Chapter 1

Southsea, 2018

A car shot past our house rattling the window, a bottle smashed and somewhere nearby and revellers, like a pack of hyenas, were making a last drug and alcohol fuelled attempt to party on the esplanade: the noises at the end of the night drifted in and out of my consciousness. Then there was a loud thud as a heavy door slammed shut and woke me with a start.

I sat up in bed and looked at my phone. 4.35am. I can’t remember ever seeing 4.35am in real time. It’s a stupid time, the graveyard shift, as dad would say and the time of the night when people are most likely to die, if they are going that way, or at least that’s what he says. He’s good for macabre stuff like that. He had a view of life that was in total contrast to mums. He said we are all primordial soup, there is no heaven, or hell or soul and point in thinking any other way. So, if basic instinct is our driver, then I’m with him, it gets me into some heated debates with the Reverend at school in PRS lessons, but surely that’s the point of school isn’t it? That’s what the teachers tell us anyway: learn to think for yourself they say – but when you do and it disagrees with them, it’s a different story.

There was no point in being awake, so I flopped down and tried to go back to sleep.

Something was nagging me, irritating me and telling me to stay alert.

I made a decision to ignore it. I don’t care, I want to sleep; it can wait. This is one of my talents.

When my alarm drilled into my semiconscious mind and woke me at 7am, it felt even more of an intrusion than usual. Mum was making her way up the stairs to my room at the top of the house; I can tell by her footsteps; not exactly heavy or quick, somewhere in-between. I’m sure she probably would say what she usually says, something like ‘get up, you’re going to be late!’ I switch off so it doesn’t matter what she says.

How does she know that I’m going to be late today? Just because I usually am doesn’t mean anything. I don’t want my life to be so easily judged, I don’t know why adults do that, how do they have the right to think that they know how I will do things today? What if, today is the first day of a radical change for me?

I am always late, but not so much that it matters. If it mattered, I wouldn’t be late. There is an art in being late; you have to know when it’s just enough. I’m pretty good at timing it just right so that I don’t have too many problems. My tutor at school is used to me and complicit in my plan to never quite be on time. He seems to understand what it’s like to be teenager, maybe he can remember, he’s not that old, and so he never gives me any hassle, even when I accidently spill his coffee, or forget to be polite. He just kind of gives me that patient; I’ve got your number and your back. My dad would go crazy and his reaction to me has the opposite affect than he expects, I spill more stuff and swear because he makes me on edge.

My dad is this dark cloud that hangs around the corners of my life. It is as though he uses any excuse to explode at me. He’s like a bomb, ready to detonate and spray vitriol all over me. People tell me to ignore him when he’s like this because he can’t help it and he loves me but why do I have to forgive his crap behaviour if he can’t forgive mine? I am after all, a minor and he is an adult, therefore the onus is on him to set a good example. Mum is scared of him, he is rude and horrible to her, it makes me mad, but she tells me not to react to him. One day I’m going to kill him; I won’t be able to help it.

I had band practice after school today, so I didn’t get home until after mum and my brother. Mum was making dinner and my brother was doing his homework on the kitchen table. I messed up his hair as I walked by, he hates it but that’s the point. I dumped my bag on the floor and answered mum,

‘Yeah, today was great.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic’, she says.

‘What!’

I didn’t mean it to be sarcastic.

‘It’s just school, what do you want me to say?’ I knew that I was being difficult, I often say the wrong things and sometimes those things are hurtful, but it’s not as though I don’t know any better, They just come out, I can’t help it but they aren’t deliberate.

‘Ok, did anything good happen?’

‘We wrote a great song tonight. And I don’t really know why people don’t like sarcasm, you should be proud of me, only clever kids can do it.’ I looked at her for acknowledgement.

She smiled in her patient, kind way and went back to chopping carrots.

I hate carrots. They are pointless.

Ha, I just got the irony of my own analogy. No one else did, or perhaps they didn’t care. God, its hard being funny when you are surrounded by half-wits. I felt the urge to kick my brother but resisted it.

I tuned out the rest of the conversation and stuffed some food into my mouth as I remembered how hungry I was. School lunchtimes are pretty torturous but at least today, I barely had one; there was orchestra and a sports meeting and I had to see Mr (Jerk-off ) Brown about why I didn’t hand my chemistry homework in. I didn’t tell him, I had no idea we had any homework or even what his lesson was about because I was writing a song, or that I don’t give a toss. Obviously that’s what was streaming through my head but it’s confidential. He was all right about it, he could have given me a detention but he didn’t because I’m about the only one in our class who doesn’t ridicule him and besides, I’m clever. I feel sorry for him, he tries very hard to be funny and cool but he’s so far off the mark. He ought to just stick to teaching us because he’s pretty good at that and most of the time; I get what he’s teaching when I can be bothered to listen.

Mum had been talking to me I think judging by the look of bewilderment on her face which my brother was cashing in on. I had tuned her out as I often do, but just then I caught her looking at me.

‘What?

‘Now that I have your attention, I need to tell you both something…’ she looked a bit weird, a bit like a wet bird. That sounds so awful, but she just looked forlorn and beaten, a massive contrast to those photos hanging on the wall upstairs of her dad when they first met. It’s not a great advertisement for relationships when you look at the ‘before’ in those photos and now the ‘after’ in my mums beleaguered, harried expressions.

‘Your Dad has left us.’ She said and relief seemed to filter through her face leaving softness in its wake like a ripple across a pond at dusk.

‘He’s gone?’ As if I give a toss, I am thrilled beyond words.

It was odd, I suppose that neither of us thought to ask why, or if he was coming back, I guess it was just in case we jinxed it and somehow helped it to happen. If you knew what he was like you would probably understand why.

Mum started to peel a potato and Sam and I just looked at each other. The silence was deafening so I asked her,

‘Mum, are you okay?’

It was a stupid thing to ask but I couldn’t articulate anything else. She must have been so happy too, but then it was going to be hard to live on her wages, she already worked long hours and then what if he wants to kick us out of here? It was too massive a thought. I couldn’t deal with it so I blocked it.

I don’t know if she answered, if she did I didn’t hear. I was too pre-occupied with those weird thoughts that were nagging me last night whilst I was trying to get to sleep. Is it possible that somewhere in the deep outpost of my unfathomed mind, I knew or heard him leave, was he even at home last night…Oh, who cares?

The clock ticked loudly and the knife mum was using to chop the potatoes with hit the board sending sounds like shrapnel splintering across the draining board.

Chapter 2

It’s almost a week ago that dad left; or mum said dad left. To be honest it doesn’t really make a lot of difference, he was never here anyway; even when he was here, he was somewhere else or at least we wished he were. He lived at night, when we were all in bed, he got up then and did stuff in his room very quietly. Really he was mostly at the hospital, he is a psychiatrist, but I don’t know what he did / does. I tried to ask him a few times because I really wanted to know. He always dismissed it and fobbed me off as if I wouldn’t understand. He probably doesn’t know that I read psycho thrillers and find all that stuff really interesting, but then he treats me like I’m an idiot most of the time so I don’t suppose he cares what interests me.

When we were little he was great. A normal dad, I think. I can remember him playing with us sometimes and although he didn’t smile much he seemed happy enough - whatever that means. There are loads of photos of him around and mum made loads of photo albums too; no one ever really looks at them but her. I’ve seen them though, so some of the images must have stuck in my brain and when I think of dad, I think of those photos now. He was a good-looking guy, tall and strong with a regal face. I really wish I had his physic; I am shorter than I should be, and I keep looking in the mirror to see if I’ve grown. He was a great Rugby player and I thought maybe I would inherit his athletic genes.

He was proud - not of his heritage, because he hated that; of his job and what he thought it meant to people. People respected him at work but he hated being brown, he wanted to be British, white. He was Asian and brown, a first generation immigrant; his parents brought him to Britain when he was a baby. They believed that education is everything and they risked all they had to come here in the 60s. He’s clever and let’s face it, he was going to be a doctor, wasn’t he? How many premier league sportsmen were brown in the 70s and 80s? He could have done anything. We loved him until it all started going wrong.

It was the rage, the moods, and the way he screamed at mum. We just learnt to work around him. Now he’s gone, the house feels lighter, warmer… happier. Even mum seems better, brighter or maybe it’s me imagining things. She’s cleared his room, she’s been moaning about his piles of papers and not being able to clean and how its all a mess in there for ever, so that’s a result. All of his stuff is in boxes, when I got home from school today she told me to take care on the landing, it would be a bit of a squeeze getting though the boxes but they were going tomorrow. I must have given her a strange look because she said that we needed to rent a room out.

So we got a student, he came over to look around that this evening at the room, dad’s room and he’s moving in next week. It’s all, weird and doing my head in, that’s why I can’t do my homework tonight; my head is a mess - a mirror image of my bedroom floor. Mum doesn’t understand that, but it’s true, I hate it when she tries to clear up my floor, my room and make it all neat and clean, because everything is where it needs to be; it just needs to be where it all is - on the floor. When she tidies it up, it’s as though she’s wiped out my thoughts and it feels like I don’t belong in the space and have to start over to make it mine again. Maybe dad probably felt the same way, but I don’t want to make him the goodie in this. He’s not and it’s their stuff not mine, like I said, I’m a minor, they’re the adults. They should have been able to work it out.

My head is a mess because one day in the morning I have a dad, I hate him but at least I’ve got one, then on the same day I haven’t got one!

Here I am with my head, a mess, sitting at the kitchen table, Sam is here too and mum is clearing away the supper, neither of us have offered to help, she is just busy with her own thoughts and she accepted it when we both said that we have homework to do. She always does, when I’m older I’m going to have a go at her for accepting all the shit that has been thrown at her by us and especially dad, but for now I’ve got homework and my head is hurting.

We had a lecture at school today about mental health and teenagers. It’s pretty bad…but I’m lucky; even when things feel really shit, I can’t be bothered to get too hung up about it, not compared to some kids I know. I don’t cut myself or smoke stuff or stick stuff up my nose or anything else really. To be honest I’ve never really thought about it. They teach us how do it all at school. Dad used to get alarmed that I know as much about street drugs as he does…probably more. He used to act like it was none of my business and who was the school to be teaching that stuff, but he never really was bothered enough to do anything about it. He doesn’t walk past all the homeless people on his way to work every day like I do. I can see for myself what they’ve been taking and sometimes they offer some to me. One look at the state of them is enough to put you off, I don’t want to piss myself in the street or have to beg from people who aren’t as clever as me and besides, mum would be heart broken if I did any of that stuff and I can’t really do anything to hurt her now, dad’s done enough.

Mum has an irritating habit of telling me now and again that she is always here for us. I don’t ever tell her anything and I hate it when she gives me that look and asks if I want to talk. I know I can and so I don’t need to, I wish she knew that. That’s all there is to it.

However tonight is different and I have to clear my head a bit so I ask her,

‘How do you know dad has really gone?’

‘He cleared most of his stuff and took it along with his computers.’

‘That’s it?’

‘He left a letter; it spells it all out. You don’t need to know what’s in it.’

Nothing is more interesting than when someone tells you that you don’t need to know something, I wouldn’t let them get away with it if it was anyone else but mum.

‘Shit.’ That’s all I could think of to say.

‘Language!’

‘Sorry mum, but it’s quite radical isn’t it? Gives new meaning to a poison pen letter, did he mention us?’

‘Yes, he’s set up a trust fund to pay for your school fees.’

‘Great!’ I said, trying not to sound sarcastic.

‘Actually, that’s a huge relief, it means that you can stay where you are and I’m really pleased that he has done that.’

‘But Mum… he’s our dad!’ Sam sounded alarmed.

Perhaps he thought she needed reminding, I really don’t know what goes through his head sometimes but I didn’t say anything. Just as well I think.

‘Yes, honey…and he still is…’

We just looked at each other. Poor Sam, he’s much nicer than me really, he looked like he was going to cry and I suddenly felt really bad for taking the piss out of him.

‘But he couldn’t cope with family life.’ Mum said.

She always has to try to be nice about it all.

‘He’s been an arse-hole, that’s what mum is trying to say.’ I said to Sam helpfully.

She was just opening her mouth to tell me off when I saved her the trouble.

‘Mum, you know it’s true, you deserve better than the way he treated you and he was an arse-hole to us and the fact that he has left voluntarily means that I don’t have to kill him, so everyone’s better off,’ I said, trying to spin some humour out of the situation.

‘Is he still working at the hospital?’ Sam asked hopefully.

‘Good question; which I hadn’t yet thought of, Sam!’ I said trying not to sound sarcastic again.

I ducked as he stood up to swipe at me.

‘Luke, why do you have to wind him up?’ mum asked.

I wasn’t but I couldn’t be bothered to say so.

Mum went on,

‘He’s moved to a hospital in India.’

‘What?’ I almost exploded.

She looked at me and in turn I looked at both of them.

‘Shit!’ Sam said.

‘No shit!’ I said.

‘Boys!’ mum said.

‘India, why India? He wasn’t born there; he hates being brown.

‘I have absolutely no idea.’ she said and I could see by the blank look on her face that she really didn’t.

Chapter 3

June 2018

I don’t really know how I conned mum into it letting me get tickets with the rest of the band for the weekend Victorious Festival on the common. It’s great, dad would never have agreed! We only live about twenty minutes walk away from the main stage so it’s torture to hear it and not go like last year. Half the school was going to be there, but they will get lost in the crowd, literally I hope and anyway there’s safety in numbers, I guess. When I’m with the band, I don’t really care about anyone else. We’ve been together for a while and we get along, mostly. Or maybe it’s fair to say they agree with me, they have to because I’m the one who writes the stuff we play and most of the time they are really into it.

Today is going to be a great day because the best music is happening on the indie stage. I’m taking my guitar because I want to try the Open Mic stage. I’ve got three guitars, mum doesn’t know about this one because I had to empty my savings account to buy it and she would have given me a big lecture on responsibility and money and how hard it is to earn…. etc. My friend Matt looks after it mostly, I’ve been bringing it home quite a bit recently because it was dad who would have noticed it and he’s not here. He would have really appreciated it and then tried to tell me how to play, which would have really pissed me off because he doesn’t know how to play the guitar or read music, but he always thinks he knows more than I do. It really winds me up…or used to.

It’s going to be hot, the guys are here and we are off!

‘When will you be home?’ mum asked.

‘I don’t know, when it finishes,’ I can’t believe she had to ask me.

‘Have you got sunscreen with you?’ she asked.

‘No… Yes’, I lied. She knows.

‘Water?’

‘Yes,’ even though I didn’t and don’t care, I’ll just buy it for once. It’s a bit lame to be walking round the festival with loads of supplies.

We managed to get out before she could think of anything else.

The Festival covered the Common, it crowded the War monument and touched the sides of the Castle, weaving in and out of the paths that normally criss-crossed the common, but it made the usual landscape unrecognizable. We had VIP tickets - some strings my mate’s dad pulled. It meant that we didn’t have to circle through the cattle pens to be searched, we pretty much just walked in, the security guys made a show of ruffing us a bit looking for stuff but it was all very friendly. The sounds were coming hard at us and I was trying to keep a cool head whilst I figured out where we should head. As we cleared the entrance we were in the main stage area. The support acts were on until late afternoon. I had a list of whom we had to see, I guess we all did but none of us really cared who was on each other’s list. We headed to the bar area, no surprise really. I downed a beer in the spirit of friendship, but I was itching to get out and walk around.

I don’t really know how I spent the intervening hours but when I think about it, it’s like this slowly rolling camera of: painted festival faces; dreadlock drummers in psychedelic tunics, troubadour hippy girls with flowers in their hair and acoustic guitars slung over the sun tanned bodies, middle –aged hippies who looked as though they had seen better days, and maybe too much ganga had clouded their vision, but the hours flew by, the music was great, the sun was out and I had a couple of beers but I didn’t make the acoustic Open Mic and that was it. I met a girl on the common and she was … she was into me and I really liked her. I mean, I really liked her, sort of like when you get a stomach bug and all your insides melt, without the vomit part of course. Something just hit me and made me feel weird inside when I looked at her and she returned my gaze. She was tall, probably taller than me – most people are, and she had crazy telephone cord hair – no one has those kinds of telephones anymore, but you know what I mean. She was kind of cappuccino-coloured and the sun glinted on her skin turning it golden. Her eyes were deep brown almonds and she looked at me with a mixture of friendliness and contempt – I recognized someone on my wavelength. She was beautiful. I don’t remember ever feeling like that before. Maybe we got together – maybe we were a thing? I wish I could remember her name.

And then, it was getting dark and we were in the mosh pit and the whole vibe was strong and I felt trapped but I felt part of something too. The deep bass notes reverberated out of the speaker stackers and hit out at anything to absorb their ferocity. I felt the deep surge of sound in my stomach. When it stopped at the end of the set, it left an eery echo, as if the sound needed to settle. That was the last set and it had come to an end too soon and when the band left the stage it was all just surreal, the sounds in my head and the night and the stars and this girl. I don’t remember the details, but people were thinning out, but I didn’t want to go home. We, I don’t know who I was with really, the girl was with us- I know that. We started to walk with everyone else away from the stage and the sea and over the common. There were hoards of kids just like us: their face paint reacting to the light and their body paint luminescent in the cascading festoon lights. We kicked over bottles and cans and street food refuse, we were part of a mass exodus snaking back into town, over the common. There were piles of drunks and a few cases of despair or the worst of indulgence but mainly it was teenagers like us; drunk on the experience and it was still warm. None of us wanted to go home, we were still buzzing so we headed to the Hot Walls just to chill for a while. Hot Walls belongs to us, my generation. It’s one of the unwritten rules in Southsea. It’s our turf. If you are a parent, just don’t go there because you won’t feel welcome.

It turns out we were just one gang of many heading there. The best part was we seemed to pick up company as we went but everyone was disguised and it was dark so we didn’t care.

Just like the name suggests; it was warm there and you could still find a place to sit on the beach against the walls. It’s strange to think how long those walls have been there as the city’s defences. I thought of Henry VIII and how he must have stood somewhere near where I was as he watched his prize ship sink on it’s maiden voyage just in these waters. They dredged it just here, there must be so many ghosts of sailors who lost their lives, probably couldn’t swim even if they hadn’t been weighed down with heavy armour. It’s a pretty horrible way to die.

One of the gang or someone with our gang – who knows, had a blanket and someone else had some food and probably, some Spliff but I don’t smoke it, so it doesn’t interest me. If you live in Portsmouth, you know the smell of it from a young age; it’s pretty hard to get away from it. I lay down a little apart from them, too much weed smoke makes me feel like vomiting and that wouldn’t be cool so for a while I lay, star gazing, the sky was cloudless and in spite of the lights from the city, there were stars, millions of them, I tried to find some satellites or a shooting star, it was all pretty perfect. I don’t really know why I remember this part of the evening when much of the rest of it was a bit of a blur, but I do. The stars and the girl, she was there with a couple of her friends. I think she sat near me and we talked, I don’t know what we talked about, but I remember watching the stars and thinking about what Steven Hawkins said about finding another planet to populate and trying to imagine that. I was reading Asimov at the time, dad’s copy. He had the whole series and I took them after he left. I thought I might get to know what he thought about when he wasn’t dealing with people’s psychoses or thinking about leaving us. It didn’t really help me out with that.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, probably all their spliff smoke - because when I woke up something weird had happened. The whole scene was different. The crowds had gone, I could smell something, something chemical and mineral and warm. ... And sick making.

I struggled to feel awake but I had to shake myself pretty quickly. There was hardly anyone around but the girl, she was standing up and pulling her stuff up and getting ready to run, she had a strange look on her face and it was obvious that she had been trying to get me to wake up. My friends were getting their stuff together too, all planning to get out. I stood up to follow them but I had an attack, I sometimes get them, it’s to do with my asthma. I couldn’t see and I couldn’t hear anything, the world went black. It’s not serious, it doesn’t usually last too long, but I can’t get up straight away even if people are trying to make me. I don’t know what really happened. That’s all I can remember.