you if you didn't have medical help, by destroying your liver and kidneys." She was sitting between their beds and both children were lying on their sides, facing her. "We have got to make sure we remove every trace of the poison from your bodies, which is

what most of these tubes are about. We're also giving you some medicine that will help counteract the effect of it. You might be interested to hear that one of the medicines is derived from a fungus, like the thing that poisoned you. And now I come to think of it, the other one comes from a thistle.

"If all goes well, you are likely to be in hospital for less than a week. But it's going to be a rough couple of days for you, and there is still a chance your livers may fail. If they do, you will have a longer stay as we will have to try and get you a liver transplant."

She turned to talk to Pagan. "I need to know your parents' details, young lady. I know you've been living rough, but it's important they know what's happened to you. Especially if you end up needing a liver transplant."

Pagan nodded, quite ready to co-operate. "My mum's name is Julia Randall." She recited her mother's phone number and the doctor wrote down the details.

"Good girl," said the doctor. "I'm going to go and ring your mother and let her know you're here. Now I know it's not very comfortable for either of you, but try to get some sleep. You should be feeling better in the morning. We'll be monitoring you closely over the next few days to make sure the poison has gone and that you're on the mend. Goodnight." She left.

Pagan and Luke stared at each other through the tubes and machinery.

"I've been nothing but trouble to you," she said. "But I want you to know the last few days have been the best I've ever had."

Although her face was taut with pain and paler than he'd ever seen it, the smile Pagan gave him then was the most beautiful that Luke had seen in his life. A big lump seemed to be forming in his throat. "So far," he added.

"Yeah. So far," she agreed.

Chapter Twelve

Once the ambulance had gone, Ned went back into the school and telephoned Luke's parents.

"Hello?" Suzanne's sleepy voice came onto the other end of the line.

"Suzanne, it's Ned. I've got some bad news for you."

"What? What's happened?"

Ned explained the situation.

"We'll leave right away," said Suzanne.

Ned suggested that she come straight to the school, where she and her family could stay in one of the guest rooms. They exchanged mobile phone numbers and then rang off. Ned drove to the hospital and was soon sucked into the paperwork involved in admitting people to medical establishments. Once he was satisfied that Luke and Pagan had been stabilised, he drove back to the school to snatch some sleep before the Brownlows arrived.

At three o'clock in the morning, Ned was woken by the ringing of his mobile phone.

"We're nearly at the school," said Suzanne.

Ned dressed and met the Brownlows at the front of the school. They brought the sleeping twins inside and he then helped carry their bags to their room. Andrew speedily erected a travel cot and transferred the girls into it. Neither of them stirred.

"I'll stay here with them," Andrew told Suzanne. He looked at Ned. "Could you take her to the hospital now? I'll come over in the morning with the girls."

Ned nodded in agreement and told Andrew where to get breakfast for himself, Elsie and Molly once they were awake.

He drove Suzanne to the hospital and took her to the intensive care unit where Luke and Pagan were being treated. Both children were asleep when they arrived. Suzanne's face went almost as white as Luke's when she saw the measures being taken to rid their bodies of the poison. She took a seat at Luke's side and directed a grateful smile at Ned.

"Thanks Ned," said Suzanne. "You go back to the school. I'll be fine."

Ned gave her a brief one-armed hug and left.

*

In Manchester, Julia Randall was woken by a telephone call at two o'clock in the morning. She rolled over to grab the receiver, gripped with fear at what news might be waiting for her. "Hello?"

"Is that Julia Randall?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"My name is Kate Ellerson. I'm a doctor at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital. I'm phoning to tell you we admitted your daughter here tonight."

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's ill with mushroom poisoning, but there's a good chance she will make a complete recovery. Pagan gave us your number and I wanted to let you know she is here and safe."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," promised Julia, tears of relief dropping down her face.

*

Luke and Pagan's sleep was fitful and regularly disturbed by hospital staff coming to check on their conditions. In the early morning, Luke woke to see his mother sitting next to him.

"Mum!" he said, and was surprised to find his voice thin and croaky.

She took hold of his hand and squeezed it hard, apparently unable to speak herself.

"When did you get here?" Luke asked.

"Ned phoned us last night," his mother managed to say. "We drove up with the girls early this morning. Dad's going to be bringing them over later. How are you feeling?" Luke thought about this.

"A lot better than I did last night," he decided. "It was really horrible, Mum."

"You poor thing. What on earth possessed you to eat wild mushrooms? I thought you hated mushrooms."

Luke looked over at Pagan, who was still sleeping in the next bed. "I was trying to be polite," he said.

His mum shook her head, a sad smile on her face, then turned her own face towards Pagan. "Who *is* she, Luke?"

Luke found himself completely unable to answer his mother's question. "She was in trouble, Mum. She'd run away from home and I was trying to help her."

Mum pushed Luke's hair across his forehead, out of his eyes. At that moment, another woman entered the room. She was tall and thin, with hair that had once been dyed brown, but which now had a growth of grey at the roots. Her eyes were fixed on Pagan's face and she went straight to her side.

Luke and his mother stared at her with undisguised interest. Pagan remained asleep and the woman turned to them with an air of desperation. "Is she alright?"

Luke nodded. "They're doing all they can," he said.

The woman bit her lip. "I haven't known where she's been for a week," she said. She met Luke's mother's eyes. "Can you imagine what that's like?"

Luke's mum shook her head again, her face expressing sympathy.

Pagan opened her eyes, then, and looked up at her mother. At first she was confused and sleepy and greeted her with a smile, but then she recalled everything that had happened since the last time they had met and the smile faded from her face.

"Oh, sweetheart," the woman's voice cracked with emotion. "I'm so sorry."

Suddenly Pagan's face was shiny with tears which were mirrored on her mother's cheeks.

Luke's mother tactfully got up to pull the screen between the two beds shut. Luke took the opportunity offered by this rare privacy to quietly explain the background to his relationship with Pagan.

"But Luke, you must have known her mother would have been worried sick," objected Mum.

"Yeah, Mum, but this boyfriend of hers sounded well dodgy. I hope she's kicked him out."

A nurse arrived at the bedside then and the next few minutes were taken up with blood tests, measurements and readings of the various instruments.

Half an hour later, Pagan's mother drew back the screen between the two beds.

"I think I need to meet my daughter's friend properly," she said, smiling at Luke.

Luke checked Pagan's face and saw that she was looking happy. Happier than anyone with that many tubes coming out of them could reasonably be expected to look, anyway. Luke presumed this meant that the creepy boyfriend had been shown the door.

Luke let his mother make the introductions. While she was doing so, his dad arrived in the room.

"The girls are down the corridor in the family room, exploring a toy box," he said. "I'll go back to them in a minute, but just wanted to see how you're doing."

"Better, thanks," croaked Luke.

His dad left and was almost immediately succeeded by Ned.

"Mum, this is the man who found me last night," Pagan said, smiling up at Ned. Pagan's mother grasped Ned's hand.

"Thank you so much for getting her to hospital. I'm Julia, Pagan's mother."

"I'm glad to see you reunited with Pagan," replied Ned. "My name's Graham Kelly, but I'm generally known as Ned. It's Luke you need to thank for saving Pagan. He pinpointed her location precisely and we found her straight away."

Ned crossed to Luke's bedside. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks," said Luke again.

A senior-looking doctor came into the room and spoke to Luke's mother and Ned. "Are you Luke's parents?"

"Er, I'm his mother," explained Mum, looking slightly flustered. "His dad is looking after our other children."

"Well, I need to speak to you both," said the man.

"I'll keep an eye on the twins, if you like," offered Ned.

Mum beamed up at him. "Thank you."

*

Suzanne and Andrew sat with the doctor, who explained there was still a chance that Luke's liver might fail.

"We need to talk about transplant options in case that situation arises," he said. "One of the most effective procedures in such cases is to take part of the liver of a compatible family member. I need to talk to you both about whether this is going to be something either of you would consider."

"Of course!" Suzanne assured him.

"In that case, I must tell you that our policies require me to warn you that the testing process is very similar to having a paternity test. This test will show whether you are, in fact, Luke's biological parents. If you are unwilling to undergo a paternity test, then you should not proceed."

Andrew and Suzanne both stared at the doctor without speaking. They did not turn to look at each other at all and the silence in the room stretched into an embarrassingly long period of time, neither of them making any effort to break it. The doctor cleared his throat and glanced at his watch, seeming to feel it was up to him to resolve the situation.

"I'll go and check on Luke," he said, "while you discuss this. I'll come back in ten minutes or so."

He left and Andrew slowly turned to look at Suzanne, who was now crying. She looked back at him. "How long have you known?" she whispered.

"It became pretty obvious when we needed to get fertility treatment to have the twins," replied Andrew.

"Yes," Suzanne agreed, "but you never said anything."

"There didn't seem much point. Although I will admit I've had trouble really relating to him ever since," Andrew added. He sighed. "Not that it was his fault, poor kid." He stood up. "Well there's no point me having this test then, is there? We'll just have to hope you're a match or that we can find a donor, if it gets that bad."

They fell back into silence again, until Andrew asked the question that had been tormenting him for three years. "Who is his father, Su?"

Suzanne looked up at him and the tears were flowing faster down her face. "It's Ned."

Andrew sat down again with a bump and stared at her with a stunned expression on his face. "*Ned* is Luke's father?"

Suzanne nodded, biting her lips together and gazing down at the floor. Andrew stood up again, apparently unable to stay still, and paced around the room, looking as though he was ready to punch someone.

"Does Ned know this?" he demanded.

"Of course not, Andrew," Suzanne said, with a hint of impatience. "He left to go to Harvard when I left to go to York and he didn't come back to England until long after we were married. I wasn't sure myself until we had such problems having another baby..."

"I can't believe this," Andrew threw himself back into the chair again, causing it to scrape against the linoleum floor with an ear-jarring screech. He put his head into his hands and then let out a mirthless laugh. "But when you come to think about it, there is a family resemblance there." He looked up at her. "Childhood sweethearts, were you?"

"No. It wasn't like that at all. Ned was just the boy next door. We knew we weren't going to be seeing each other after we left for university and it was a mad, moonlit encounter after a last night out with all our friends from school." She blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "We're going to have to tell Ned, in case he might be a match for Luke."

Andrew looked up at her. "Yes, of course. I suppose we're going to have to explain all this to that damned doctor, too."

A few minutes later, the doctor returned. He was visibly relieved to see that the couple had been talking in his absence. Andrew explained that he was not related to Luke, but that there was a chance that Luke's biological father might be willing to take the test, once he became aware of the situation. It was agreed that Suzanne would be tested for compatibility and that Suzanne and Andrew would talk to Luke's father.

They returned to the family room, where they found Ned sitting on the floor reading a story to Elsie and Molly. The twins got up and ran to their parents as they entered the room. Suzanne lifted Molly up and gave her a hug as Ned stood up to greet them.

"Ned, we need to talk to you about Luke," Suzanne began.

The adults sat down and the twins went back to the toy-box on the floor. Suzanne glanced at Andrew, uncertain how to begin this difficult conversation. Andrew was tired after their long drive through the night and was in no mood to break the news gently.

"Luke may need a liver transplant," he said, "so the doctors are going to test Suzanne to see if she's a potential donor, but there's no point in them testing me because I'm not Luke's biological father."

Ned stared at Andrew as the implications of this stark statement sank in. He said nothing, but after a long moment he turned his gaze to Suzanne, almost reluctantly.

Suzanne's face was burning red and her eyes were full of tears again. "Would you be willing to be tested, too, Ned?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Of course I will," replied Ned quietly.

Suzanne broke down into sobs of relief, causing Andrew to put his arm around her. It was a gesture of comfort, but there was an element of possessiveness in the action which was not lost on Ned. He got up. "Whom do I need to talk to?"

Suzanne pulled herself together and wiped her eyes.

"I'll take you to the doctor and we'll ask him what we need to do next." She turned to Andrew. "Darling, will you be OK with the girls for a while?"

Andrew nodded and they left to sort out the blood tests.

As they waited together, Ned turned to Suzanne. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Suzanne was twisting her wedding ring around her finger and didn't meet Ned's eyes.

"I didn't know for sure for a long time," she said. "I met Andrew soon after we both started university and it was a while before I realised I was pregnant. I didn't know who the father was, but knew I was happy with Andrew. The baby was going to have a good dad and that seemed the most important thing, at the time.

"It wasn't until later, when we had trouble having another baby, that I began to be more sure Luke was yours and not Andrew's. I was so pleased when you came back and got to know him last summer, even though I couldn't tell either of you about your real relationship."

"But Andrew suspected something?"

"Yes, he has known for a few years, but never talked about it to me. That's why they've been getting on so badly lately: he's been taking it out on Luke." Suzanne looked up at Ned. "How do you feel about it?"

Ned let out a short laugh, as if he didn't consider that his feelings were that important. "Guilty, mostly," he admitted. Then he took Suzanne's hand in his, stopping her compulsive twisting of her ring. "But also a little bit proud," he said. "He's a good kid, Suzanne, and you and Andrew have done a great job."

Chapter Thirteen

At Hawley Lodge the remaining Romans in Luke's dormitory were speculating about where he had got to. Sundays were more relaxed than most other days at the school, but the boys were expected to be up and dressed, with their beds made, by nine o'clock. It was quite common for Mr Wilmot to come and check that this rule had been complied with and, sure enough, a sharp rap at the door announced his arrival. The housemaster's eyes went straight to Luke's bed, which was in a considerable state of disarray.

Taj, Jay and Fred braced themselves for an interrogation about their room-mate and the condition of his bed but the expected blast of anger did not come.

"Luke's been taken seriously ill," Mr Wilmot told them. "He's in hospital and likely to be there for some days."

"What's wrong with him, sir?" asked Jay.

"He's been poisoned by eating mushrooms," came the reply. The sight of Luke's unmade bed seemed to bother Mr Wilmot and he walked over to it to pull the duvet straight. The boys stared at each other in confusion, wondering how on earth Luke had managed to consume anything as dangerous as poisonous mushrooms. "I'm sure you'll get the full story from him in due course," Mr Wilmot said, sensing their next question. With that, he left the room.

The news about Luke spread around the school rapidly. The Roman year nines also shared the story about him being caught with cigarettes in his possession on the previous Wednesday, which added a further dimension of interest to the story. By the time the day ended it was assumed by most of the students that Luke had moved on in the course of a week from smoking cigarettes to eating hallucinogenic mushrooms. In his absence and completely without his knowledge or any real justification, Luke's reputation as a bit of a troublemaker had become significantly amplified. The general opinion was that if he survived his hospital stay, he would be likely to be expelled from Hawley Lodge.

*

Once the tests were completed at the hospital, Suzanne and Ned returned to Andrew.

"I need to go back to Luke," stated Suzanne. She looked from Andrew to Ned. "Do you think we should explain this to him now?"

Andrew said, "It's not fair for us to know and him not to." He and Suzanne turned to Ned for his opinion.

"He will find out anyway if he needs a transplant and I'm a match," he pointed out.

Suzanne sighed. "Let's get it over with, then. Shall I tell him on my own?"

The others agreed this was probably for the best and she went back to Luke.

*

Luke and Pagan were both chatting with Julia when Luke's mother came back into the room. She smiled at them and told them she needed to have a private talk with Luke. The screen was pulled in between the two beds again and she sat down, taking Luke's hand in hers again and smiling at her son.

"What is it, Mum?"

"Luke, this is going to be a bit of a shock for you, but I need to tell you that your dad isn't really your dad."

"What?"

She flushed and continued.

"I was already pregnant, without knowing it, when I met your dad at university. Andrew is *not* your father."

Luke stared at her, amazed at what he was hearing. "But then...?"

"Your real father is Ned Kelly."

Luke stared at his mother in disbelief, trying to make some sense of what she was telling him.

"I've known this for a few years, now," she continued, "but it was only today that it all came out in the open, as we might need to get a liver transplant for you and there was no point in testing Andrew. He realised that he wasn't your father a while ago, but he hasn't ever talked to me about it and he didn't know who your real father was until now. Poor Ned had no idea about any of this until today, but he's agreed to be tested to see if his liver might be a match for you."

"OK," Luke said, feeling he ought to say something, but unable to manage anything more than this. He shut his eyes to distance himself from a conversation which was too complex for his exhausted mind and body to cope with. Unexpectedly, he fell asleep.

When Luke next woke up, it was to find Ned in his mother's place at the side of his bed. The screen between his bed and Pagan's was still drawn and Luke saw that it was now Ned's turn to have a heart-to-heart with him. It was the first time they had had a chance to talk with each other privately in months and, given the unpleasant circumstances of their disciplinary interview on Wednesday, the dramatic events of Saturday night, and the revelation made earlier by his mother, Luke had no idea where to begin.

Ned smiled at him. "I don't know," he said, "the lengths some people will go to, just to get out of doing a detention or two."

Luke laughed and any awkwardness between them was dissolved.

"I know it's going to be very strange for a while," Ned continued, "but I'm sure things will settle down and life will go on much as it did before."

Luke nodded. "I suppose so. Will I be able to stay at Hawley Lodge?"

"That's up to Andrew and Suzanne," Ned replied. "I don't see why not."

"Even though I was out of bounds again, yesterday?" Luke dared to ask. Ned smiled and gestured towards the medical paraphernalia which had saved Luke's life.

"I suspect that the consequences of that particular transgression have taught you a lesson beyond anything that was in my power to administer."

Luke's smile was repentant. "I certainly don't think I'll be eating mushrooms again in a hurry," he agreed. He studied Ned, looking for the signs of similarity to himself which he had never been able to discern in his dad. Ned's eyes were hazel, where his own were blue, but their hair shades were alike and Ned's medium height and stocky frame were much more like Luke's than Andrew's. Another thought occurred to him. "Are you going to tell people at school that..." He could not quite say the words.

"That I've just found out you're my son?" asked Ned. "No, not yet, anyway. Not because I'm ashamed about it," he added hastily, "far from it. But I need to talk about all of this with you, with Andrew and with Suzanne. We've got to find a sensible path forwards from here without hurting anyone's feelings. Having found a son I didn't even know I had, I don't want to lose him again through alienating the man who has brought him up."

Luke nodded and Ned continued with a question of his own. "Did you ever tell your classmates about me being your next-door-neighbour?"

"No," admitted Luke. "The only person I've told about that was Pagan." He thought about it a bit more. "There was a kid at my old school whose dad was a teacher there and he..."

"...wasn't the most popular kid in the school?" suggested Ned.

"Everyone was horrible to him," agreed Luke. "His dad *was* pretty unpopular."

Ned raised an inquiring eyebrow at this remark.

"Oh, you're not!" Luke added, hurriedly, "But I still don't think I'd want the others to know."

Ned smiled. "Well perhaps we should keep this latest news between ourselves too, then." He changed the subject. "You like Pagan, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Luke. "I'm gonna miss her, even though I've only known her for a few days."

"I'd better put this screen away, then, so you can make the most of this time together," said Ned. He got up and pushed the screen back, revealing Pagan and her mother chatting next door.

Pagan smiled at Luke as they came into each other's view again, then addressed Ned. "Are you the headmaster of Luke's school?"

"Yes, I am," he told her.

"Then I've got a confession to make," she said. "It's been weighing on my conscience."

"Oh, dear," smiled Ned, "you'd better get it off your chest then, young lady."

Pagan looked up at him. Her face was still pale, but she looked much better than she had the previous evening and her expression was determined. "It was me who went to the pub in the village to get those cigarette ends," she said. "Luke didn't go there at all. I felt terrible when he told me he'd lost his place on the orienteering team because of something he hadn't done."

Luke stared at Pagan in dismay. He knew she was trying to be helpful, but was sure that she was just making things worse. Now Ned would be able to add 'lying' to the list of offences Luke had committed on Wednesday. He switched his gaze to Ned, who met it with a penetrating glance of his own, delivered from beneath raised eyebrows. But there was the merest suggestion of a smile at the corner of his mouth, which reassured Luke that his neighbour was more amused than annoyed by this latest revelation.

Ned returned his attention to Pagan. "But by visiting you in the country club grounds Luke went out of bounds anyway," he pointed out.

"That's what *he* said," Pagan replied, sounding exasperated, "But it doesn't seem anywhere near as bad to me."

"*You've* clearly never met Mr Pritchard," retorted Ned, making both Luke and Pagan laugh.

"I've used his showers, shampoo and towels, though," volunteered Pagan. Ned covered his ears with his hands.

"I really don't want to hear about the ways in which you've been abusing Mr Pritchard's hospitality without his knowledge. I sincerely hope he doesn't discover your campsite before I work out the best way of dismantling it."

Julia yawned and stood up. "Well I don't think I fancy staying in your tent, Pagan, if you don't mind. I need to go and find myself a hotel room for the night. I'm quite exhausted."

Ned got to his feet, too. "Luke's parents are staying in one of the guest rooms at the school," he said. "There's another room there, if you would like to use it."

Julia beamed with gratitude. "That would be wonderful!"

They agreed that Ned would take Julia back to Hawley Lodge. Ned turned to Luke.

"Andrew or Suzanne will be coming back in the morning, Luke. They went to the school to put the girls to bed. Sleep well, you two, and behave yourselves."

Julia hugged both Pagan and Luke then left with Ned.

Pagan looked at Luke. "Is he single?"

"What?"

"Your headmaster-neighbour guy. Is he married?"

"No," said Luke. "Why?"

"I think if I had to have anyone as a step-dad, he'd be the one."

Luke laughed long and hard, although it hurt him to do so.

"What?" said Pagan, indignantly. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, nothing," Luke reassured her, gasping for breath and shaking his head in disbelief. "Except that I've just found out that as well as being my headmaster-neighbour guy he is also my actual dad guy."

"WHAT?"

Luke told Pagan the startling news he had learnt that day.

"Blimey, Luke, that's incredible. But he does look a lot like you. Except with a bit less hair."

"Thanks a lot," said Luke.

"I think you're both quite good looking!" Pagan informed him, before blushing into silence.

Chapter Fourteen

In the car heading back to Hawley Lodge, Julia was telling Ned about her stressful week. "Not knowing where she was, that was awful. I know there's still a chance she might suffer liver damage, but at least I know she's safely tucked up in hospital."

"Why did she run away?" Ned asked.

Julia explained about Brian. "So suddenly I'm on my own again. It's one of those times when you realise you've got to reassess your life completely."

Ned nodded. "I know exactly what you mean," he said, in a heartfelt manner.

Julia looked at Ned curiously and he told her the news he had heard that day. It was a relief to be able to unburden himself to someone unconnected with any aspect of his life.

"That's quite something to find out," Julia acknowledged. "I can't begin to imagine what it's like to discover something like that when you already know a person in a different context."

"It seems to happen quite a lot with Luke, somehow," Ned told her. "I haven't had a lot of time to think about it yet, but I can see I'll be doing a lot of talking with Andrew and Suzanne over the next couple of days."

"If you need any help," Julia offered, "I'm a counsellor when I'm not being a stressed parent."

Ned glanced at her, before turning his attention back to the road. "Now that's interesting," he said, "I've been looking to recruit a counsellor for our school, but haven't had a lot of luck finding the right person."

"Is this going to turn into a job interview?" demanded Julia, "because if it is I should warn you I'm not going to perform at my best after a week of sleepless nights!"

Ned laughed. "I'm not sure I'm functioning at full speed either. Perhaps we could discuss it tomorrow, if the kids look like they're on the mend."

Once back at the school Ned showed Julia her room. She declared her intention of going straight to sleep. Ned arranged to call for her in the morning and take her down for breakfast. He then went next-door to the room occupied by the Brownlow family. The twins were curled up fast asleep in their travel cot underneath the window.

"D'you two want some dinner?" Ned offered. "I can get our Matron to come and keep an eye on the girls for an hour or two."

The Brownlows agreed to this and half an hour later, Ned led his neighbours down to his study on the first floor.

"I've arranged with the kitchen staff for us to eat here," he explained. "I'm sure you don't want to be gawped at by a hall full of curious boys."

Suzanne smiled in gratitude while Andrew admired the room. "This is very nice," he said.

"One of the perks of the job," replied Ned.

"What made you go into teaching?" asked Andrew, making a brave attempt at small talk.

"I had some excellent teachers myself," replied Ned. "They made a huge difference in my life and I thought it would be wonderful if I could do the same for other people." He turned to a cabinet on the back wall. "Normally I don't drink during term-time," he said, "and now I need to keep my liver alcohol-free, just in case it's needed, but I think you two deserve a glass of wine. Do you agree?"

The Brownlows both nodded and Ned withdrew a bottle of red wine and two wine glasses from the cabinet. He uncorked the bottle and poured the wine, passing the glasses to the others. Then he raised his own glass of water in a toast. "To Luke and Pagan's health".

One of the kitchen staff brought a trolley of dishes into the room and the three of them helped themselves to food before sitting down to eat together at one end of the long table. The wine and food helped to ease the tenseness of their situation.

"When I saw Luke this evening he told me he was keen to stay on at this school," Ned began. "I told him it was up to you two."

The others nodded, but said nothing.

"If you do decide to let him stay here," Ned continued, "I hope you'll let me pay his school fees."

The Brownlows both protested at this, but Ned was determined. "It's the very least I can do," he said, addressing Andrew. "I don't have any dependents of my own to support and you've got two daughters to get through school and university. Having played no part in his upkeep until now, I would be grateful if you'd let me belatedly contribute in that way."

After some more grumbling and discussion the neighbours agreed that Luke would stay on at Hawley Lodge and that Ned would be responsible for his fees.

"How's he been getting on?" Suzanne asked, "Aside from the last twenty-four hours, that is."

Ned's eyes drifted towards his desk, as the scene from Wednesday afternoon played itself out again in his mind's eye.

"His work has been improving greatly," he said, "and he seems to be getting on well with his peers. His behaviour has given me cause for concern from time to time, but I think now we know about Pagan, some of the mystery around that has been explained. Generally, I think enrolling him here has been beneficial for him, last night's events notwithstanding."

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The following day, Ned enlisted the help of the local police and went to the country club with one of their officers to see Mr Pritchard. He suspected that an appeal to Pritchard's better nature would fail, but that the sight of a uniformed officer would achieve his co-operation in the return of Pagan's possessions. Ned let the police constable explain in his official police vocabulary that a child who had been missing from home had been found on the country club's grounds. Pritchard glanced at Ned suspiciously. "What's he doing here?"

"Mr Kelly discovered the whereabouts of the child when she became ill through the consumption of poisonous mushrooms found on your property," the police officer replied. Ned could sense that Pritchard was afraid he would somehow be liable for having poisonous mushrooms in his grounds and was not surprised when Pritchard readily agreed to the policeman's suggestion that Ned and he should recover the child's possessions and then leave him in peace.

They found the campsite quickly, took down the tent and packed Pagan's possessions into her bag, returning the towel with its country club logo to the hotel reception desk.

Ned arrived at the hospital at lunchtime and went to see the convalescents. Julia was sitting with them when he arrived. The Brownlows had taken her to the hospital with them in the morning and had just gone with the twins to the hospital's canteen for some lunch. Julia was quizzing Pagan about her time in the country club.

"Weren't you bored, sitting in a tent by yourself all the time?"

"I was at first," Pagan agreed, "but it got better after Luke brought me some books from the school libr-" she stopped in mid-word as she saw Luke making a face at her. "Oh, sorry," she

said to Luke, before looking coquettishly up at Ned. "You're not going to give him a hard time about taking a couple of library books out of the school, are you? I took great care of them and he took them back to the school on Saturday, so they're quite safe."

Ned raised an eyebrow at Luke. "In the face of such a passionate defence, I don't see how I could," he replied.

Ned established that both teenagers were feeling better and their liver tests were not giving the doctors any concern. Pagan was relieved to hear he had retrieved her possessions from the country club.

"Would you like to go out for some lunch?" Ned asked Julia. Luke and Pagan glanced at each other and then quickly looked away as they both felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh out loud.

"That would be lovely," Julia smiled.

Fifteen minutes later, Ned and Julia were sitting in the bar of a pub in a village near the hospital, making polite small talk until Ned reminded Julia of the conversation they had had in the car on the previous evening.

"I meant what I said last night about needing a counsellor for the school. Is it something that might interest you?" asked Ned.

Julia thought about this. "Possibly," she said. "It's very early days in my re-assessment of my life, but I do think a complete change of scene would be a good thing. I need to think about Pagan's needs too, though, and she's at an awkward age to move from her school and her friends."

"I think Pagan has shown she can handle new places and new people pretty well in the past week," Ned pointed out.

Julia laughed. "Yes, I suppose you're right! It might be a good idea to get her away from my ex, too." She then became business-like, explaining her qualifications and her experience as a counsellor in schools in the Manchester area. In his turn, Ned told her about Hawley Lodge and explained that he was not in the position of being able to offer Julia the job there and then, but that if she was still interested she would be able to formally apply for the post, details of which were still available on the school's website.

"I don't suppose the post comes with accommodation, does it?" asked Julia.

"I don't think you and Pagan would want to live in the school," said Ned, "but Hawley Lodge owns some cottages in the village which staff can rent at reasonable rates."

"And there isn't any chance that Pagan would be able to attend the school herself, I suppose?"

"Girls are admitted in the sixth form," Ned told her, "so she'd have to go somewhere else for the next two years. But the local high school has a very good reputation."

"OK," said Julia. "Well I'll talk to Pagan about it and we'll see where this goes from here. Although the way she looks at that Luke of yours, I suspect she's not going to be too averse to the idea."

"Teenage hearts are fickle things," said Ned. "I wouldn't rest your decision on the strength of a one-week-long relationship."

"But as you and I have discovered over the last few days, even the briefest of teenage relationships can result in some pretty significant consequences."

*

Luke and Pagan were released on the Thursday, after spending four days in hospital. The various tubes were gradually removed from their bodies as their conditions improved and the tests on the functions of their livers showed there was no permanent damage to them.

"You were very lucky," they were told by the young doctor who had admitted them. "The mortality rate for poisoning by this type of mushroom is high, but you were admitted here early enough for us to be able to get the poison out of your systems before it had a chance to do major damage to your internal organs. I'm sure you'll both be more careful in the future about eating wild mushrooms."

Pagan and Luke assented to this wholeheartedly. Neither of them wanted to even look at a mushroom again.

The Brownlow family came to say goodbye. Luke lifted Mollie and Elsie onto his hospital bed and tickled them mercilessly. They writhed around in a blonde heap of screams and giggles and Luke laughed at his sisters.

Half-sisters, a voice in his head reminded him. He tested the phrase out but found it inadequate. His feelings towards the two small girls did not match the diluted nature of the words that described their newly-discovered relationship. Unbidden, a picture of Mr Wilmot in front of a board covered in fractions formed in his mind. Luke smiled up at his parents. "Two half-sisters make a whole one, right?"

His father laughed and gripped Luke into an unexpected hug.

"What do two dads make?" Dad asked, as he released him.

"Twice as much trouble?" suggested Luke. His father cuffed the top of his head. This time the blow was light in effect, but heavy with affection. Luke grinned up at him and went over to hug his mother, who was smiling and looking tearful at the same time.

Luke's family left to drive back to Sussex. Pagan, Julia and Luke got into Ned's car and he drove to the station near the school; the same one that Pagan had arrived at eleven days earlier. All four of them went down to the platform together, Ned carrying Julia's bag and Julia bearing Pagan's rucksack and tent. The next train north came into view round a curve in the tracks. Ned shook Julia's hand and Pagan gave Luke a rib-crushing hug, pressing her face against his.

The Randalls got onto the train with their bags and it pulled out of the station, leaving Luke feeling empty as Pagan vanished from his sight. Ned seemed to sense his desolation; he put his arm across Luke's shoulders, patting his upper back and pushing him gently towards the staircase that led up from the platform. Neither of them spoke as they walked back to the car and drove the two miles back to the school. Ned parked the car and looked across at Luke. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be, I suppose," Luke smiled back, and they went back into the building and back into their school lives.

Morning school was still in session, so Luke got changed into his school uniform and quietly slipped into the year nines' classroom, smiling apologetically at Mr Thomas, who was half way through teaching a history lesson. To Luke's huge surprise, the whole class rose to its feet, as though a teacher had entered the room, and he was greeted with a loud round of applause and a few cheers and whistles from the year nine boys, all celebrating his return from his near-death experience and his even more miraculous escape from expulsion.

Embarrassed but deeply touched, Luke crossed to his seat near the window, enduring some fairly painful but kindly-meant punches to his back and to his needle-punctured arms as he walked through the mob. He noticed that Wharton had not left his seat and was not joining in the

general jubilation, but this could not dent Luke's delight at the welcome he had received. Eventually Mr Thomas restored order and the class settled down to their work, although Luke was, once more, finding it hard to concentrate.

After the lesson was over, Luke found himself surrounded again. Mr Thomas came over too and shook his hand.

"Good to see you back, Brownlow," he said, before leaving Luke to tell his story to an audience hungry for the details of his recent adventures.

Chapter Fifteen

On Saturday afternoon Luke was sitting in the library, catching up on some of the work he'd missed during his hospital stay. He became aware that someone was approaching the bay in which he was sitting and glanced up to see Wharton leaning himself nonchalantly up against the bookshelves opposite Luke's seat.

"So I hear you've been thrown off the orienteering team then too, Brown-nose. How did you manage that?" he sneered.

Luke was not in the mood to be jeered at by Wharton. "If you must know, I was kicked off for being out of bounds."

Wharton scoffed, but as he did so, Luke noticed the black-gowned figure of Ned approaching them down the centre aisle of the library. Carefully not looking at Ned and feeling his heart beating a little faster than usual, Luke said "I don't suppose you've ever even *been* out of bounds yourself, have you?"

"God, you're such an amateur, Brownlow. I was out of bounds *and* out of school after hours when I put your shirt on that statue and I got away with it completely."

Ned had arrived parallel with Wharton just in time to hear the whole of this boastful confession. Wharton jumped violently when he realised the headmaster was there and the horrified expression on his face was one that Luke would have dearly loved to have been able to capture in a photograph.

Ned treated Wharton to one of the hard stares which Luke had become accustomed to receiving from him. "I always believe that credit should be given where it is due, Wharton," he said in a conversational tone. "I suggest you go and tell Mr Thomas exactly what you've just told Brownlow. You'll find him in the hall."

Wharton left, looking gutted. Ned sat down opposite Luke. "I came to see how you were doing."

"Fine," said Luke. "Even better now." He grinned at Ned. "I know retaliation is against the rules, and everything," he said, "but that felt fantastic."

Ned had a grimly satisfied smile on his own face. "I think we can say that this was more a case of delayed retribution," he said.

*

The rest of the year passed in relative peace. The year nines had to sit exams in June, which tested their knowledge of the subjects they had been taught over the course of the year. As he left the hall after their final exam, chatting with Taj and Jay about how pleased they were that they were all over, Luke noticed Ned talking with a tall woman in the entrance hall. A second glance confirmed his initial feeling that he knew her. It was Julia Randall.

Luke wondered why Pagan's mother was back at the school. He would have liked to say hello to her, but didn't want to interrupt the adults' conversation. Then Ned spotted him and beckoned him over. Julia smiled as she recognised Luke and grasped his hand. "It's good to see you again," she said, "especially looking so well."

Luke smiled shyly at her. "How's Pagan doing?" he asked. He had been in fairly regular contact with Pagan since they had parted, but he wanted to hear how Julia thought she was getting on.

"Fine," replied Julia. "Doing exams at the moment, like you, I expect, but they seem to be going alright for her."

Luke looked from Julia to Ned and back again. "Erm, can I ask -?"

Julia laughed. "What I'm doing here?" She glanced across at Ned. "What do you think, Mr Kelly, should we tell him?"

Ned nodded. "Mrs Randall was here for a job interview, Luke, for the post of school counsellor."

Luke's face lit up and he turned to Julia. "Did you get the job?"

Julia smiled down at him. "I feel extremely guilty about telling you before I tell my own daughter, but yes, Luke, I've been offered the post and I've accepted it."

"Excellent!"

"Well I can't have Pagan running off again down here to see you every time I have a disagreement with her. I thought if we lived a bit closer, perhaps she could get you out of her system." Julia punctuated this comment with a friendly wink at Luke.

Ned looked up at the clock in the entrance hall. "We'd better go if you want to catch the next train north," he said.

"Goodbye, Luke," said Julia. "See you next year!"

Luke turned back to join his friends, thinking that the next year could prove to be even more interesting than year nine had been.

THE END

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You can read more about the background to *The Roman and the Runaway* at <http://hawleylodge.wordpress.com/>.