

## **Christmas Day 2010**

It's pitch black and stinks. Animal piss. Sawdust. Damp like mushrooms. Jacko huddles in the corner, knees drawn up to his chest.

The place looked alright when at last he got the door open. That was after he'd spent fuckin' ages clearing the pile of snow that was blocking it. He couldn't find a shovel or anything so had to use his hands. Even with gloves on, his fingers got numb and his ears burnt because his hoodie wouldn't stay up. Like always, he'd come in from the ten foot at the back of the house meaning to creep up the path and take up a position under either the kitchen or the back room window. The blinds were down in the kitchen but the Bitch had left the curtains open in the other room and yellow light was spilling out. From where he was stood in the dark it looked like a picture in a storybook. Or then again maybe a shot from one of those crappy Disney films. He could see a Christmas tree twinkling with lights with a pile of stuff underneath and the buggy was there too, though he couldn't tell if the bairn was in it. But he guessed that he was going to have to wait a long time for her and her old man to be out the way and it was cold enough to freeze your nuts off. That's when, turning round to go, he'd clocked the shed or whatever it was and decided to have a look inside. He could get warm there, then later on make his move.

When he pulled the door shut behind him, his fingers found a light switch. No way was he expecting it to work but it did though the one dusty bulb hanging from the ceiling didn't give out much. On one side was a stack of cardboard boxes sealed with

gaffer tape and piles of newspapers. Next to them stood rows and rows of empty wine bottles. There were hooks on the walls and on them hung a spade, a rake and another tool he didn't know the name of. On the other side a workbench covered with all sorts: jars with bits of metal in, rolls of string, paint pots, weedkiller, seed packets, sandpaper. A broken doll. Looked like no one had been in there for ages though from the reek of it animals had. Standing dead still he thought he heard a scratching noise but it might just have been in his head. His feet were freezing. He glanced down. No wonder. He was only standing in a puddle of melted snow. And he was shivering that much his whole body was twitching like a spaz. Pulling off his soaking gloves his eyes darted round the shed, making a note of everything just like a spy would. There amongst all the crap on the bench was a kettle. Made it look sort of homely. On the shelf above the bench stood a small jar of coffee, a box of teabags and a packet of that white stuff you could use instead of milk which tasted gross but would have to do. Everything was better when you had a brew inside you. He took a step over to the bench, picked the kettle up and gave it a shake. For once his luck was in: there was some water in it. He tried to plug it into the socket under the shelf but it was hard to get the prong things lined up and his fingers were swollen with the cold.

'Fuckin' hell!' as he knocked his head against the shelf. But with a bit of a jiggling it eventually went in and he pressed the switch down.

It sparked and with a faint whooshing the power went off. The darkness was up against his eyes and he blinked real fast. He cursed again as he felt his way over to the door and pushed. It wouldn't give. Fumbling around he discovered there was no handle no locks or anything on the inside. Tears pricked behind his eyelids and that's when he almost blubbed. Almost. But he didn't. He could've done. Nobody would see if he did but no way was he going to give them the satisfaction.

The lace bit on the hem of the dress he's wearing is soggy and it's sticking to his trackie bottoms. He feels for a bit and rubs it back and forth between his fingertips until they are red raw.

## Chapter One

### Three months earlier

Shirley Blagdon stood on the doorstep of number 84, Welford Avenue, her home for over forty years, and fumbled in a large, purple bag for her glasses. Having discovered them hanging round her neck on a ribbon she then continued rooting round in the depths of the bag until she found her front door key to let herself back in. Five minutes later she reappeared, this time with a shopper on wheels but without the glasses. Smiling she locked the door, put the key into the pocket of a droopy cable-knit cardigan and made her slow way down the front path, failing to hear the sound of her next door neighbour's door opening. The effort needed to heave the rusted gate open and then drag it shut was considerable and, pausing to get her breath back, she surveyed what she thought of as 'her' Avenue with a mix of affection and irritation.

It was losing its identity as if it couldn't make up its mind what to wear. Some houses took a pride in their appearance. Young couples had lovingly restored window frames, replaced wrought iron railings and placed terracotta pots and hanging baskets outside; because they were hardly there in the week these places had a sense of being in their best clothes. Other houses, bought by the University, varied hugely in their standard of upkeep: the worst had bottles and cans stacked outside front doors which, when opened, revealed hallways cluttered with tangles of bikes. It reminded Shirley of children's parties when she and her five sisters had been dressed by their Mam in a mismatch of castoffs and handmedowns.

‘Lovely day Mrs Blagdon!’ Julia Randall tapped her lightly on the shoulder and Shirley wondered if this was a signal that an earlier greeting had gone unacknowledged.

‘Oh! Hello, dear. Yes, isn’t it. I love Autumn. Somehow better than Spring, I think. Don’t know why. There’s a poem about swallows being ‘hitchhikers to the South’ which always comes into my mind about this time. Silly nonsense really. Don’t know why those words stick with me. I don’t even care for poetry that much though I do read a lot of books. Not that poetry isn’t books but...’ She bent down to fiddle needlessly with the zip of her shopper. ‘How are you getting on, anyway? It can’t be long to go now.’

‘Just a couple of weeks.’

‘Ah.’ There must be things you were meant to say to a woman nearly due but Shirley couldn’t think what they might be.

There was an awkward pause, broken by Julia. ‘I’d best get moving. The wind is quite chilly.’

‘Going to the top are you?’

‘Yes, I don’t need anything really. Just felt the need to get out. How about you?’

‘I’m getting the bus into town for a couple of bits and bobs.’

The two women fell into step together and Shirley decided it would not be out of order to comment favourably on her young neighbour’s appearance. Over the past few months Shirley had been shocked that Julia appeared to be shrinking rather than blooming through her pregnancy. Apart from the modest sized bump, you’d have assumed her to be seriously ill. Her hair was lank, dark circles were scalloped below her eyes and she moved lethargically.

‘You look a lot better than you did.’

Julia started. It was possible that Shirley had spoken more loudly than she’d intended.

‘At least the sickness has gone now so I can eat.’

‘What did the doctor advise?’

‘He did suggest some medication but you know after Thalidomide.....’ She attempted to pull the flapping sides of her coat together over her middle and made a sound of irritation when they refused to meet.

‘It can be difficult to know what to do for the best.’

‘Yes.’

‘You know where I am if.....well of course you know where I am...’ She gave a self-deprecating laugh, her voice trailing off.

‘Thank you.’

They had reached the bend in the Avenue and Julia eased herself onto a low wall to get her breath.

‘Sorry, do you mind? Go ahead if you want.’

‘There’s a bus every quarter of an hour and I’ve got nothing to rush for, love!’ Then Shirley wondered if Julia had said that because she wanted her to go. She ran her shopping trolley back and forwards over a crack in the pavement.

‘You must have seen a lot of changes round here, Shirley?’

Shirley threw her a quick glance to see whether this was just making conversation but the girl was looking around with what appeared to be genuine interest. She rested her arms on her shopper.

‘Haven’t I just. When Sid and I moved here up there on the main road there was only a small general shop, Mrs Clyber’s, and a post office. You could get most

things from Mrs. Clyber so you only needed to take the bus into the city for the bank or to go to Frazers, that was the department store, if you were after something special.'

'So Mrs Clyber's is now....?'

'Costcutter. The post office went about five years ago, of course, and I can't keep up with the other changes. That tanning place was a furniture shop till just recently. The Avenue used to be just residential. It will be lovely to have a young family next door.'

Julia grimaced as she struggled to get to her feet and Shirley put a hand under her elbow to help, 'Are you sure you're alright to carry on?'

'I'm fine. Sorry to slow you down.'

'Don't be daft. I told you, I've got nothing to rush for.'

When they had almost reached the main road, a breathless Julia gestured that Shirley should carry on without her.

'Don't hang about. For me. Please, Mrs Blagdon.'

'Shirley. Call me Shirley.'

'Alright, Shirley. You don't want to be just missing a bus. Then have to stand around for another fifteen minutes.'

'Well.....alright, if you're sure.'

As she made to go, out of the corner of her eye Shirley caught the flick of a curtain from a second floor window at Southgates, the children's home that stood near the top of the Avenue.

She turned back to Julia, 'That reminds me...I knew there was something I wanted to ask you.'

Julia raised an eyebrow in query and Shirley gestured towards Southgates. 'I came across a lad the other day. Jacko he called himself. I saw him go in over there and wondered if that's where he lived?'

She sensed Julia stiffen, wariness flitting like a shadow across her face.

'Oh yes?'

'He said you taught him. You know, before you went on pregnancy leave.'

'Maternity.'

'Pardon?'

'It's called maternity leave.' Julia replied curtly.

'Oh yes. Silly me, maternity. Anyway, he seemed a nice enough lad. Bit of a rough diamond of course. Wanted to know if he could do any odd jobs for me.'

'He does live at Southgates but he's a troublemaker. I wouldn't get involved.'  
Julia's voice was flat.

'Well no, I said I didn't need anything doing at the moment but...look, is that a number 54? I think it is. Yes, I'm sure it is. See you later, love...'

Half way to the bus stop, the bus overtook her. It wasn't a 54 but then she knew that. Her hearing might not be up to scratch but her distance sight was fine. For some reason that encounter with Jacko had unsettled her and she'd hoped to get some background information from Julia to make sense of it. Yet obviously the girl, for whatever reason, was out of sympathy for the poor lad.

He'd bumped into her, probably deliberately she later realised, and offered to carry her shopping. A scrawny little lad with battered trainers and a tab end hanging out of the corner of his mouth. She declined his offer but he didn't appear put out. Then she asked his name and where he went to school and he'd replied readily enough but maybe she'd asked one question too many because suddenly he'd darted



off across the road, banged open the gate of the Home and stood on the doorstep, jabbing repeatedly at the doorbell. She called after him to try and prolong the exchange but he made a gesture with his hand which might have meant he was acknowledging what she said or might have been telling her where to shove it.

‘Jacko...must be a nickname’ she muttered as she waited at the bus stop. ‘I should have let him help me.’

She quite often talked to herself these days. Asking herself questions,

‘Now what would you like for your tea today, Shirl?’

And then replying, ‘A nice bit of mackerel perhaps. If I got a couple of fillets I could make the leftovers into a kedgerree for Tuesday’s tea.’

‘Good idea! But don’t forget you’re almost out of sugar.’

Obviously she wondered if she was losing it. How would she be able to tell if she was suffering from early onset of Alzheimers? That nice chap Terry Pratchett had it but he was able to spot his symptoms because the disease affected his writing. She loved his books. The next time she went to the library she’d see if they had his latest.

## Chapter 2

Jacko watched from his window as Miss put a hand on her swollen belly and patted it. Gross. When he found out he was going to have her for English in Year 10 instead of Smellstone he'd been properly made up. Smellstone had it in for him and everyone knew Miss Randall was cool: she had weird colours in her hair, a stud in her nose and didn't dress like the other women teachers. Schofield said she used to be a Goth and someone else said that once at a staff meeting she'd told Smellstone to piss off in front of everyone. Course it turned out her lessons were as boring as all the rest but she was alright until she got herself knocked up and went like they all did. Fat. Stupid. Useless. He hoped she didn't come back after having the bairn. She shouldn't do. A Mam should stay at home and look after her little 'uns.

He was just about to let the curtain drop when there was a gentle knock on his door and without thinking he whirled round and said 'Come in' all polite like.

'Now then Jacko. How's tricks?' Mike, Jacko's key worker, stood in the doorway rubbing the back of his head and smiling hopefully. 'Got your room nicely sorted I see.' With a couple of paces he was inside, looking around and nodding his head in approval. 'Very colourful. Mind if I grab a pew?' Not waiting for Jacko's answer, he pulled out the chair from the desk, turned it round and straddled it, resting his arms on its back and facing Jacko who retreated to the bed. 'Didn't realize you were a City fan!'

He'd gone for orange and black, not that he was massively into City but the other lads were and he couldn't think of anything else. You were allowed to put up posters too as long as you used Blu-tack. Not that he usually gave a toss about what

they allowed or didn't allow but it was different as far as his room went. He put one of Cheryl over his bed so he could be sure she was looking out for him all the time and one of City over on the bit of wall next to the window.

‘ And you're cool with having the smaller room? You understand how Shorty needed the extra space?’

Jacko shrugged. Actually he was dead chuffed but no way was he going to let on to Mike. Though the room was small it was at front of the house and on the second floor. He could sit at his window and see everything that was happening in Welford Avenue, like being up in a crow's nest of a pirate ship. What he hadn't clocked until he'd moved in was the washbasin. That meant he could actually leave his toothbrush, deodorant and hair gel on the side without fretting about them being lifted. It took a long time to arrange his stuff where he wanted it, deciding which drawer to put his underkegs in and where the box with his Special Things should go. Eventually he stuck the box under his bed but pushed right in so nothing could be seen.

‘ It's important for you to know that I'm always here to chew over anything with, Jacko. Anything that's on your mind, anything that's bothering you. Big or small, it doesn't matter. And if I'm not on duty and it's urgent there's always someone else. Do you understand that?’ Mike leant forward and Jacko could see the blackheads on his nose.

‘ Yeah.’

‘ And you're getting along with the others OK?’

‘ They're alright.’

‘ We rub along well here. Not to say we don't have our ups and downs – just like any family - but when all's said and done we look out for each other.’

Jacko jiggled his legs so his feet tap-tapped on the floor and hummed under his breath. What the fuck was he expected to say?

‘ As you know, Jacko, you’re at Southgates for a probationary period. Do you understand what that means?’

‘ Yeah.’

‘ Tell me, then, so I can be sure you understand.’

‘ I gotta behave.’

‘ And if you don’t...?’

Jacko shrugged, looking over Mike’s head at the back of the door.

‘ What happens if you get into any kind of trouble, Jacko?’

‘ I’m out.’

‘ Where will you go?’

‘ To the nick.’

‘ It wouldn’t be prison but it would be a residential secure unit. Very different from here. I don’t think you’d like it.’

Jacko concentrated on not meeting Mike’s eyes. He couldn’t keep looking at the door so he stared at his trainers instead. While Mike droned on he thought about before Southgates. He didn’t want to but he couldn’t always stop those kind of thoughts. They just kind of arrived in his brain.

When he was first taken away he went on a right bender. You couldn’t let them think they could just get away with doing something like that. He broke up half the downstairs furniture the first place they sent him and took a swing at the bloke who came up to the bedroom to say goodnight. Perv. But a bit of him had been relieved to hand over responsibility of the bairns to someone else. He knew they were only eating cornflakes, chips and breadcakes, that Cindy had nits and the baby had

such bad nappy rash that her bum was like one big red sore but he could only try and sort one thing at a time. Then everything went tits up.

Mam was in hospital now - at least they said it was a hospital. It looked more like the nick to him. All the nurses had bunches of keys hanging from their belts and the windows had bars. He meant to go up every week but she never seemed that bothered to see him so every week turned into once a fortnight, then once a month and now when Fiona, his social worker, offered to drive him up there he made excuses not to go.

‘Are you listening, Jacko? What is it very important that you do?’

‘Be good.’

‘And we’re absolutely clear about what being good means, aren’t we? No fighting, not doing anything that involves the police and not getting into any kind of trouble at school.’

Jacko nodded. He’d learnt to agree. It meant that these sort of exchanges ended sooner.

‘I’m not convinced that...’

A loud crash from downstairs followed by some kids shouting and swearing let him off the hook. Mike leapt up and shot out of the room.

Jacko returned to his post at the window. Miss and the other one weren’t there on the other side of the road anymore. There was two girls in Grammar School uniform on the pavement below him though. One kept flicking her hair back with her hand like she thought she was a supermodel or something. He’d heave up the window and gob onto her head if she didn’t move on soon. It could be good living here. When they first moved him to Southgates and he found Miss was living down the same

street he cursed his luck but, the ways things had turned out, at least now he could keep an eye on her from where he was. A real close eye.

Later that evening Jacko went down to the kitchen to get himself something to eat. Everything felt weird. It was like his room was a cell and he was being made to stay in it even though really he could come and go when he wanted. The others had all pissed off out and even though he was OK about staying in he'd have liked to have been part of the crack beforehand, listening while they bragged about messing with girls and drinking. There was nobody to show his room off to neither. They'd all piled into Shorty's room not only because it was bigger but it had the fire escape where they could have a smoke.

What was it about wishing for things that ended biting you in the arse? Like wanting a Dad. He used to pray for one when he was little. Kneel at the foot of his bed and ask God to bring him a Dad. He wanted someone to take him to footy and mess around with, not a cunt who blacked his Mam's eyes and then turned on him when he tried to stop it. For three months after that they'd been in what was called a refuge – a place run by a couple of lesbos where the front door had all sorts of bolts and chains on it and you had to know a code to get in. Full of screaming kids and stinking bogs and big pans full of soup stuff which reeked almost as bad as the bogs.

Jacko opened the fridge, heaved out the three litre carton of milk and slopped some over a bowl of Cheerios.

‘ Now then Jacko. Sorry I had to dash off earlier. Bit of bother that needed sorting.’

Jacko acknowledged Mike with a nod but kept on eating, holding the bowl under his chin and spooning the cereal into his mouth in one continuous action.

‘You’re going to see your sisters tomorrow, aren’t you?’ Mike pulled a chair around from the other side of the table and placed it next to Jacko’s.

Jacko mumbled agreement, bringing the bowl up to his lips and slurping the last bit of milk. He belched, swallowing hard so as to produce a really loud one.

Mike smiled encouragingly, ‘How’s that all working out?’

Cindy, Shannon and baby Leanne were being fostered by a pair of geeks, the Lessingers, who lived the other side of the city in a posh house with a proper garden. He should be there too. He knew for a fact there was a spare bedroom because he’d snuck off and had a nosey round the first time he visited. But no way was he going to ask Fiona who would only put on that stupid soft voice and use words half of which he didn’t understand. No one ever told you the truth anyway.

‘S alright.’

‘How about school? In your new classes?’

‘Crap.’

‘When you arrived I thought we agreed you’d turn over a new leaf this term.’

You decided that, thought Jacko. I never.

‘Getting some decent exam grades is going to make all the difference for your future.’

‘I’m in bottom set for everything. We don’t do proper exams.’

‘I’ll need to ask about that when I come in to the Parents Evening in October. Or perhaps I should speak to someone before that..’

Mike looked thoughtful and in desperation, before he could get out his famous notepad in which everything was recorded and nothing forgotten, Jacko blurted out,

‘Could I get me bus fares for tomorrow?’

‘In a minute. Now what was I saying?’

‘ I’m worried about our Cindy.’

All of them knew that when you was cornered the best thing was to make it look as though you were telling Mike something really important. He loved feeling he was being trusted with something special and private.

It worked. Jacko noted the glitter of interest in Mike’s eyes as he leant forward, ‘Are you? Like to tell me about it?’

‘ I.....um....I..’ Jacko desperately cast around for a reason.

‘ You can tell me anything.’ The guy was virtually wetting himself with excitement.

‘ She’s not happy. Getting picked on at her new school. I’m going to talk to Mrs L about it tomorrow. Tell her I’m worried, like, and ask her to....well, to do something.’

‘ Good lad. Very sensible and very mature.’ Mike was beaming. ‘ Wait here. I’ll get your money.’

Mike went out, whistling under his breath. You could tell he was right pleased with himself. Jacko could imagine him having a chat with Carol and telling her all about it. Mike was shagging Carol, who was one of the full-time care workers. She wasn’t his missus. The idiot thought nobody knew but they all did. Anyway at least now he, Jacko, would probably get extra bacon at breakfast. The poor mugs never realised when they were being played.

‘ Here’s a fiver just to be on the safe side.’ Mike said, coming back into the kitchen. Bring me the change and let me know how you get on won’t you?’

Jacko gave a grunt which might have been a yes but which he could later deny if need be.



Back in his room Jacko started what he thought of as his night watch. On the opposite pavement a group of students, stupid wankers, were talking and laughing. One of the posh looking ones had a loud voice like a donkey. Right below Jacko, an old guy walked his dog, stopping every few steps while it cocked its leg against a tree or lampost. He had a Tesco's carrier bag looped round his hand to pick up the dog's shit. The way people cared for their mangy dogs and scabby cats made Jacko mad. When he got his own place he'd never have any pets. Well, maybe some lizards but nothing else. A moped with L plates on buzzed down the middle of the road with a lad chasing it; following that was a van with a satellite thing on its roof which sounded its horn for the moped and the kid to move over.

Then, slowly, an ambulance rounded the corner into the Avenue. It didn't have its blue lights flashing or its siren on but it was still exciting to see it at night, especially as it had to stop behind a parked van to let through a car coming from the opposite direction and that was just under Jacko's window. He could see the two people lit up inside the cab. There was one man and one woman, dressed in green uniforms. Paramedics, you called them. The woman was driving and the man was speaking into a microphone thing. He'd like a job like that. Driving and sometimes putting on the siren to go to an emergency; dodging the other cars on the road and going through red lights, everyone making way for you. Not just that but being the person that everyone wanted to see. Wearing a green uniform with badges on and carrying a bag of instruments and medicines to make people better.

An ambulance had come to take him away that night and he'd always remember the lady in the green uniform who took one look at the state of him and filled up. Somehow he knew they weren't meant to do that. On the way to A&E she held his hand and talked to him so he would keep awake. He could never remember

what she talked about – he had blurry memories of her describing a holiday at the seaside – but her voice was nice. He did remember wanting so badly to go to sleep, to close his eyes and drift away from the pain. To float out to sea. But her voice, soft but snagging at his mind, kept dragging him back to the present: the bump and rattle of the ambulance, the smell of the stuff they'd put on his cuts, the bleeping of a machine, the needle in his arm and the feel of her warm hand, enclosing his.