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ACT
TWO

CHAPTER TEN

TELL YOU WHAT, IT IS COLD.

I don't know what's wrong with these buses. It's like the air conditioning's only got two settings. Dry, dusty, baking heat and face-numbingly freezing. It's a shame they only use the hot setting in the middle of summer.

So I'm bumping along the potholed roads on the way to Mum's, the music in my headphones just about keeping the world at bay. Some guy on the seat in front scowls at me, but I ignore him and turn the music up louder, losing myself within the sound, trying to get transported

somewhere else, trying to believe that as long as the song lasts I'm not *actually* me – I'm someone else somewhere completely different.

Fifty minutes later and I get off at the closest bus stop to Mum's. She lives on the edge of this small market town where basically nothing happens – *ever*. It's kind of dull, but at least it's not our flat in Cherry Orchards.

I walk along the river for five or so minutes and then get to the road that Mum lives on. Twin rows of Victorian terraces glare at each other from either side of the narrow street, or at least they *try* to but there are cars and vans blocking the view, parked haphazardly all along the pavements. I guess these would have been nice houses once, but most of them are flats now, so it feels like *way* more people live round here than there's room for.

Standing outside the door a moment, I take a deep breath. I always find it weird coming here.

So what to say about Mum? Well, *firstly*, I love her. I mean, she's my mum, right? It's just that, you know, things *did* go downhill when she left. I know that it wasn't

because she left. Dad always makes that *really* clear. None of this is her fault – he says that's something called a *false equivalence*. It was just a decision that they came to together – because they weren't in love any more.

And it's not like she left Dad when he lost his job or when he got injured or anything. She didn't even leave him for Greg. No, when Mum moved out Dad was still fit and healthy, still working at the college, still having a laugh and a joke. To be honest, I'm pretty much sure that she doesn't even *really* know the state that he's currently in. I mean, I've not told her, and Dad *certainly* hasn't. He's like that, my dad – doesn't want *anyone* feeling sorry for him. You know, doesn't want any pity or charity. But yeah, I find it weird coming here all the same. I think a big part of that is because Greg is *always* here.

I mean, I suppose it *is* his flat, so I guess he has a right to be there. But it doesn't mean I have to like it.

I ring the buzzer and hear Greg's voice crackle through the intercom.

'He-l-l-llo?'

It drives nails through me. Even that. One word. *Hello*. Obviously it's not the word itself; it's the way he says it. The way that he drags it out, like it's made of chewing gum and he's seeing how far he can stretch it before it snaps. I suddenly feel like I want to scream the worst swear word I can think of at the top of my lungs, and it takes everything I've got NOT to do that.

Instead, I take a deep breath and just say, 'All right, Greg?' in what I hope is a friendly voice. 'It's me, Will. Is Mum there?' Even though I know full well that she's there. I've just had a text from her saying, *C U in 5, sweetheart X*.

'Hey, Will!' says Greg. 'Come on up, buddy!'

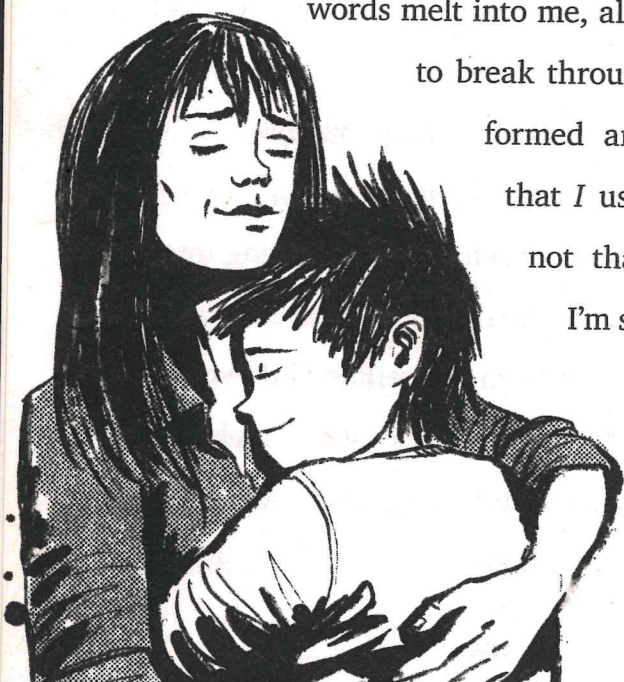
Buddy? Seriously? I shake my head.

The door buzzes and I push it open, walking into the communal hallway. There are bikes leaned up against the wall, bikes hanging from the ceiling and even bikes chained up on the banisters. Seriously, it looks like a bomb went off in a bike factory. I fight my way past them all and up to the second floor.

Mum's waiting for me, leaning against the door frame, smiling easily, her hair still brown, only a couple of grey hairs, hardly any wrinkles, even when she smiles, and she smiles a lot. She still looks pretty much how she did when I was little, whereas Dad looks like someone made a bad copy of the person he used to be, thinned out all his hair and added a whole load of wrinkles.

'Will!' says Mum, coming towards me with her arms wide, pulling me into a hug. 'You okay, love?' she whispers, holding me tight. Those simple words melt into me, almost deep enough

to break through the shell that's formed around the person that *I* used to be. But I'm not that kid any more; I'm someone else too –



and there's nothing anyone can do to just magic things better now. So what's the point in getting into it?

'Yeah. Good, thanks,' I say, pulling out of the hug. 'How about you two?'

'Ah, you know,' says Mum, grinning over at Greg who's picked up a battered acoustic guitar, 'we're pretty much the embodiment of rock and roll.'

'Yep,' agrees Greg, wriggling his feet into some pink novelty slippers. He smiles back at my mum as he starts playing an old Oasis song on the guitar.

I roll my eyes. Greg's just so . . . *Greg*.

But Mum laughs, and when she does their living room glows – a hazy bubble of warmth and happiness that radiates out from her, and I can see how happy they are.

See, that's the problem. I *know* that Mum loves Greg, and that he loves her. Any idiot can see that. I also know that on paper he's way better for her than Dad was. They both love music and are *really* into plays, musicals, all that sort of thing. The walls of Greg's flat are lined with DVDs, CDs and old tapes that he's had since the nineties.

Dad was never really all that fussed about any of that stuff. I mean, don't get me wrong, he likes a good tune, but he was always more into reading, going to the gym, rock climbing and fixing stuff.

So, yeah, I *know* that Mum and Greg love each other, and in all seriousness that's great – Mum deserves to be happy. But I'm stood there right now all the same, slap bang in the middle of that bubble of warmth and light, and I just don't know where I'm meant to fit in with it all. You know? It's weird, it's like it's all happening *around* me, but I just don't feel it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I SLEEP ON A PULL-OUT FUTON

in the tiny box room at Mum's where there's barely any room to even pull the bed out. It's where Greg keeps all the CDs that he can't fit in the living room and about twelve hundred different guitars. I mean, that's an exaggeration, but seriously there are *loads*.

When I wake up, I smell bacon cooking and jump out of bed. Well, I *wriggle* out of bed, trying to avoid catching myself on any of the instruments hanging on the walls, and carefully put my clothes on, but,

you know, I do it quickly.

Mum's in the kitchen. It's kind of cramped and I heave myself on to the worktop in the corner so I'm out of the way.

'Morning, love!' she says, smiling. 'Sleep all right?'

'Yeah,' I reply. 'It's a good job I don't snore, though, the strings on those guitars vibrate whenever you make a sound louder than a whisper!'

'Why do you think I make Greg keep them all in there!' says Mum with a laugh. 'Fancy a bacon sarnie or is that a silly question?'

'Does a bear use the lavatorial facilities in the woods?'

Mum grins. 'I remember when your dad first said that! He's certainly got a way with words.'

'You're not wrong.'

We both smile for a while, then Mum's smile slowly fades.

'And how is he? Your dad?'

'Ah, you know . . .' I try to sound breezy. 'Same old, same old.'

Mum frowns. 'Just because Sally said something about an accident at work?'

See, *this* is the trouble with leading a double life. You've got to keep all your stories straight with *everyone*. And people like Sally, Mum's old friend who still lives a few streets away from me and Dad, don't make *that* any easier.

'Ah, right, *yeah* –' I shrug – 'that! Yeah, that was all a bit of a nightmare. He had to take a couple of weeks off, but he's loads better now.'

Mum looks at me, her eyes narrow and she chews at her bottom lip. 'So he's back at work?'

'Yep,' I say, super breezy, like everything's TOTALLY fine. 'Well . . . he's looking for a new one. You know Dad – not one to sit around on his backside!'

'Yes, I know your dad,' says Mum, nodding briskly, her eyes shining, 'and I know that he's proud . . .' She pauses. 'So everything's *really* okay?'

I look Mum dead in the eyes and even do a little laugh. 'Look, I'm not going to lie . . .' I say, layering up another couple of lies that are close enough to the truth to almost

fool me. 'We were a bit strapped for a while, when Dad wasn't working, and, sure, all the jobs he gets at the minute are like zero-hours things with no security, so *that* gets him down a bit, but *basically* we're good.'

Like I say, Mum and Greg aren't rolling in it. They can have the heating on, and buying a pack of bacon's no huge deal, but it's not like they can *actually* help. Not *really*. So what's the point in laying it on them? Mum's working at a playgroup and Greg teaches guitar lessons and plays in some Americana pub band at the weekends, so they're hardly on the rich list. Besides, Mum *does* help when she can – passing me the odd fiver and every month she puts money into Dad's bank towards food and clothes for me, but, you know, it's never *enough*. Not when Dad's not working.

'So you don't need to worry about us!' I say, patting her on the shoulder.

Mum pulls me into a tight hug. 'But you *would* say, wouldn't you?' she whispered. 'You know, if you needed help?'

'Course I would!' I lie.

We stay there like that for a while, me hugging her until the bacon starts to smell like it's burning, then Mum spins round to pull it out from under the grill.

'Besides . . .' I add, 'Dad had an interview the other day, and he got a *really* good feeling. It's an office job, so it'll be perfect until his leg's one hundred per cent better. Now, he's not counting any chickens—'

'As if!' Mum interrupts, laughing, although her face looks strained. 'I do *actually* know him, remember?' She sighs. 'All the same, I hope it works out for him, Will. I really do.'

Greg leans in round the door, smiling as he *completely* murders the moment. 'Last one up, am I?' he asks, and then sniffs the air. 'Mmm, bacon! Looks like I timed it just right!'

'Well, you can wash up!' says Mum, throwing a tea towel at Greg's face.

He gasps, pretending to be outraged and then opens the cupboard by the door. The room suddenly feels *far* too small.

'Fair enough . . .' he says, pulling out two bottles and looking over at me. 'Brown sauce or red, Will?'

'Neither . . .' I reply. Then after a pause I think to add, 'Thanks.'

Mum hands me my sandwich. The bread's fresh and warm with a crispy crust. Inside, the bacon's all layered up – there must be like five rashers or something – and it's the good stuff too, the *thick* stuff. I take a huge bite and close my eyes. All of a sudden, I'm eight years old again. Way back before Mum left – when we were all



living together in the old house, back when we'd *always* have bacon sarnies on the weekend – back when we were happy.

Well, back when I was happy.

Then Greg speaks and slowly I open my eyes – my vision splintering into tiny shards that tinkle around my feet.

'So, Will . . . your mum and I are going to head over to a guitar exhibition at the museum in town this morning. Do you fancy coming along?'

I'd rather lick my fingers and stick them in a live plug socket.

'No thanks,' I reply. 'I've got to get a haircut.'

Internally I shake my head. *Get a haircut?* Where did *that* come from?

'Okay, love,' says Mum, rooting around in her purse. 'That'll be nice; it *is* getting a bit shaggy. Do you want some cash towards it? I've got a fiver in here somewhere . . .'

She finds a five-pound note and holds it out towards me.

'Thanks, Mum!' I say, taking the note and putting it in my pocket.

'Well, if you're sure,' says Greg. 'It's all these guitars that used to be owned by famous musicians. They've even got one that Paul McCartney once played!'

'Wow,' I say, hoping that it doesn't sound as sarcastic as I'm feeling, 'that sounds great, but seriously, you two go along, I'll catch up with you later on.'

Then I turn my attention back to the bacon sarnie, hoping it can weave its time-travelling magic spell again – but it doesn't.

It still tastes great, though, so, you know, I'll take that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOW, I HAVE A BIT OF A PROBLEM...

I need a haircut by the time Mum and Greg get back from their exhibition. I mean, it's not the biggest problem in the world, but, still, it needs some thought. Trouble is, a haircut's pricey and even with the fiver Mum gave me, there's no way I can scrape enough together.

The idea hits me suddenly, like all the best ideas.

DIY.

I know Greg's got a beard trimmer; it's basically like a set of mini hair clippers. I can just do a number four all

over and that'll be that. I mean, sure, it's not a *great* look, but, to be fair, anything's better than what I've got going on at the minute.

Reaching into the bathroom cabinet I pull out the beard trimmer. It's covered in lots of tiny bits of Greg's beard hairs, which makes me feel all kinds of gross. I brush them off as best I can, then look through the various comb guards for one that's the right length.

Now, I'll be honest, I've never cut my own hair before, but how hard can it be? I mean, it's not like I'm trying to do some tight fade or something, I'm just doing the whole lot the same length – easy.

I clip on the attachment and turn the beard trimmer on. It even sounds like the clippers at the barber's and there's a soft reassuring buzz as the trimmer vibrates slightly in my hand. Starting low, I gently slide the trimmer up the side of my head, watching as clumps of my hair drift down like confetti.

I pause and run my fingers up the side of my head. God, that feels better – so much lighter. I'm smiling now,

nodding as I look at myself in the mirror – this is going to look great.

The trimmer hums back into life and I carry on, working my way round the sides and the back. I mean, sure it looks kind of funny right now, with this weird long bit on the top, but I'll sort that out afterwards.

Everything's going brilliantly, until I hear a crack and a small shard of plastic pings into the sink, followed by a larger piece of plastic as the guard falls off and then a whole *load* more hair drifts down and the trimmer gets caught in the long bit of hair on the top, chewing it up like an angry lawnmower.

Now, I don't know if you've ever used hair clippers, but they have these little metal teeth that slide across each other – they're what *actually* cuts the hair, and they cut it *short*, basically bald. It's the different combs that give you the different lengths. So, yeah, without the comb guard, I've managed to carve a totally bald strip out of my hair. Heart racing, I yank the trimmer out of my tangled hair, where it's busy hacking more weird bald

patches up the side of my head. Frantically I turn it off and stand there sort of gasping, looking at the disaster in the mirror.

It's bad.

Really bad.

I've got this long bit on top that hangs down and then it's all short at the sides, apart from the chunks where it's *literally* bald.

A rush of heat pulses through me as I stare at myself in the mirror.

I look like an absolute state.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I'M stood there, staring slack-jawed at my reflection, but after a while I pull myself together and start trying to work out what I'm actually going to *do* about it.

Option One: I could try to fix this mess myself, but the only option would be to shave the whole lot pretty much bald, and there's no way I'm doing that.

Option Two: I could just walk around, proudly showing off my 'unique' style and hope that the 'attacked by hair-eating seagulls' look becomes popular. But something

tells me I don't have quite the social currency to carry *that* one off.

You know, one of the good things about having lots of problems is that you get used to it – you get used to *trying* to solve them. My life is like a crash course in resilience, where every day, you either sink or swim. And you know what? I don't feel like sinking. Not just yet anyway.

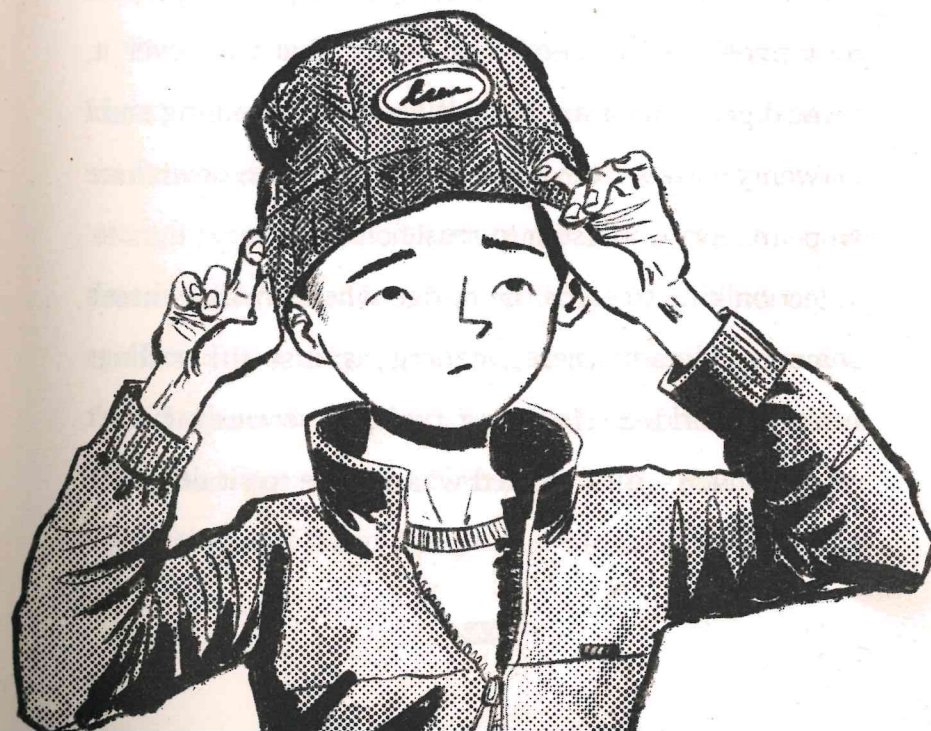
Besides, I've got an *Option Three*, and I think it's a good one. I mean, what would *you* do if you had an absolute shocker of a haircut and not enough money to get it fixed?

You'd get a cheap hat. *Right?*

Twenty minutes later, I'm at the second-best charity shop in town, shuffling through their very limited collection of hats. And, sure, I *could* go to the animal sanctuary one, which is *way* better and even has some decent brands sometimes, but a couple of girls a bit older than me work in there at the weekends, so there's NO WAY I'm going there today – not looking like *this*.

So, yeah, I'm in here, where the only person who can judge me is this older lady behind the till, wearing some massive felt hat – maybe she tried to cut her own hair too? Besides, it's not like I can get anything that'll actually look good on me. It's *got* to be a beanie, otherwise you'd still see all the bald bits, and me and beanies don't get on too well.

Eventually I pick some snowboarding thing that would probably have been cool once – maybe thirty years ago?



On the plus side, the hat was really cheap, so as I walk out of the charity shop, I've still got some change rattling about in my pocket. I consider going to get a can of drink, but then change my mind, I'd better save it for when I get home – Dad'll need it for the food shopping.

Anyway, it's a nice day, you know? Cold but crisp and the sun's shining, so I forget about a drink and decide to walk back to Mum's along the river.

I like the river here; it calms me down, you know? The whispering, rippling sound of it, the way the light bends and glides over the water as it swirls around – it's kind of hypnotic. Also, there's this bridge that runs over it, some big old Victorian thing. Whenever it's raining and I need to get away from Mum and Greg, I come down here where it's dry and listen to music on my own.

I'm walking towards the bridge when I realise there's someone already there, leaning against the railings under the bridge. That's just typical – *seriously*, I don't ask for much – all I wanted was a place to sit down for a bit.

I'll just have to go on to the bench a bit further along. But as I get closer to the bridge, I realise that it's a whole group of lads. Older than me, maybe sixteen or so. Something like that. They look like they'd be in the sixth form, but they're not from my school. I don't recognise any of them.

My heart beats faster. I'm not getting a great feeling from them. You know how you can just tell, even from a distance? They're laughing, but it's not like *ha, ha, ha*, *what a funny joke* kind of laughing; it's a hard sound – as sharp as it's cold.

They've not seen me, so I head up the bank to my right, breaking through the trees and bushes, planning to skirt round the bridge, when something catches my attention. Actually I do recognise one of the voices in the group; it's a bit higher than the others. A bit younger.

Chris Tucker.

What's he doing here? I've never seen him *anywhere* near here before. I stop behind a broad tree and peer down the bank. From this angle I can just about see him

and a couple of the lads under the bridge.

'Yeah, nice one, Si,' says Chris. 'I'll bet they didn't try *that* again!'

The group all laugh – that same jagged barking.

'Jesus! Don't be such a suck-up!' says a stocky lad whose face I can't see in the shadows.

'I wasn't,' protests Chris, his voice thinner and weaker than I've ever heard. 'I was just saying . . .'

'Yeah, well. No one's interested in what you're *saying*,' mimics the boy, 'Come on, Si, let's get out of here. I don't want to be hanging around under bridges in nowhere towns all day.'

Another figure slinks out from under the shadow of the bridge, sharp details sliding into view as he steps out from the darkness. He's wearing pristine white joggers, brand-new trainers and a baggy sweatshirt with a huge logo that I don't recognise but it's *obviously* expensive. His hair's cut close to his head, and the sunlight gleams off a huge watch on his wrist.

'Listen, Chris,' he says slowly, his voice low and

dangerous, 'you're only here because of your brother, *yeah*? But if you want to be more than John Tucker's baby brother, you've got to prove it. You know? You've got to *earn* it!'

'I can do it, Si,' says Chris. 'You *know* I can.'

Si puts his hands on Chris's shoulders, standing at least a head taller, probably more. His shoulders are broad and muscular – he looks how Chris Tucker *wants* to look.

'And Mo's right, *yeah*? There's no point coming out with all the chat. It's what you *do* that counts? You get me?'

Chris nods, silent.

'You're learning!' says Si.

Everyone laughs again and Chris's face reddens.

I can tell there's a lot riding on this moment, but I don't know what. For some reason I hold my breath, even though none of them would be able to hear me.

Si pauses as though he's considering something. Then he shakes his head and almost laughs. 'Okay, sure . . . why not, *right*?' He gestures to one of the other lads who

comes out from under the bridge. 'You got the list, Tony?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, get Baby Tucker's number and message him the details – all of it. All the brands, the best places to get them – the whole lot.'

'Come on then,' mutters Tony. 'What's your number?'

I hear Chris giving Tony his phone number, his voice bright and artificially casual. There's a slight pause, then Chris's phone beeps and he looks down at the screen.

'You know what that list is, Baby Tucker?' asks Si quietly. 'It's kind of like a shopping list, okay?'

Chris nods.

'Good,' says Si. 'So if you get me everything on there . . . Well, if you get me *everything*, I'll give you a bloody Xbox myself – but *that's* not going to happen, so just get me everything that you *can* and then we'll come to some . . . *arrangement*. Okay?'

Chris nods again.

'Good lad,' says Si, putting his hands back on Chris's shoulders, holding so tight that I can see his knuckles

whiten. 'And don't you tell *anyone*,' he adds in a low velvet growl. 'You hear? Not a *soul*. If you get caught, that's *your* problem.'

Chris sets his jaw and shakes his head. 'I won't get caught,' he says. 'And even if I *did*, I wouldn't say anything – I'm not an idiot!'

'Good lad!' says Si again, smiling. 'See, I'd hate for your brother to have to hear any . . . *upsetting* news about something bad happening to you.'

Si slaps Chris so hard on the shoulders that he stumbles forward, losing his balance and landing hard on his hand and knees.

'See you later, Baby Tucker,' calls Si as he walks away, his friends laughing as they follow him back under the shadow of the bridge and away.

I wait there a while. The last thing I want is to burst out of the bushes, right in the middle of *that* lot. I glance back down at Chris as he's scrambling up to his feet, wiping his hands on his jeans, shooting a look round to see if anyone saw.

I've got no idea what happens next . . .

Maybe I made some sort of noise. Stepped on a leaf or a twig or something. I don't know . . . but *something* makes Chris look up the bank directly towards me. Our eyes meet and I duck behind the tree, heart thudding sickeningly in my throat.

I wait there, silent, not moving. Not even breathing. After a few seconds, I hear footsteps as Chris walks away, back along the footpath away from me.

But the weird thing is, I'm *sure* that he saw me – I'd put money on it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MUM PHONED ME AS I WAS WALKING

home to ask if I wanted to meet her and Greg for lunch in town, but I passed on that idea, I mean, this weekend's already been about as Greg-filled as I can cope with. Besides, I knew that there was a pizza in the freezer, hot water in the radiators and a shelf full of DVDs back at the flat, so I settled down for a nice cosy afternoon.

As the day fades into the evening, a misty drizzle starts to fall, creating fuzzy halos round the street lights and, tell you what, I'm glad that I'm here, not at home in

the freezing flat with Dad. Then immediately I feel bad – like I was being disloyal somehow.

It's about four thirty when I hear Mum and Greg chatting in the hallway, so I spring up to grab the hat, covering my 'haircut'.

The door opens and Mum and Greg bundle in, taking off their damp coats and chatting away about the exhibition and this old book Mum bought from a charity shop, when suddenly there's this quiet *click*, and all the lights and the TV cut out.

We stand there in the darkness.

'Looks like we need to feed the meter,' says Greg. 'God, that thing gets hungry. Is there any change left?'

'So, *about that . . .*' says Mum. 'I needed it the other day for the shopping. Sorry.'

'Not to worry,' says Greg, putting his coat back on. 'I fancied a walk anyway.'

Mum turns to me and touches my arm. 'Will? Be a love and nip to the shop, would you?'

I kind of shrug but don't really say anything, while

Mum rummages in a drawer, opening a tin and pulling out a ten-pound note. 'Get some change for the meter, and you can get a can of Coke too, if you like?'

'What, the *real* stuff?' I ask. 'Not some knock-off?'

'You still like it, don't you?'

I grin, and I'm pretty much out of the door before Mum's finished saying, 'Thanks, love!'

I choose a playlist on my phone and the music throbs out of the headphones. Walking quickly, I try to keep my feet moving in time with the music, as though it's a game. It's hardly any distance to the shop, five minutes tops. But by the time I push the door open with a *ding*, the drizzle's made up its mind to get serious and turn into rain, so my hood's kind of clinging to the side of my hat. And yeah, I know that a hat AND a hood's kind of weird, but I need to keep the hat dry so I can wear it later.

'Bit wet out?' asks the guy behind the counter without looking up from his phone.

'Yeah, a bit wet,' I reply, and he nods.

Now that is some CLASSIC small talk. *Seriously* next-level stuff.

I walk round to the fridge and take out the chilled shiny red can. I feel like the hero in some computer game quest. If there was no one around, I'd probably feel tempted to hold the can up in the air and hum some triumphant bit of music. I LOVE this stuff. But Mr Chatty behind the till is there, so I don't do that. I definitely imagine it, though.

I take the can over to the till and hold out the tenner. Without looking up from his phone, the guy takes hold of the note, opens the till, and tries to pass me a fiver and some change.

'Sorry, but can I have it *all* as change, please?' I ask.

Mr Chatty sighs and points to a sign that reads no change given without a purchase, muttering, 'I spend half my life giving out change!'

'To be fair, this is a purchase . . .' I protest, holding up the can and kind of waggling it about.

'Cheapest thing you could get!' he retorts.

'*Hardly*,' I say. 'I mean, it's not like this stuff's CHEAP, is it? Not in here anyway. I could go a bit further up the road and buy it from the supermarket for, like, half the price.'

Mr Chatty puts his phone down and glances over at me. 'You've got a cheek!' he says, but he's smiling, 'Look, it's fine, I'll do you the change. Don't want to be responsible for you drowning in the rain on the walk to Asda.'

'Thanks!' I say and I smile back. Suddenly I feel a bit like me and Mr Chatty are kind of friends.

'Besides,' he adds, 'hardly had anyone in all evening. Every little helps, right?'

'Tell me about it!' I say, half laughing but unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

He looks at me again and I feel like this time he's *really* looking at me. Taking in the jeans that were old when we got them from the charity shop, the black school shoes, the soaking-wet hoody and the old-fashioned hat.

He nods to himself, takes out the change and passes it to me. 'Here you go,' he says. 'Cheers then.'

'Thanks,' I say, taking the change and counting it out

as I walk towards the door.

I turn back. 'You've given me too much,' I say. 'This is a tenner's worth of change.'

'I can count,' he replies, catching my eye and smiling. 'Now, you get going, before you have to *swim* home!'

Kindness is weird. It can feel like being knocked off balance – especially *unexpected* kindness.

'Thanks,' I say as I open the door. 'Seriously . . . *thanks!*'

'No worries,' he replies with a grin, and then as the door closes with a *ding* he shouts, 'That stuff'll rot your teeth, mind!'



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

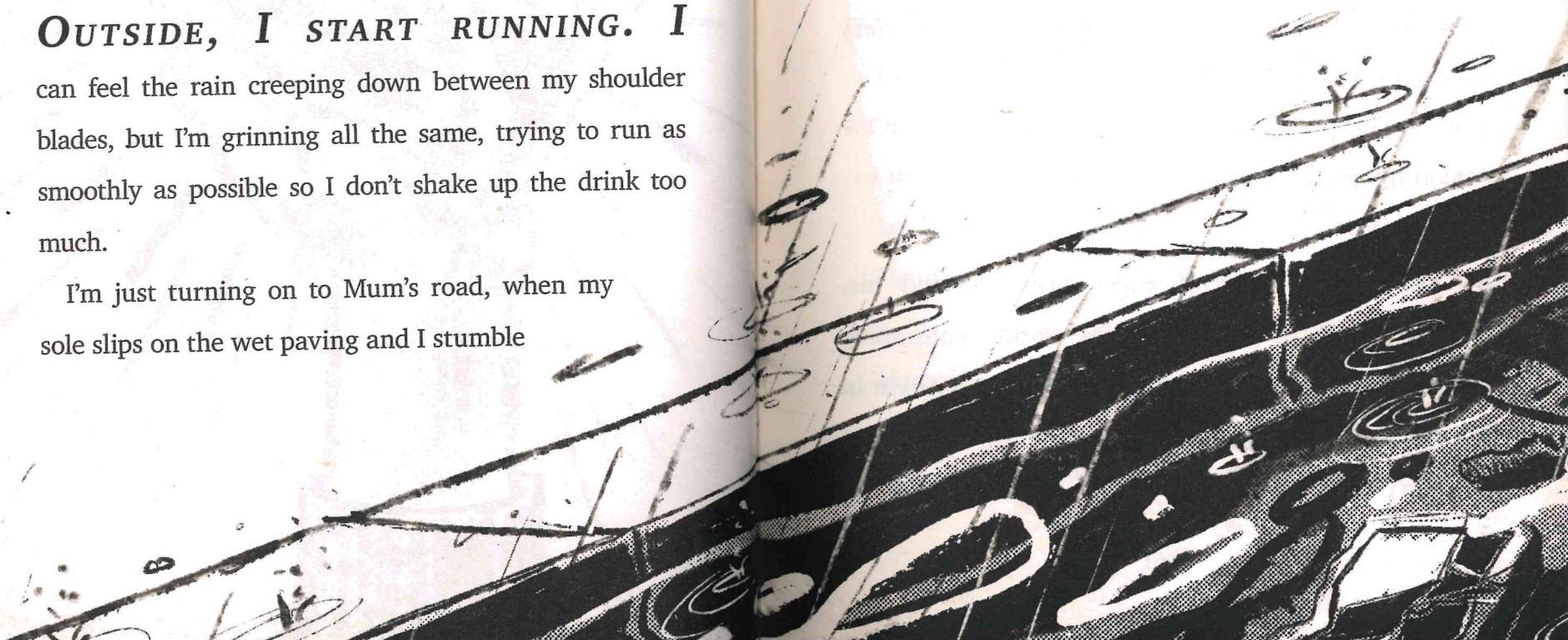
OUTSIDE, I START RUNNING. I

can feel the rain creeping down between my shoulder blades, but I'm grinning all the same, trying to run as smoothly as possible so I don't shake up the drink too much.

I'm just turning on to Mum's road, when my sole slips on the wet paving and I stumble

forward. There's this weird confused moment, when I've got no idea what's happening and I feel like I'm about to *totally* pile it, but somehow I just about manage to stay on my feet.

As I skid to a halt, my headphones fall from my ears. I hear a rattling, skittering sound, and watch my phone bouncing across the ground, casting a pale dancing light across the rain-soaked pavement, until it slips over the kerb and into a deep puddle. The light vanishes.



Scrambling forward, I kneel down and fish about in the puddle. After a second or two I feel my phone and pull it out. The screen is totally blank. There's nothing coming out of the headphones and the whole thing just looks dead.

You ever hear the phrase *take one step forward, two steps back*?

That's how I feel. Except it's more like take two steps backwards, then *another* two, then you might as well just run backwards as fast as you can and keep on going.

It's like my whole life's going *backwards* – all the time.

My eyes shut tight. My teeth grind together. Every muscle in my body tenses.

It's not fair.

Nothing is fair.

NOTHING!

A huge black hole of anger opens around me, swallowing all the goodness of the world – consuming everything – until there's nothing left, and I just exist in the middle of this huge swirling rage storm.

I don't know how long it lasts, but when the feeling

fades I'm left standing in the rain. Soaking wet and cold. Without the furious heat of the anger there's nothing left. *I'm* nothing. Just an empty shell.

I walk back to Mum's and ring the buzzer.

'Hey, Will! That was quick!' comes Greg's cheery voice through the intercom and I hear the door unlock.

I climb up the stairs and into the flat. In the light from the hallway I can just about see my hand as it reaches out and places the coins down on the table. Then my hands take off my hoody and hang that up on the coat rack. I hear water drip on to the floor.

'Hey, are you all right, Will?' asks Greg from somewhere far away.

I nod.

'Look, give me a second . . .'

There is the sound of coins being put into the meter and then the lights come on.

'Hooray!' cheers Mum from inside the bathroom. 'Well done, Will! Is it all right with you two if I stay in the bath a while? I've not had a proper soak in ages, and it's really

nice in here with all the candles. I might even put some music on.'

'That's fine, love,' calls Greg as music starts playing from the bathroom. 'You take as long as you like.'

When he turns to me, his face drops. 'What's *happened*?' he asks, his voice quieter and lower than usual.

I don't say anything – I just stand there all blank and empty.

'Come on, Will,' insists Greg. '*Please!* At least dry yourself off a bit. You're soaking!' Greg picks up a towel from the airer and throws it over to me, but everything's moving too fast, or I'm moving in slow motion, and the towel just drops to the floor.

Greg grabs it and leads me over to the sofa. Pulling my soaking hat off, he puts it on the radiator and starts drying my hair with the towel. 'So . . .' he says, 'what happened?'

'Nothing . . .' I mutter. '*Everything*. I don't want to talk about it.'

Greg's towelling stops for a moment. 'Is it the hair?'

'Said I don't want to talk about it.'

'Fair enough,' says Greg, 'but, look, I can try and sort the hair out a bit, if you like?'

I shrug. Like that'll help, like that's going to change anything.

Greg gets some scissors from the kitchen. 'Lean forward,' he says.

I lean forward.

Damp clumps of hair begin to fall, gathering by my feet, by my shoes – my *awful* shoes – and I start to cry. Huge gulping sobs that I try to suppress, just like I try to suppress *everything*. Silent heart-ripping sobs.

'Hey . . . come on, Will,' says Greg, putting a hand on my shoulder. 'Look, I know that things are tough, but we're here for you – *I'm* here for you – if you want me to be. I swear I can *try* to help.'

'But you *can't!*' I cough out between sobs. '*No one* can. That's the problem! *Everything's* bad. All of it. My whole life is ruined. Messed up – the whole *lot*.'

Greg says nothing but keeps silently cutting my hair.

'I know what you mean,' he says eventually. 'I know how that feels.'

I snort to myself. *As if . . .* Greg? With his stupid extended '*he-l-l-l-l-o*' and his stupid jolly face. I turn round, my face feeling all twisted up, but when I look at Greg I see him differently. He's smiling but it's kind of a sad smile, and somehow I can tell that he *does* know what I mean, that he *has* felt what I'm feeling.

'Dropped my phone . . .' I add, pulling the dead lump of glass, metal and plastic out of my pocket. 'It went in a puddle.'

'Pass it here,' says Greg, holding his hand out. 'Did you try to turn it on again?'

I shake my head. 'What's the point? It's dead, isn't it?'

'Maybe. Maybe not . . .' replies Greg. 'But it's a good job you didn't try to turn it on. Sometimes *that's* what completely ruins them.'

He takes the phone and walks into the kitchen. Curious, despite myself, I watch as he opens the cupboard and takes out a Tupperware container. He fills it with dried

rice and buries the phone in it, then he closes the lid tight.

'The rice sucks out all the moisture, see? But make sure you leave it like that for a couple of days, and *don't* try to turn it on. Okay?'

'You think it'll work?' I ask.

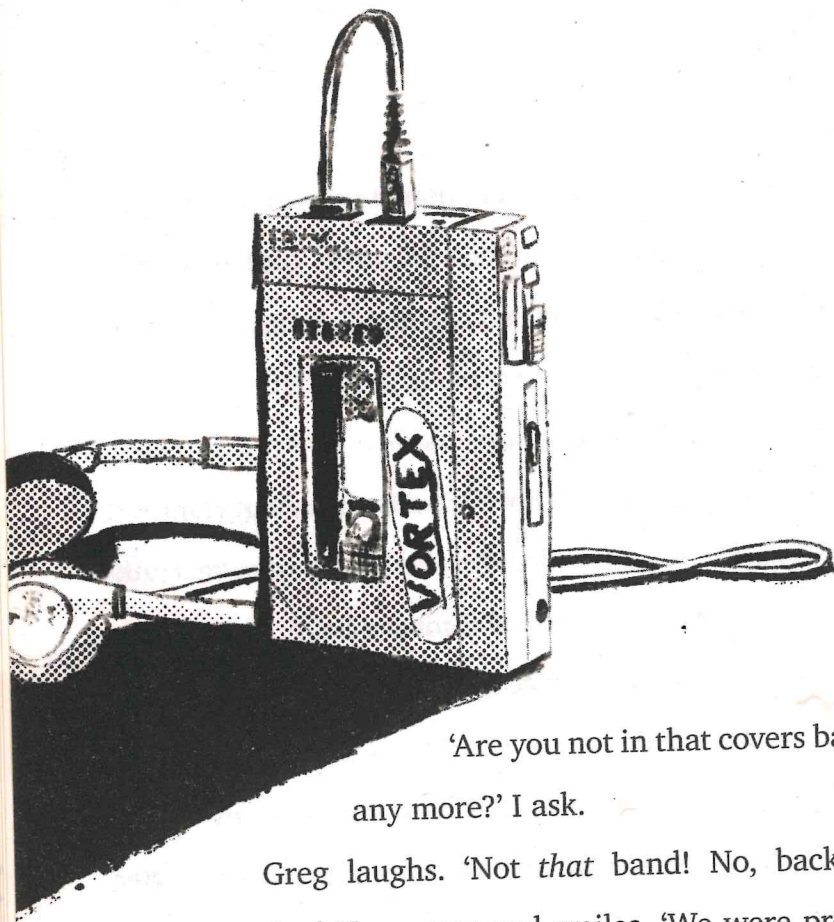
Greg shrugs. 'I don't know. It's worth trying, right?'

'I suppose . . .' I say. 'I didn't have any data or credit anyway. I basically just have it for music.'

Greg's face lights up. 'Well, you know what? I think I *can* help with that!'

He goes through into the box room – *my* room. Normally I'd feel weird about him being in there when I'm staying over, but right now I don't mind. I hear boxes being moved about and a minute or so later I hear him say, '*Ah!* There you are!'

He comes back in, holding up this weird little box with headphones attached to it. 'It's a Walkman!' he says. 'You know? Like a portable tape player? Well, it's a recorder as well, actually. We used to record our rehearsals on it, back when I was in the band.'



'Are you not in that covers band any more?' I ask.

Greg laughs. 'Not *that* band! No, back in my twenties.' He pauses and smiles. 'We were pretty good – got a few features in the *NME*.'

'Shut up!' I say, properly interested now.

'Yeah.' Greg nods. 'We came number one in their top five unsigned bands one time.' He grins, as he passes me the Walkman. 'Seriously, I thought we had it made. We played a whole load of gigs, supported all the big acts at the time, recorded a few demos. Nearly got signed.'

'No way!' I say. 'What happened?'

'I happened!' says Greg. 'I made some mistakes. Well, a LOT of mistakes.' He shakes his head. 'You know, I was twenty-one and suddenly everyone was telling me I was the best thing in the world.' He looks at me and shrugs. 'Trouble is, I *believed* them and started acting like a total idiot! *Then*, after a few months of me acting up, I had a huge blowout with Jake, our lead guitarist, and left the band just before we were due onstage at a big gig. I ruined *everything*! I remember yelling that I didn't need any of them and would do better on my own.'

Greg gestures around his small living room. 'As you can see . . . it didn't quite turn out that way.'

'Wow . . .' I whisper. 'I'm sorry . . .'

What's weird is that he grins here, like an *actual* proper smile.

'Nothing to be sorry about!' he says. '*Firstly*, it was a long time ago. And *secondly*, if we'd ended up being some huge famous band, then I'd never have had the chance to grow in the way that I have. You know?'

He pauses, and sits down on a chair in front of me. 'The thing is, I'd put *everything* on that future, on the band, and when it didn't happen I was crushed.' He looks me in the eye. '*Genuinely* crushed. But since then I've learned a lot. I've learned how to be happy, which I never was before. And besides, I've still got my music. You know, I can sit down anytime I like to play and it costs me *nothing*! Plus, it's the life I've led, which meant that I got to meet your mum, and right now I genuinely think that if the band had gone on to be HUGE, I wouldn't be as happy as I am now.'

'You mean . . . you'd be *happier*?' I say, but I smile to show that I'm joking.

'Ha!' Greg grins and pretends to slap me across the head. 'Seriously, though, Will, what I'm saying is that I know that life can feel rough. Maybe even unbearable sometimes –' he puts his hand on my shoulder – 'but so long as you DO bear it, as long as you find a way through each bad moment, and the next one, and the next, and you just keep going, then *eventually* you can look

back, and then? The pain's nowhere near as sharp. See, eventually *all* those bad moments are just small steps on a much bigger journey. They don't have to define you. Do you see what I mean?'

'Just keep going?' I say.

'Pretty much!' replies Greg, grinning.

That's when we hear the bathroom door opening.

Greg jumps up to grab my beanie and throws it over to me. 'Look, I've done my best,' he says, 'but I'm no miracle worker. Best put this back on to avoid any questions from your mum!' He scuffs all the cut hair under the sofa. 'I'll tidy that up later!'

'Thanks, Greg,' I say. 'You know, for *everything*.'

'Think nothing of it,' he says.

But I do. I think a lot of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SO, YEAH, THAT WAS QUITE THE plot twist. I had *literally* never imagined that I'd end up liking Greg, but there you are. I guess it just goes to show that sometimes the world *really can* surprise you.

After all that, I actually had the best time that I've ever had round at Mum's. We had lasagne with garlic bread for tea and I drank my can of Coke, then we all watched a film together, and it was good. You know, properly relaxing. Mum *did* ask why I was wearing the hat the whole time, but Greg chipped in to say that he

thought it was cool, so Mum just shrugged it off.

It was like that the next day too. Greg dug out some of his old tapes; he's got some decent stuff. You know, *obviously* it was all nineties, but, still, there's a whole bunch of albums and bands I'd never heard of. Plenty to keep me going till my phone dries out anyway.

The next day they both walk me to the bus stop. Mum pulls me into a hug. 'Say "hi" to your dad for me,' she says.

'Will do,' I reply, giving her an extra-tight squeeze. 'I love you, Mum.'

'I love you too!' she says, squeezing me back.

I smile at her as I turn to Greg. 'Thanks for letting me stay over,' I say, even though I've never said anything like that before. Mum sort of does this funny blink, like she's trying not to look *too* surprised.

'No worries,' says Greg, holding out a battered old tape box. 'Oh yeah, by the way, here's a tape of demos we recorded.' He leans in closer as he passes me the tape and whispers, 'And something to sort out the hair too!'

'What's going on with you two?' asks Mum. 'It's like

you're both school kids, whispering together!

'Ah, it's nothing!' says Greg. 'Just a bit of an in-joke.'

Mum shakes her head and does the blinking thing again. 'You two have *in-jokes* now?'

I grin at her, then turn back to Greg. 'I meant to ask, what was your band called?'

There's a pause. Mum smirks.

'Vortex,' says Greg eventually.

'Vortex?' I say.

Greg grins. 'Come on, I said we were a good *band* – I didn't say we had a good name!'

Just then the bus arrives. 'I'll definitely have a listen,' I say, patting the tape as I climb on board the bus. And I mean it. I will.

I walk to the back of the bus, brushing my hands lightly along the seat backs and sit down. Then I put on the headphones over my hat and wave goodbye to Mum and Greg as the bus pulls slowly away. While I'm taking the tape out of the box, I can see a tenner tucked inside. *Nice one, Greg!* I can get the whole hair mess properly

sorted out now. It'll be too late by the time I get home, but after school on Monday should be all right – so long as I can get into town in time.

I put the tape in the player the way Greg showed me, rewind it and press play. You know what? Greg's right. Vortex were good. Like, *really* good. They had this sort of shoegaze thing going on, but with really hard guitars and loads of synths and samplers and stuff. And, tell you what, he can sing. I mean, I knew Greg could *sing* sing, because Mum's taken me to some of his covers band gigs. But on these demos, on the songs that he'd written *himself*, it all just . . . *works*. And despite what Greg says about finding personal happiness vs fame, fortune, mansions, yachts and a massive ego, I still think it's a shame his band never happened. But there we go – that's life, I guess?

I'm sat there on the bus, letting the world slide away past the window as I listen to the music, each stop and start of the bus drifting by, when suddenly I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn round, pulling the headphones off my ears.

's sitting on the

'So what you doin' in that dump of a town?'

'My mum lives there,' I say. 'What about you?'

He looks at me and doesn't say anything for a long time. 'My brother's got a place there,' he replies eventually.

his shoulder.

I nod slowly. 'Right.'



I don't mention anything about seeing him down by the river, and he doesn't mention it either.

'What you listening to, then?' he asks.

'Music,' I reply.

'Yeah, *obviously*! I mean, I know you're weird, but I didn't think you'd be listening to . . . *like* . . .' He pauses, obviously trying to think of something funny to say and failing. 'What are those headphones? They look ancient.'

I shrug. 'Yeah, it's this old Walkman I borrowed. My phone died, see?'

Chris nods. 'Nightmare. Let's have a look then?' He holds his hand out.

I hesitate. I mean, this is Chris Tucker. But something about him seems different today. You know, for a start he's not called me Poundland, and actually he's not said or done anything out of order – not *yet* anyway.

Wondering if I'm going to regret it, I take the Walkman out of my pocket and pass it over.

'Jesus! What is *that*?' he says. 'You been time-travelling or something?'

'I told you it was old,' I say. 'My mum's bloke lent it to me. It's pretty sweet actually; you can record with it too.'

'Right,' says Chris, clearly not interested as he passes the Walkman back to me. 'Can't play *Demonlance*, though, can it?'

'Nope, no games – just the music.'

But something about his question catches me by surprise. See, *Demonlance* is this really involved RPG game – it's *total* D&D stuff.

'So, what? You play *Demonlance*?' I ask, wondering if he's trying to wind me up.

'*Sometimes* . . .' he replies, cagey now. 'How about you?'

'It wouldn't work on my phone,' I say, 'but, you know, I like the look of it.'

'Yeah, it's decent,' he says, then he nods to me, like that's the end of the conversation. 'See you later then, Will,' he adds and puts his own headphones back in.

Will? Chris Tucker just called me Will. Like, my *real* name. Not some stupid nickname or my surname or anything like that – he called me *Will*.