

him down a bit. He said he just wanted a bit of space.'

Dad nods, rubbing at the salt and pepper stubble on his too-thin face. 'That's rough,' he says. 'Cameron's a good kid.'

I nod but don't say anything.

'Do you want me to have a word with school?' asks Dad.

'No!' I reply too forcefully, too loud. I take a breath and run my hand back through my hair. 'No. You know how it is – these things blow over eventually.'

'All the same, a quiet word can help, and, you never know, this kid might be being a pain to other kids too. Do you know who it is?'

I shake my head. 'Cameron didn't say,' I lie as casually as I can, *worryingly* casually, in fact. I never used to be very good at lying, but I guess it's like anything – the more you do it, the better you get.

'Just someone in one of the older years,' I continue. 'Look, I'll keep an eye on it, and if it *keeps* happening, I'll let you know.'

Dad nods, then looks me right in the eye. 'And you're *sure* that's all it is?'

'Of course!'

Dad looks at me a moment longer, his blue eyes probing me, the pale irises looking greyer than they used to. He sighs and nods again. 'You're a good friend to him, Will.'

I look away, unable to hear that right now.

'So have you eaten?' asks Dad, his tone not quite disguising the fact that he *clearly* hopes that I have.

'Yeah, you know Cameron's dad!' I lie again. 'Smoked sausages, mash and *all* the veg you could imagine. Fair play, it was amazing!'

'I'll bet,' says Dad. 'Well, that's *splendid*, otherwise we'd have to go MAD tonight and crack open *another* tin of soup, right?'

'Steady on! You don't want to get *too* extravagant!'

He catches my eye and nods slightly, his eyes shining. I look away again, unable to bear his expression.

'You know what, Will?' says Dad, his voice stretching both high and low at the same time. 'It won't be like this

for ever. I'll get back on my feet . . .' He looks down at his leg and grins at me. 'You know, *literally*. It'll all be good then. I *swear* it will. I just need a chance, then there'll be no looking back.' His voice wavers, then breaks, shattered by the effort at optimism. 'I'm sorry. You know that, don't you? I'm sorry things are like this.'

I grit my teeth and look down at my feet. I'm not going to cry – *no way*. 'You've nothing to be sorry for,' I reply. 'It's not like you planned it this way! It's just life, right? Besides, who needs loads of money, right? There's only so many exotic holidays we could take before we got bored of sitting around on the beach!'

He laughs, a hollow sound that echoes round the bare room. 'Yes, but . . . you go without so much—'

'Doesn't matter!' I interrupt. 'You're my dad! You've *always* looked out for me, and you give me *way* more than anyone could get with just *money*!'

Dad blinks quickly and now *he* looks away, running a finger under one eye. 'Thanks, Will . . .' he mutters, his voice thick and heavy.

I walk over and pat him on the shoulder. 'No worries,' I reply. 'Look, it'll get better. I *know* it will. You've got to just keep going, *right*? Like you always tell me? Just keep on trying. Things'll come good in the end.'

'Yeah . . . course they will,' he says, nodding his head and rubbing the heel of his palm into his eyes, hard. Then he looks back up at me. 'So anyway, you fancy losing at chess again?'

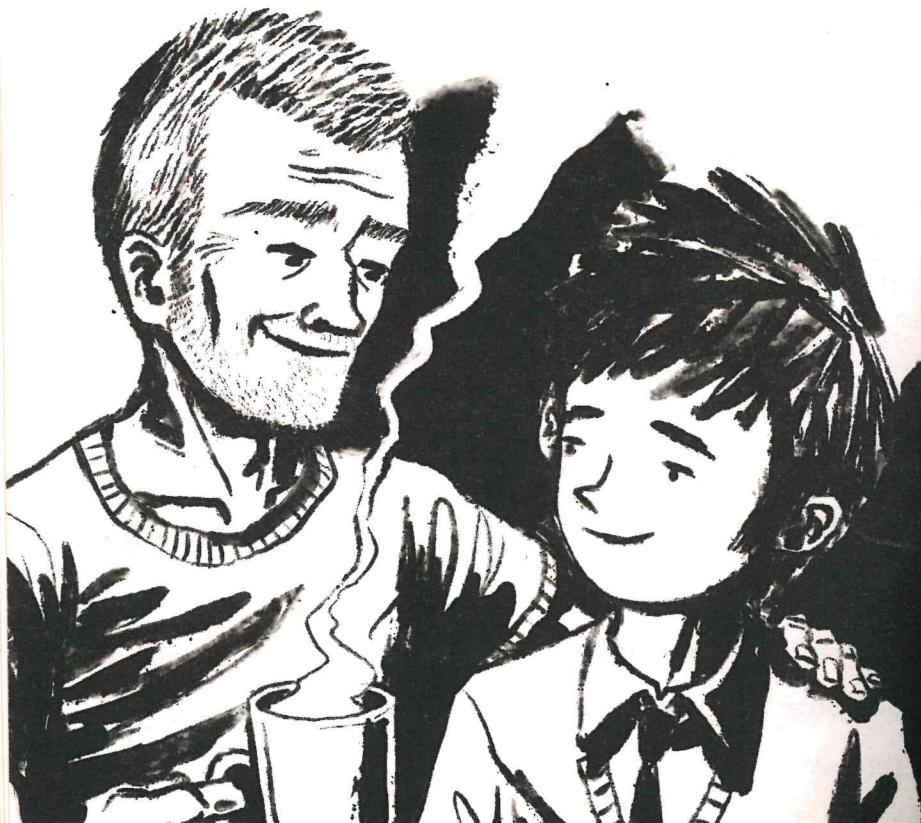
My eyebrows shoot upwards. 'Are you *joking*? I've won like ninety per cent of the games we've played recently.'

He shrugs. 'Yeah. *Still* . . . that means I've won ten per cent of them and *today* I'm feeling lucky! So go on then –' he nods over to the chess set by the TV – 'get it all set up!'

I get the pieces out and place them on the board. 'Black or white?' I ask. 'Not that it matters – seeing as I'm winning either way.'

'We'll see about *that*!' he says, grinning. 'Now, come on! Stop delaying the inevitable and get that board set up!'

If it wasn't me that he was talking to, and if I didn't know just how broken he was, that smile would *almost* be convincing.



CHAPTER SIX

JOLTING AWAKE, I'M PULLED OUT
of whatever dream I was in.

My heart's pounding and despite the chill of the night, my thin duvet's damp with sweat. Dad's asleep in the room next to mine. I can hear him breathing – slow and steady, in and out. *Seriously*, the walls in here are like paper.

I roll over and close my eyes, trying to calm my breathing, calm my

mind. But it's no good. I just can't sleep. My brain's buzzing and sparking like raw electricity – wild, directionless and angry. After what feels like hours of lying there, I get up. But *now* what? Our tiny flat presses in at me with cold calloused hands. I could put the TV on, watch a DVD or something, but I don't want to wake Dad. So I find myself

a jacket, then I'm slipping out of the door and away.

Now, I know it's not a great idea to go for a stroll round here at whatever o'clock in the morning it is, but *honestly* the thought of sitting



around in our flat is more than I can bear right now. At least out here there's a bit more space, the illusion of freedom. Besides, I can avoid all the places I know are *properly dodgy*.

A cool wind pushes me down the empty streets that seem cleaner and clearer now, without the harsh unflinching daylight revealing all their dirty secrets. Everything is quiet and still, as though I'm the only person alive, like this is *my world*, and it's all just for me. I don't see anyone, any *sign* of anyone. No cars streak past, filling the night with thudding music. There are no angry shouts ringing out of other people's flats, no sirens, no distant shattering glass, no wild laughter, no screaming or running feet.

Just stillness.

Street lights gleam as the buildings reach up into the cool night sky and for the first time in ages I feel a sense of peace.

The next moment, a piercing sound rings out just by my ear. I spin round, heart racing as a gust of wind

beats past me. Something huge shoots past and *whooshes* overhead. The air swirls and eddies in its wake, filled with a scent that I can't place – fresh, wild and free. Something drifts down from the sky – small, pale, almost silver. It *can't* be snow, can it? I mean, sure, it's cold but it's *way* too early for that, isn't it?

I reach my hand up and realise that it's a feather. A soft downy feather. It seems to glow in my hand beneath the street light. So perfect. So improbable.

The call rings out again. A piercing screech. I spin round. Perching on a graffiti-covered postbox is a massive silver bird. Sharp talons grip the painted iron as it regards me with pale round eyes over a smooth



curved beak that ends in a point so fine it could have been carved with a diamond.

Without taking its eyes off me the bird stretches lazily, opening its wings wider than I'm tall, maybe even wider than *Dad's* tall – and he's nearly six foot. Tilting its head to one side and then the other, the bird tucks itself neatly back up and perches there, calmly regarding me.

I've never seen an owl before. At least not in real life, so I had no idea they were quite so . . . *massive*. And perhaps they aren't usually . . . but *this* one is. I stand there, frozen. Unable to move, think or do *anything* really. I'm just swept up into the gravitational pull of this creature in front of me.

Now, ordinarily if I were faced with a wild animal with a wingspan like that, talons as long as my fingers and a beak that's *literally* designed for tearing flesh, I might be at least a *bit* scared, or to be more honest completely terrified, but I don't feel *any* of that. For some reason I just feel this sense of intense calm wash over me as the owl stares at me, unblinking, with its huge round eyes

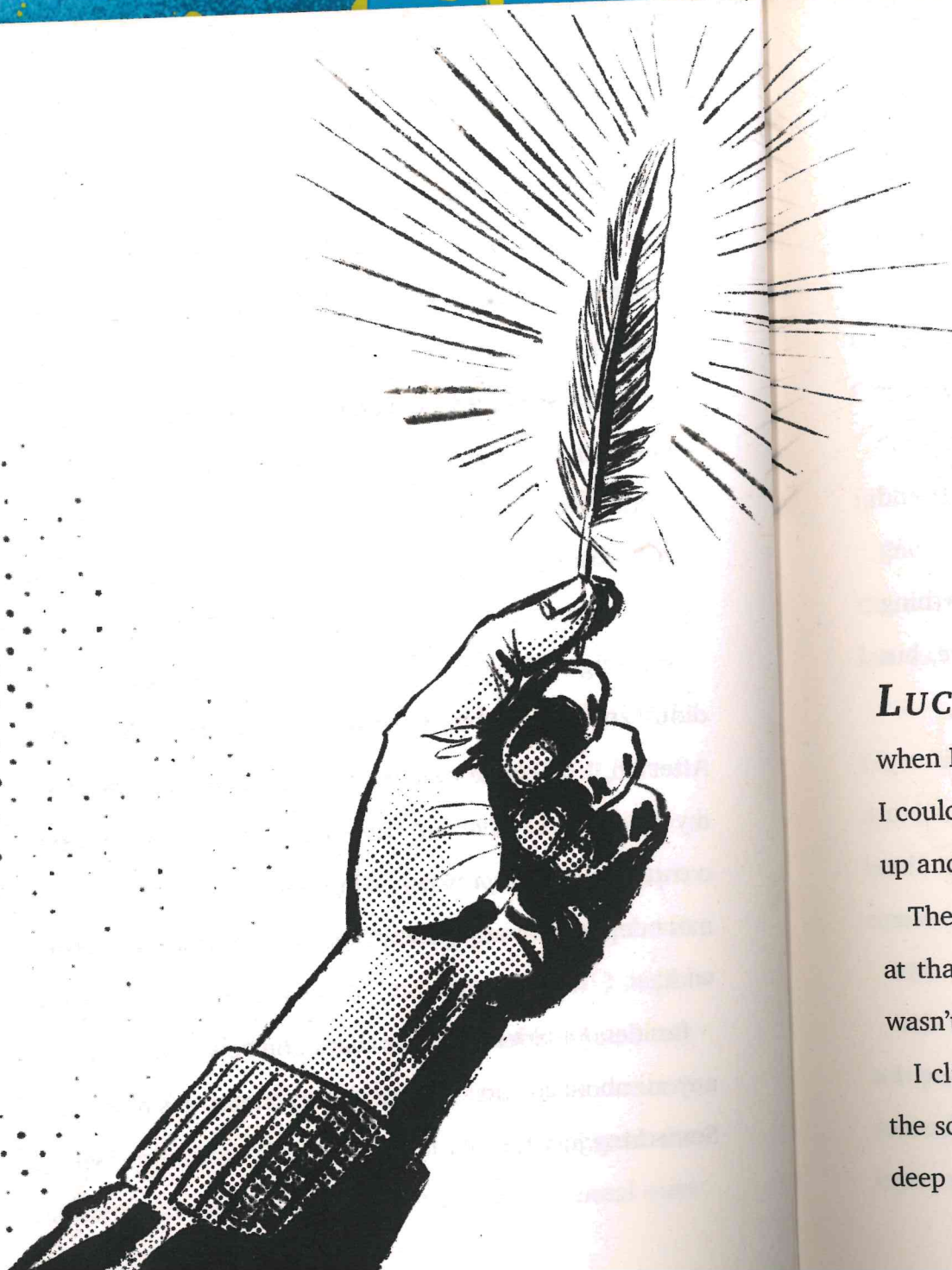
gleaming with a soft reflective light like mercury.

I've no idea how long I'm standing there, but all of a sudden I realise that no one would *ever* believe this. I need proof. You know? *Pictures or it didn't happen* . . . I fumble around in my pocket, grabbing for my phone and shoot a glance down, selecting the camera. As I do that, a sudden *whoosh* cuts through the air and a gust of wind almost throws me off balance.

When I look back, the owl is gone.

You might think I'd feel disappointed, or upset that I didn't get a photo, but actually *no*. I don't feel that at all. After all, I still have the silver feather clamped between my fingers *and* I've got the memory of the owl. Its complete physical *presence* is burned into my mind with more depth than any photograph could hope to compete with.

Besides, I suddenly realise that I don't even *want* to tell anyone about the owl – about this moment – it's all mine. Something just for me.



CHAPTER SEVEN

LUCKILY DAD WAS STILL ASLEEP when I got in. Pushing our front door open as quietly as I could, I realised he'd have lost his mind if he'd woken up and found that I was just *not there*.

There's **NO WAY** he'd let me go out wandering around at that time of night, but, still, he *didn't* know, and I wasn't about to tell him. So . . . no harm done.

I climb back into bed, suddenly feeling tired, but not the scratchy, wired exhaustion I'm used to – this was a deep cleansing feeling of calm. Like lowering yourself

into a warm bath. I close my eyes and settle back into the pillows, and then at some point I guess I must have drifted off to sleep.

That strange sensation of calm and peace stayed with me . . . basically until I found myself back at school the next day.

You know what an argument with your best friend feels like? It's like you're wearing your shirt the wrong way round and your trousers back to front. Everything would look pretty much the same from a distance, but up close it's all kinds of wrong.

I was a bit late in, and when I get into History Cameron's moved seats and is now sitting next to Elsie Woodleigh, even though I know *full well* that she winds him up because she's always chatting and never pays any attention in lessons. If there's one thing that Cameron is, it's focused. I genuinely can't believe that despite *everything* he'd rather sit next to her than me. I guess things must be *really* bad. On the way in I'd been running through everything in my mind, working out

how to smooth things over with him, but it doesn't look like *that's* happening any time soon.

'Sorry I'm late, miss,' I mutter as I shuffle in and go to take my seat, alone at the desk I usually share with Cameron.

'That's okay, Will,' says Mrs Unwin. 'I *assume* you've informed the office?'

'Yes, miss,' I reply, not adding that it was waiting for the massive queue at reception that made me twice as late as I was – some things *really* aren't worth going into.

'Very good.' Mrs Unwin nods. 'Now, Will, would you like to share your response to the homework?' She pauses and looks around the room. 'I'm *assuming* that everyone here has remembered to bring in their piece on medieval castle fortifications?'

Mrs Unwin makes a lot of assumptions.

My heart sinks even further, dropping through the wet paper bag I've been storing it in and tumbling away somewhere far beneath me. *The homework* . . . I close my eyes, willing myself to be anywhere that isn't here.

Unfortunately when I open my eyes again I'm still trapped in my History lesson, hand still gripping the back of my seat, not yet sat down and everyone looking at me.

'So what did you focus on, Will?' she asks.

My mouth fills with cotton wool and sawdust. I swallow hard. 'I . . . er, I didn't do it, miss,' I mutter.

Mrs Unwin nods and breathes heavily out through her nose. 'You *haven't* done it?'

'No, miss,' I reply. What was she was *hoping* I'd say?

Maybe something like: *Only joking! I actually DID do the homework! That's right! I crafted a handmade model of a working castle gate out of lollipop sticks, cardboard, string and glue with my dad while we were sat in our cosy living room, watching the History Channel on Sky+ for research. Then we got out all our paints and brushes and sat there painting away while we waited for our pizza delivery to arrive.*

I mean, *seriously!* How am I going to make a model out of *things that you'll just have at home* when we don't have anything at home? And, sure, I know that Mrs

Unwin said we could also have just done a poster, and, *sure*, I know she leaves a few sheets of paper and pens by the door for *anyone who might need some materials*, but I don't want to have to do that. It's like admitting defeat, you know? I guess that's how Dad feels about the food banks. I mean, I'm always saying we should go along, get a few bits, but he always seems to find some excuse not to.

'So is there any particular reason *why* you didn't do the homework?' Mrs Unwin pushes.

I shake my head. 'I just forgot, miss,' I mutter. To be honest, that was also true. I did completely forget about it.

Mrs Unwin peers over her glasses at me. 'I assume you know that means a detention, Will?'

'You *assume* correctly, miss,' I hear myself saying.

It just kind of slips out and there's this semi-audible gasp from the class. I'm not the kind of person who's rude to the teachers. I never act up or get in trouble – at least, I never used to, but all these *assumptions* are really

getting on my nerves.

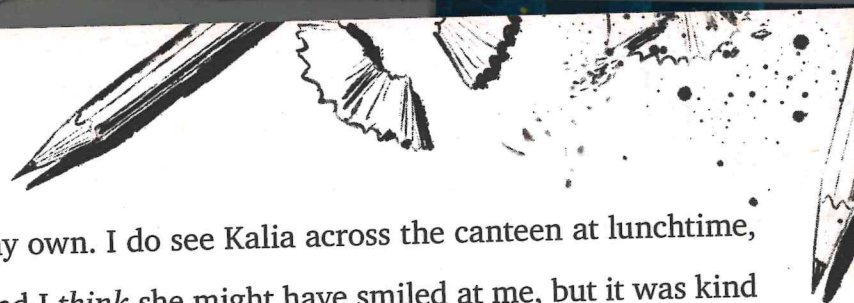
'Rudeness is UNACCEPTABLE, Will,' states Mrs Unwin. 'You'll be getting a negative for that.'

I shrug, even though my heart is pounding.

Mrs Unwin shakes her head and continues to stare at me with this whole *I'm-not-angry-I'm-just-disappointed* look. The rest of the class is starting to get a bit lively, so eventually she turns away and clears her throat. 'Ummmm . . . I don't believe that I opened a discussion! Fatima, how did *you* respond to the project?'

Fatima stands up, pulling an elaborate 3D-printed drawbridge and portcullis out of her bright orange rucksack as I sit heavily down, my own scuffed, grubby three-year-old school bag falling by my feet.

The rest of school's just, you know, *schooly*, although it's this weird, alternative-reality version of school where me and Cameron don't even make eye contact let alone talk. You know I said earlier that Cameron's my best friend? I guess I should have said he's pretty much my *only* friend. So without him to talk to I'm stuck on



my own. I do see Kalia across the canteen at lunchtime, and I *think* she might have smiled at me, but it was kind of sunny so she might have just been looking in my direction and squinting. I sort of half waved and then panicked in case she *hadn't* been smiling at me at all. So I spun round, trying to look like I'd just remembered that I had something urgent to do, and walked out. I can be such an idiot sometimes . . . Seriously, who even does that kind of thing?

The *only* good thing about the day is that we have Art last thing, and getting into that room is like coming home – if, you know, your home is somewhere that you *like* being. It's the whole thing, you know? Not just the drawing and the painting; it's the whole lot. The smell of it – the paints, the clay, the white spirit – everything. It all merges together to just make me feel – I don't know – calm. It helps that Mr Prince's decent too – *properly* decent. Sometimes he plays music in the lessons and even gives me cartridge paper to take home to draw on. He's got this trick to cut the huge sheets down to

SCHHHZZZZZZ!

size, just using a steel ruler. He folds it over, takes out his trusty measuring blade and slides it across the fold. *Schhhhzzzzzzzz* – and the paper's cut. I love it. There's no WAY I'd have that sort of paper otherwise. You know, *proper* paper – *art* paper – with an actual bite to it, paper that you can *feel* while you draw on it, not like the plastic-smooth printer paper I normally use.

I walk through the door and already I feel a little bit better.

'So how's your day going, Will?' asks Mr Prince, who's clearly been briefed on how my day's been going so far.

'Not so great, sir,' I mutter.

'Okay . . .' says Mr Prince evenly. 'I know how *that* feels.'

And that's it. He doesn't say anything to try to make me feel better, or find out *why* it's not been a good day, or why I acted up with Mrs Unwin, and weirdly that makes me feel a bit better.

He just claps me on the back with one of his huge hands and I go over to open my drawer and take out the

still life I've been working on. To be honest, I'm not *really* into that sort of thing, drawing fruits and old kettles and stuff, or at least I wasn't until Mr Prince pointed out that if you want to draw armour you need to know how to draw shiny metal, and that an orc's skin is all soft and pitted, kind of like an old avocado. So now I can see the point in it, even if I don't enjoy it as much as I enjoy drawing from my imagination.

Mr Prince then addresses the whole class, but he makes sure that he catches my eye as he speaks. 'This afternoon I thought we might do something a bit different,' he says. 'You've all been working *really* hard on your still-life pieces, so I thought we'd take a bit of time to just have some fun. Okay? So for the rest of today I want you to draw or paint *anything* that captures your imagination. Something that feels relevant to *you*. Anything you like. Animal, vegetable, mineral, *whatever!* The only important thing is that you make the image you *want* to make, however you want to make it. All right?'

There's a buzz of excitement as we all get out fresh

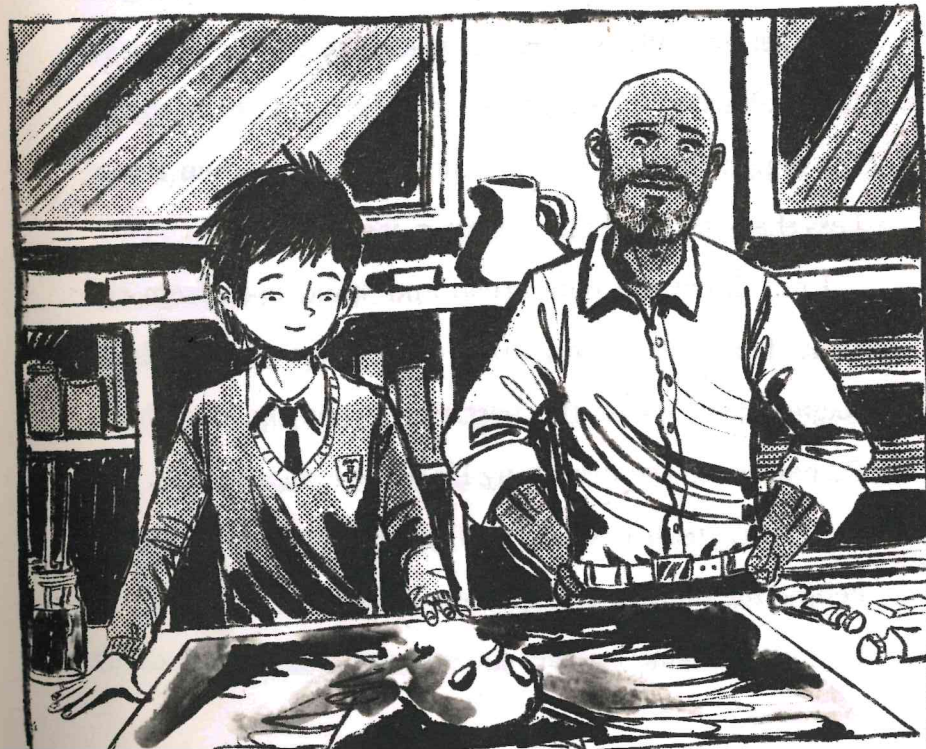
sheets of paper. Alia asks if she can make a sculpture and Mr Prince grins, opening his hands wide. 'Like I said . . . whatever you want!'

For the first time today I feel excited. I could draw a cleric about to do battle with some elven renegades or a dragon obliterating a whole village, a whole citadel, the whole *world!* But as I sit there, staring at the paper in

THE OWL.

front of me, there's only one image in my mind . . .

Ordinarily I draw pretty tight. You know? I like to use hard pencils and draw everything kind of small and super detailed. But for some reason I find myself reaching for the biggest paintbrush I can find. I mix up a diluted blue wash. Then I feel my way over the whole sheet of paper, roughly indicating the basic form of the owl. I don't even have any reference. I don't need it. Seriously, that owl is



locked in my mind.

As I'm sliding the brush around, I feel like I can see the curved blade of the beak on the paper even before I've painted it. The feathers on the wings just appear before me as the watery paint swirls and bleeds across the image, but that doesn't spoil the painting – if anything, it adds to it. Having finished with the pale blues, I mix up a thicker night-sky shade that's almost black. Hard crevices of shadow are carved in, as the image becomes clearer and stronger but still just as loose. Just as free. After that, it's a few highlights, the gleam of the eyes, the silver wingtips, the suggestion of stars in the background, and then, *boom!* Less than forty-five minutes later, it's finished.

I put down the paintbrush and stand back from the table, feeling strangely dizzy – my heart and mind are racing as I look at the best thing that I've *ever* done. Perhaps even the best thing I'll *ever* do.

I didn't realise that Mr Prince had been standing behind me until he gently clears his throat. Usually I hate it when someone watches me drawing, but today it didn't

matter at all. Although, to be honest, it didn't really feel like I was the one doing the work. It's weird, it was more like the image was just *happening* and all I did was move the brush around – if that makes any sense at all?

'That's incredible,' says Mr Prince. 'Really, it's *remarkable* . . .' His warm deep voice pauses, and he shakes his head, almost laughing.

'Thanks, sir,' I reply.

Usually I'm about as happy to get a compliment as a cat is to be sprayed with cold water, but on this occasion I smile. He's right. It really is something special – even *I* can see that.

'No elves today?' he adds, digging me lightly on the arm with his elbow.

'Not today, sir,' I reply.

'So what inspired this, Will?' he asks, kind of confused but also pleased, perhaps even proud.

'Well . . .' I begin slowly. Mr Prince is nice and all, but, even so, that moment last night is *mine*, and I don't really feel like talking about it. 'They're just cool, aren't they?

Owls, I mean.'

'They certainly are,' he says, shaking his head slowly. 'You know? That's what I love about this job. There's always a surprise, every single day. Some surprises are . . . less welcome, but this –' he glances at me, eyes shining before he looks back at my painting – 'this painting *speaks* to me. It really *says* something. And I'll be honest with you, Will, that's rare . . .' He looks at me again. 'I'm sure I don't need to tell you, Will, but that's art.' His eyes are glued to the painting. 'What you've done right there, that's *real* art.'

And you know what? I think he might be right.

He pauses again and we both look back at the painting in silence. I see the owl as I saw her last night, a lonely figure, silver wings stretched wide, gleaming bright, shining in an oppressive darkness. Soaring past me to an unknown place, full of freedom, strength and a pure burning wildness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MR PRINCE HOLDS UP MY PAINTING

and everyone makes a really big deal out of it. Even Omari, who usually has some sort of diss for whatever I've done, admits that it's pretty good, although he looks like he's chewing wasps at the same time.

Still, it feels good, you know? Properly good. There's a bunch of kids in there and suddenly they're all looking at me like someone who can actually *DO* something, not just some weirdo with the wrong shoes and a rubbish coat.

But then the lesson's over. Even as I'm walking out of

the door, that warm, calm feeling fades. Everyone else is going home, laughing and joking in twos or threes while I skulk off on my own to sign in for detention.

And who do you think is sat in there on detention duty, waiting for me? Mrs Unwin.

The lecture goes pretty much how you'd expect. I've heard it all before, after all.

Do I know why I'm here? *Yes.*

Do I understand how important it is for there to be mutual respect between teachers and students? *Yes.*

Do I regret my choice of actions and would I do things differently if given another opportunity? *Yes.*

The trouble is that it's very easy to say *yes* but to secretly think *no* or more to the point *whatever*, so it's just this weird little dance that we're doing right now. Still, I say what needs to be said, hoping that it'll speed things along a bit, and you know what? It seems like it does.

I get handed my assignment sheet and read through it. *Simple* – downloading the music for Monday's assembly

down in the ITC suite. I start to leave when Mrs Unwin puts her hand out, gently blocking my path.

'Hang on a minute, Will,' she says. 'Look, I *know* you're a good kid. And I *know* that what happened today is out of character, so I'm not going to note it down on your personal record *or* send it home. Okay?'

I nod and a slight weight lifts off me. 'Thanks, miss,' I say, making sure that I look her in the eye while I'm speaking – teachers are big on that. And, to be fair, that's decent of her – I *really* didn't want to have to explain any of this to Dad, and now he'll never need to know.

'Look, Will, is everything okay? You know, at home, any problems?'

Now, I appreciate the sentiment, I really do, but there's no WAY I'm telling her *anything*! Firstly, I just don't feel like it, and secondly, I dunno . . . it just feels a bit, you know, disloyal. Like I'd be letting Dad down by telling her what life at home's *actually* like. So instead I put on my best breezy face and even sort of sheepishly smile. 'Yeah, all good, thanks, miss. I just didn't sleep very well

last night and kind of woke up on the wrong side of bed, you know?’

‘I know that one,’ she says with a smile. ‘Well, make sure you try to get enough sleep, okay? It is *very* important.’

‘Will do,’ I reply. I think I might even have saluted. She smiles at me then says, ‘I *assume* you understand the task you’ve been assigned?’

I guess pretty much everything that Mrs Unwin says is an assumption of some kind, but since flagging that up is what got me into trouble in the first place I do *everything* I can to let that most recent one just wash right past.

‘Yes, miss,’ I reply, smiling. ‘Downloading the music for Monday’s assembly – shouldn’t take me too long.’

She smiles at me. ‘Well, good luck with it, Will. And you have a nice weekend.’

‘Thanks, miss. You too,’ I reply, then I’m off to the ITC suite.

Finding the song’s easy. I knew it would be. They wanted this piece called ‘Habanera’ by some old dead dude called Bizet. I’d have been done in about five

minutes, but there are loads of versions of the song and I can’t work out which one I like the best, so I spend about half an hour listening to them all until I find one that I *really* like. Tell you what, it’s a pretty sweet piece actually. If you put a beat over it, I reckon you’d have a hit on your hands. Then I rip the audio from a YouTube video and drop it in to the PowerPoint.

And then that’s it – my work here is *done*. Putting down the name of the song in the Notes app on my phone, I shoulder my bag and push open the door of the ITC suite. By this point I’m feeling *properly* hungry, so I head over to where the school buses come in. I know that seems like a random thing to do, but there’s this bar there to stop everyone running straight into the road and getting mowed down by the traffic. While the kids are waiting for their buses, they spin round over it, and when they do it’s like they’re small-change Catherine wheels, shooting coins out of their pockets like sparks. Most people think it’s grotty to bother looking around for any money that they’ve dropped, so they just leave it. I think it’s stupid

not to . . . Anyway, their loss, my gain. I found a two-pound coin there the other day. So who's laughing now?

Well, not me as it turns out.

I spent nearly ten minutes searching, but all I pick up is thirty-five pence. To tell the truth, I'm a bit gutted. I was hoping I'd find enough to get chips on the walk home – still, it's thirty-five pence more than I had earlier, so I guess I should take that as a win.

Since I'm not heading towards the chippy, there's no need to go past the high street, so I take another route. It's not until I'm almost there that I'm walking directly towards the spot where I saw the owl last night.

So now my chest is tight, and I've got this weird thrumming sensation in my stomach. It's a bit like when I was little and Dad took me to the swimming pool with all the big slides for the first time. You know . . . excited but nervous too.

I mean, deep down, I *know* it's stupid. What are the chances of having a once-in-a-lifetime encounter two days in a row? The clue's in the name . . . It's not very

likely at all. All the same, it still surprises me how I feel when I turn the corner.

And there it is . . .

Nothing.

Just a battered old postbox covered in old stickers and spray paint, standing on a dirty street corner where nobody would *usually* be unless they were going somewhere else.

Even though I *knew* it was impossible, even though I *knew* it was stupid, I'd still hoped that I *might* find the owl there again. But of course I didn't. That's just not how life works, is it? I shoulder my bag and walk on through the darkening evening.

It's a dangerous thing, hope.

CHAPTER NINE

I HAD THIS THING I USED TO DO a couple of years back where I kept a chart of my days on a sheet of graph paper. You know, ranking them by colour, so the square for a good day was coloured in green, orange was okay and red was BAD.

I stopped after a while. Firstly, it just got depressing, but *also* it's hard to make the call. Most of my actual days are red, but there are moments that are *definitely* green – you know, like the owl, my painting. I guess the trick is to hang on to all the green *moments* as they

happen, before they get lost in a sea of red?

'You all right, Will?' calls Dad as I walk into our flat. I sniff. It smells different to usual. What *is* it? It's not fried onions, is it? Dad's not *actually* cooking, is he?

'I made a stew,' calls Dad from the kitchen. 'Something to fuel you up for the bus ride to Mum's later. I know you hate the bus.'

'You made *stew*? What happened? You catch a squirrel out in the quad or something?'

Dad laughs and it's a *real* laugh. 'No, not yet – they're still too quick for me.'

'Seriously, though,' I press. 'Where d'you get the money?'

'Well, it was one of those cheap bruised veg boxes at Aldi and, to be fair, the meat's just a pack of sausages, so I guess that makes it a more of a casserole?'

'All the same . . .' I look over at the pan. 'You've actually got the hob on!'

'Look, I don't want to count any chickens . . .' says Dad, and my heart sinks. My dad is an *expert* chicken

counter. I know full well that he's already numbered every single one of those theoretical hens and is right now buying seed for the massive chicken farm that he's built in his head.

He grins as he catches my eye. 'The thing is . . . I had an interview today and it went well. *Really* well. I don't need a driving licence. It's mainly desk work, and the building's got a lift so I won't slow everyone down going up the steps.' His face is all shining now, and I don't want to be the one to tell him that he's talking like he's *already* been offered the job.

'Plus, I got a *really* good feeling from the lady doing the interview, you know. She was nice. She even said, "See you soon."'

My heart sinks further. Seriously, it's like he's *my* kid and I need to tell him that the tooth fairy might not *actually* be real. I take a deep breath. 'I mean . . . that's great and all. But it's not a done deal, is it? We still need to pay for my bus ride tonight *and* next week's food as well.'

Dad waves his hand dismissively. 'It's fine. I got a bit of cash from Damien to see us through.'

'Are you *joking*?'

My jaw *literally* drops, hanging open like a trapdoor. Damien's the local loan shark and just about as hard as they come.

'*Damien*? Are we talking about the same Damien? Damien Forsyth? Have you heard what happens to people that don't pay him back on time?'

'Look, I'm sure he's not as bad as all that,' says Dad. 'It's probably just exaggerated. You know, to make sure people don't default on their loans.'

'*Default on their loans*?' My voice is rising almost to a shout. 'He's not a *building society*!' I shake my head. 'And you're happy to test that theory, are you? What if you don't get this job? What if you *can't* pay him back?' My heart's pounding like I've just done that stupid beep test at school.

'Look, don't worry about it,' says Dad, genuinely acting like he's not got a care in the world. 'Like I say . . . I've