

Chapter 1

2003: Ten Years After

“Can I tell you one more story before we finish?”

In his head, Dutton punched the air. “Yes, of course.”

Mark Strachan remained where he was, looking out of the window at the upper floors of the high-security wing opposite. He thrust his hands into his pockets.

“This happened a long time ago. I must have been about five or six. I hadn’t been in school long, anyway. We made these collages. These autumn collages. With leaves and twigs and stuff, you know? We went on a walk to some woods nearby to collect things. I remember it was cold. My fingers went red and tingly. I remember running about looking for the most colourful leaves. Then we brought them back to school, and we put them in a big pile on the teacher’s desk. I remember it looked like a bonfire - a great big bonfire, you know? And the smell of it - God, I can smell it now, all damp and earthy. It was great. We got to choose what paper we wanted for our pictures. I think they used to call it sugar paper. Never worked out why. Anyway I chose this green sheet. This rich shade of green. I could picture my bonfire burning all bright and fiery on that green. We got to pick lots of bits of leaves and twigs and beech nuts and acorns and all that, to use in our collages. And I built this amazing bonfire on my sheet of green. I stuck it all down with that white glue we used back then. It smelled rank. Like fish, if you remember?” He cast him a quick glance.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“You had to apply the glue with those little plastic spatulas and it got all over your hands and your jumper and everywhere. And I remember thinking my mum was going to be cross about that. But then I thought, no, she wouldn’t be because I was going to give her my picture, my beautiful bonfire, and she would be so pleased she couldn’t be cross.” He paused. Bowed his head. Dutton held his breath. “The teacher - Miss Pickmere? Pickford? something like that - she was thrilled when she saw what I’d done. She helped me make some flames, cut out of red and orange and yellow cellophane - her idea - and I stuck them on. It looked fantastic. All earthy and shimmery and fiery. And nobody else got to use the cellophane that day, because my picture was special. Miss Pickmere said I could take it home to show my mum and dad, but she asked me to bring it back tomorrow because she wanted to put it up on the wall for our autumn display. God, I was so proud, I can’t tell you.” Another pause. “So I came running out of school with my picture. I had to hold on tight to it because it was windy, and the picture was big, and I was scared it would fly out of my grasp. I ran to my mum. She was standing further up the road. She never stood with the other mums. And I showed her the picture and she took it from me and she said - she said: “Come on, I don’t have time for this nonsense. I’ve got to be in work in half an hour. Hurry up.” And she shoved my picture into her bag. Not carefully. No. She scrunched it up in her hand and she shoved it, all screwed up, into her bag. And she grabbed me by the wrist. And - and I don’t remember any more after that.”

PART ONE

Chapter 2

1981: Twelve Years Before

Mark watched his parents' silver Volvo pull out of the leafy car park. He didn't wave. Nor did they. He slung his rucksack over his shoulder and picked up the suitcase. He turned to face his new home. A red-brick three-storey building. Not old, not new. Surrounded by trees, but austere and impersonal. His guts clenched. Stay calm. Breathe. He smelled food. School dinners. His mouth watered in defiance of the cabbage. He reached into his donkey jacket for the letter, sellotaped where it had fallen apart along the creases. Report to the Porter's Office to be assigned a room. Hareton Hall. The university's only all-male hall of residence. He applied so late, he'd have to share a room. Probably with some sweaty-socked rugby nut.

He approached the building trying for an air of confidence. He looked up when a window above the entrance opened. Music blasted out. Spandau Ballet. A boy about his own age sat on the windowsill smirking down at him.

He pulled his shoulders back. The lobby was busy. New students hanging around in subdued huddles with parents and younger siblings. Mothers trying to give kisses and hugs, pushing greasy hair out of their sons' eyes. Fathers offering last-minute advice. Brothers and sisters shuffling feet, looking at the floor. He was relieved his parents had abandoned him outside. He strolled as nonchalantly as he could across to the windowed reception desk.

"Name?" The black-sweatered, thin-haired man at the counter didn't look up.

A grey corridor. His Doc Martens squeaked on the shiny lino. A strong smell of disinfectant and polish couldn't disguise the reassuring odour of changing rooms. Stale sweat, rubber and mud blended with a hint of something more animal. Music escaped from the doors on either side, clashing in the air around him. His nostrils flared as he picked up another, sweeter smell. He relaxed a little. He'd track down its source later. He paused at an open door. A skinny kid was pulling clothes out of a stuff bag. He looked up. "Hi."

Mark nodded and walked on.

Thirty six was fourth on the left. Spandau Ballet and that familiar smell were coming from the room opposite. Laughing boy. Interesting. His own room was unlocked. He opened the door wide and stepped inside, bumping his rucksack against the frame. He saw a clean-looking narrow bed with a blue duvet. He'd never slept under one of those before. Two desks, two small wardrobes and a sink. A large window with a view across a leafy quadrangle to other windows. And, partially obscured by the open door, another bed with someone lying on it. He closed the door and took in the muddy ex-army boots, crossed comfortably one over the other, the torn and faded jeans, the lime-green rugby shirt, the thick neck and large round face. The messy light brown hair. Pale green eyes peered through a shaggy fringe at him.

He stepped forward. Caught his foot under a duffle bag on the floor. He fell and struck his chin on the metal bed frame. It hurt. Badly. Pinned by his heavy rucksack, his legs tangled in the duffle bag string, he struggled to get up. The rucksack was lifted from him. A hand gripped his arm.

"Are you ok? Sorry, I should've moved that. Shit, you're bleeding."

He wiped his chin and looked at his hand. A lot of blood. "Fuck's sake. Are you some kind of moron?"

"Yeah. Stupid place to leave it. Let's have a look?"

He batted the hand away and scrambled to his feet. He kicked the offending bag.

“Watch out - it’s dripping. You need to stick it under the tap.” The boy tried to steer him towards the sink. Mark snatched his arm away. “Oh, ok. Only it looks bad. You need to clean it up.”

He pulled from his pocket the handkerchief his mother had rather disturbingly foisted on him that morning. He held it to the cut.

The Arsehole sat on the bed. “D’you think it needs stitches? Should I get someone? See this?” The boy pointed to a pink scar on his cheek close to his ear. “Stud. Rugby. Four stitches. No anaesthetic. Wrecked.”

He examined the now throbbing cut in the mirror above the sink. His chin was covered in blood. It was all down the front of his new white teeshirt. He shrugged off his jacket and let it drop to the floor. He ran his handkerchief under the tap and cleaned the wound. Now it didn’t look so bad. As he watched, more blood oozed from it. The cut was small, but it hurt. It stung when he touched it. Worse, there was an ominous dull pain beneath the surface.

“Shit.”

“D’you want me to get someone?”

“Who?”

“Dunno.”

“Arsehole.”

“Sorry.”

He dabbed some more. The blood was pumping now. His face had gone very pale against his floppy black fringe. It made him think of Snow White. Was he getting delirious? Or hysterical?

“We need to get that seen to.”

“You think?”

“I’ll go get someone.” The Arsehole was out of the door.

He sat on a bed and pressed the handkerchief to his chin. He felt a bit nauseous. The handkerchief was sticky now. How much blood could you lose safely? He went back to the mirror. The cut seemed to have stopped bleeding but it looked deep, like a second little mouth gawping under his bottom lip. It knocked him sick to look at it. Carefully, he pinched together the two edges of the wound. When he let go, it remained closed a moment but then it opened up again, slowly, like a goldfish gasping. The hole quickly filled and a ruby red tear rolled onto his chin. He pressed the handkerchief to it and went to the door. Would the reception guy have a car or would they send an ambulance? The door at the end of the corridor burst open and the Arsehole strode through followed by two other boys. He shouted: “Couldn’t get any help. Massive queue. But it’s ok cos James has booze” – a blond-haired boy waved a bottle of Jack Daniels above his head – “and Rob’s-”

“Robbie.”

“- Robbie - right- Robbie’s got a sewing kit.”

Robbie was gangly with wild red hair. The Windowsill Smiler. He disappeared into the room opposite.

“So we can fix you up. If you want, like. Or would you rather go to hospital? I’m easy.” He looked embarrassed. “This is James, by the way. We just met. In the lobby. He’s down the corridor with -?”

He looked at James.

“Peter. He’s from Rotherham. I’ll give him a shout.”

The skinny kid answered the call and came running. Arsehole shook his hand: “Will Cooper. And this is -”, he turned to him with a comical look of astonishment. “Shit, I didn’t even ask your name!” He laughed.

“Strachan. Mark.” He backed into the room. The others followed. “What d’you mean, fix me up?”

“My brother stitched this.” Will Cooper tapped his cheek. “Mum and Dad were away, and Mike said he wasn’t farting around with hospitals. So he made me drink half a bottle of tequila, then he got Mum’s sewing box out. Like I say, it wrecked. D’you want me to have a go?”

“What?”

“D’you want me to – y’know – stitch you up?”

“Are you fucking mad?”

“That’ll be a no, then?”

“Too fucking right. If you come anywhere near me with a needle - ”

“Point taken. So you’ll go with the lifelong disfigurement?”

James chipped in. “You should stitch within an hour of injury or septicaemia can set in.”

“Bollocks.” He tried to stay calm but the little git sounded like he knew something about it. “What are you? Doing medicine?”

“I am, as it goes.”

“Bollocks.” He took a last look in the mirror. “Ok. Do it. Not you, Dr Kildare. William Cooper, you do it.”

Cooper rubbed his hands trying to look like some kind of expert. “Ok. Good. Better start on this, while we sterilize the instruments.” He handed him the Jack Daniels.

“Do you actually know what you’re doing?”

“Yeah. Well, sort of... How hard can it be? We’ve just got to make sure everything’s clean and we’re sweet.”

He took a swig from the bottle. “Want some? Steady your hand?”

Cooper shook his head, serious. “Not before I’ve worked out how to do this.” He sized up the room. “We need more light.”

“I’ve got a desk lamp. Just unpacked it.” Skinny Kid flitted out the door.

The Windowsill Smiler - Robbie? - came in with a small plastic pouch in one hand and the biggest spliff Mark had ever seen in the other. “Here. This should knock the edge off.” He chucked the sewing kit on the bed and lit up. “Come over to the window.”

He followed him. The JD was kicking in. Despite the throbbing in his chin, he could feel his earlier tension slipping away. He drank some more.

“Hey, leave some of that for the workers. You’re on this now.” Robbie dragged on the spliff and handed it to him. The hit was immediate. The leaves outside the window brightened. The whispering back in the room condensed into clear utterances. “That one’s thinner.” “Yeah, but what if it snaps? It’s kind of like sewing leather. We need a strong one.” “How d’you sterilize the cotton?” “You don’t.” He took another drag and looked round at the preparations.

Cooper came at him with the needle and thread. “Whoa! Hang on! Let’s think about this.”

The medic - the one called James - was drinking the Jack Daniels. “Chicken?”

“Merely a strong survival instinct.”

Cooper drank from the proffered bottle, and wiped his mouth. “Ready when you are. It’s still bleeding so we better not hang about. Lie on your bed. Peter, hold the

lamp over his face. No, higher. Robbie, you kneel down there and waft that spliff about a bit. Mark, deep breaths. Eh, James, don't drink it all, mate. We might need it."

"Wait a sec. Let me psyche myself up." Then the pain bit. He fought to keep still, crushing the new duvet in his fists. Cooper said he'd been through this. How hard could it be? Hard. He squeezed his eyes tight shut. Tears streamed down his temples and into his ears. Bright lights stabbed at him inside his closed eyelids.

"Here." Someone shoved the spliff into his mouth. He bit through it. "A novel approach." Robbie's accent. Edinburgh? Weird, what you noticed when you were dying. Glasgow, maybe. And now he'd never know. Heigh ho.

"Robbie, get your hand out of the way." Cooper sounded older. In control. "Keep ... really ... still. Nearly done. Last one. Seven. Think that should hold it. What d'you reckon?"

He pushed away attempts to help him up and sprang off the bed. "Jesus fucking shit. What kind of sadist are you?" His face in the mirror was paler than he'd ever seen it. The black cotton, now fused woosily with his flesh, matched his hair. It looked like some pathetic attempt at a goatie. But the gaping little mouth was closed and seemed to have stopped bleeding. "Thanks. I think."

"Sit down. You'll be a bit shaky. Drink this."

More drink appeared. The repaired spliff did the rounds. Someone put Led Zep on. Cooper sat on the bed next to him.

"Cosy, in't it? Ever shared before?"

"No."

"Where're you from?"

"Manchester. Place called Altrincham?"

"I know it. Bolton, me. That's probably how they put us together - both coming from round Manchester, like? How's the cut?"

"Painful. I need vodka! Wanderers, right?"

"You into football?"

"United, naturally." His smile pulled painfully at the stitches.

"Nay!" Cooper fell back against the wall, as if fatally shot, thudding his head. "You rag bastard!"

He passed the spliff. Cooper passed it on without partaking. "You're vicious, William Cooper."

"You're welcome, mate."

Thanks for reading this extract. I hope you want to read on...

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