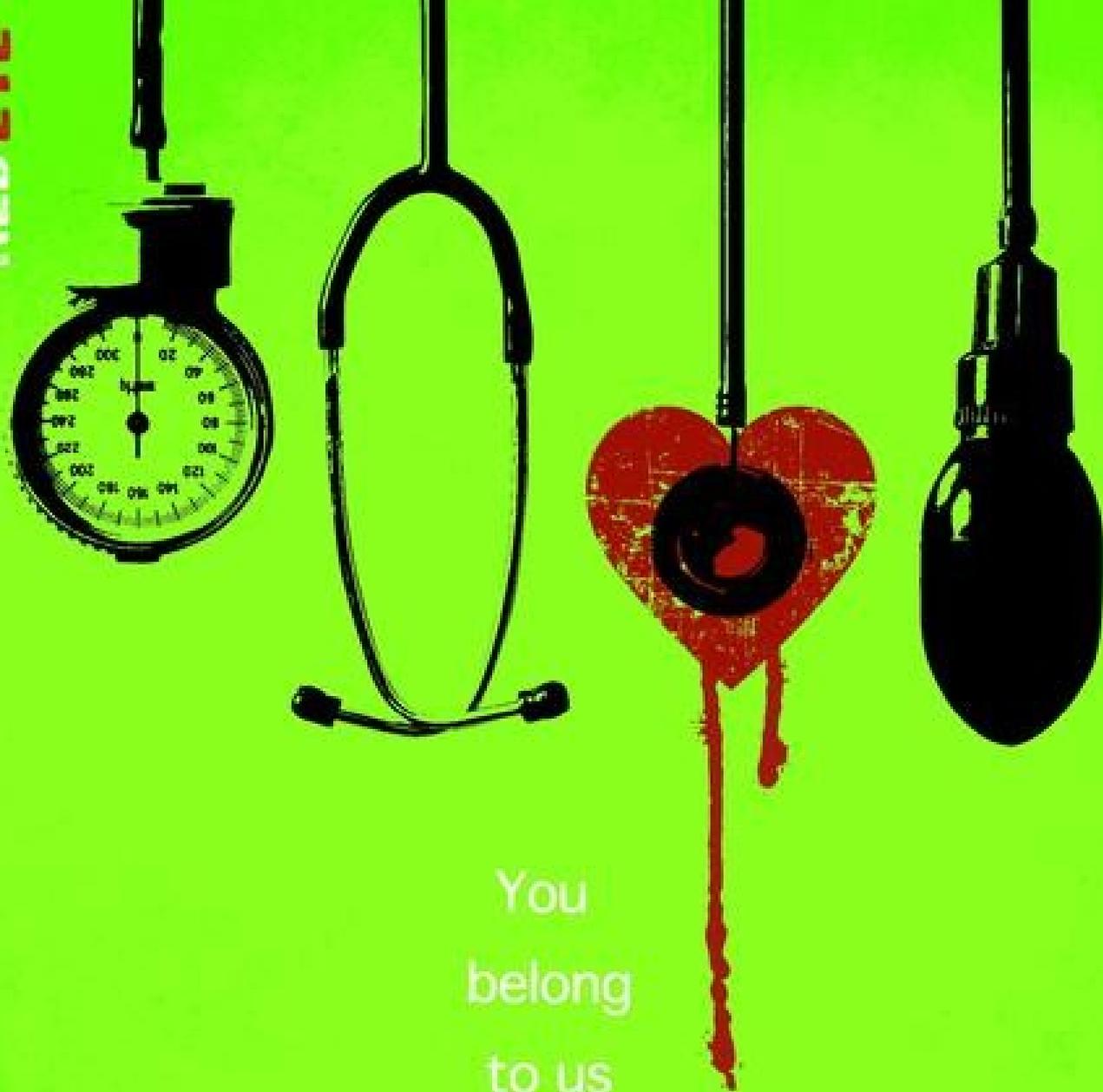


REDEYE



You
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FLESH and BLOOD

SIMON CHESHIRE

**FLESH and
BLOOD**

SIMON CHESHIRE

**RED
EYE**

Chapter One

I didn't want things to turn out this way. I really didn't.

There have been deaths, and worse. Even if there's no blood on my hands, not directly, I have to face the consequences of my actions, of what I *did* do. If events had happened differently, if I hadn't been so intent on following my theories, then perhaps I wouldn't be here now, sitting at this desk, writing out what some might see as a confession. But, if I hadn't reacted as I did, then I'd never have found out everything I uncovered. I had to try, didn't I?

Maybe I could have prevented some of it. Maybe I could have saved a life or two, if only I'd acted sooner. No, that's not true. I acted soon enough. I think.

Nobody believed me, except Liam and Jo. And they didn't take me seriously, at first.

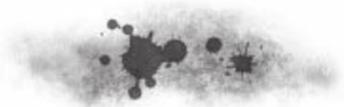
When did I last sleep? I don't remember. It doesn't matter, I guess.

I have to write. I have to tell myself to stop being a pathetic baby and be calm and rational. That's what I have to do. I must record the facts, a sequence of events, the chain of suspicions and thoughts that have led me to where I am now. So that, when someone reads this, they understand.

At least it's quiet right now, and I can collect my thoughts. This desk I'm sitting at is small and antique. A really nice piece of furniture. You can see the dark grain of the wood, the years displayed in its warm colour, its soft shine. The notebook has smooth, off-white paper. It almost seems a shame to write in it, but of course I must. I have to set down everything, to document it, from the beginning.

I have to think clearly. Breathe deeply.

I'll sit and think for a while. Then I'll write.



I must begin on September 18th. That was the day we moved into No. 3, Priory Mews. A matter of weeks ago.

My name is Sam Hunter. That's Sam as in Samuel, but I hate being called Samuel. Only my gran calls me Samuel. That's my mum's mum. She still talks to me as if I'm five, even though I'm seventeen.

I'm OK at school work. I normally hover around a B-grade. I keep my room tidy, when I can be bothered to, or when friends are coming round. I like films, graphic novels, regularly changing the posters on my walls, and those chocolate bars you can get with marzipan inside. I'm not keen on sport, and I don't like vegetables. Maybe I'm still five after all.

I have parents, unfortunately.

My mum is one of those mothers who spends every minute she possibly can at work and the rest of the time moaning about how much time she spends working. She's employed in a bank, and has been since she left school at my age. Twenty-five years, slowly climbing the corporate ladder. A very slow climb. Up just three rungs, Assistant Cashier to Deputy Thingummy of Accounting, whatever it is she's called now. You have to admire her determination, I guess. Also her ability to work around money all day long and never once nicking any of it. I don't think I'd be able to keep up the same level of will power. Even so, it's had its effect. She assesses everything and everyone according to the amount of cash involved. Except my dad, that is.

Dad's a musician. It's not as interesting as it sounds. Mostly, he sits around the house and strums at his guitar, or phones his friends 'in the business' and goes to the pub. Middle-age spread has been piling on the pounds for a while now, and he's kept the same

scraggy ponytail since about 1995. I try to keep him away from school functions.

In his late teens, he joined a punk band called The Howling Sirens. The punk movement had just ended. They had one very minor hit, then split up. Dad's been reliving the glory days ever since, spending money we didn't have on the latest recording gear, or on worthless tat he claims is rock 'n' roll memorabilia. He's a dreamer. Not that being a dreamer is a bad thing in itself, but he's lazy with it. His idea of a full day is lying on the sofa and staring out of the window.

Don't get me wrong, I do love my parents, on the whole. They've always been as good to me as circumstances allow, but they're not the easiest of people to cheer for, if you see what I mean.

As a family, we'd always been just-scrape-by, go-without-to-pay-the-bills people, until recently. We're something approaching minted now. I'll get to why in a minute. It's the reason we ended up in Priory Mews. For as long as I can remember, we've lived at a series of run-down addresses in a series of run-down streets. Until Priory Mews.

For several years, we lived in a flat above a newsagent's. I really liked that place, because I could get comics and magazines for free. The guy who ran the shop would let me rummage through the stuff he was going to return to the wholesaler.

I read a lot of American Marvel and DC comics. I read film review journals and blokey stuff about computers, which made me feel grown-up. I'd gaze over the cultural sections of the Sunday papers, getting glimpses of a wider world that seemed sophisticated and stylish.

The newsagent had a rack of paperbacks, too, and I'd got through all the James Bonds and several Stephen Kings before I was twelve. It was exciting, almost magical, finding something new. The thrill of discovery.

Looking back now, I think the newsagent allowed me all those freebies because he felt sorry for me. At the time, the look on his face seemed like kindly indulgence, but now I'm older I can see he was wondering if I was OK, what with Mum at work all hours and Dad off somewhere or asleep.

But I was fine. I relished the freedom. I could watch telly in peace. They lived in their own little worlds, and so did I. All that solitary rummaging through the newsagent's boxes did me a big favour: without it, I might never have become interested in journalism. That was the fully formed idea that popped into my head when the word 'career' was first mentioned at school. It was swiftly followed by a resolution not to approach adulthood like my parents. I was going to make more of myself, I was going to do better.

We lived in two or three Midlands towns, moving according to which bank branch Mum was assigned to, but the upgrade to Priory Mews took us eighty miles closer to London. Closer to Dad's cronies and the music biz, because it was his 'career' that called the shots now.

Hadlington is a picture postcard of English suburbia. I'd never even heard of it before I was told we were going to live there. In the early afternoon of Wednesday September 18th, I watched it roll past me from the back seat of the (brand-new) car. Clipped lawns, detached properties, lines of shops all still in business instead of boarded up. Mothers wheeling pushchairs with a smile, old folk chatting at bus stops as the bus pulled in on time, corner cafés filled with suited customers tapping at their iPads.

"Shall we drive around a bit before we go to the house?" said Mum, slowing the car at traffic lights. "Go for a wander about town?"

"Let's do that, babe," said Dad, his voice thick with excitement. "Take a look at the manor."

They took my silence for agreement. We drove past an industrial park plastered with freshly printed hoardings: engineering works, small caterers, e-tail warehouses, an art studio. I remember lounging on the back seat, the car's smoothly efficient shock absorbers still feeling like a novelty, and looking in vain for anything that reminded me of our Old Life.

Everything here was tidy, and clean, and nice-looking. Even the factory units were smartly designed. Nothing was dumped on front drives in Hadlington. Here they had civic pride. Here they had money, and responsible attitudes, and a spring in their step. It shone out of the streets, the buildings, the pavements. This is Hadlington, said the town, and it's *better* than where you come from.

We drove around the southern half of the town, skirting the grounds of the large Elizabethan mansion that was the local tourist attraction, with New Car smell filling my lungs and the engine purring like a tamed big cat. Here were leafy avenues and clusters of homes surrounding oval-shaped greens with little children playing while parents watched from wooden benches. We crossed the humped, stone bridge that spans the river close to that Elizabethan mansion.

The River Arvan slices through Hadlington like a knife through flesh, its sinuous waters slow and dark. It cuts through a picturesque park, where trees and the occasional fishing platform dot its banks. Then it leads out of town, getting deeper and more treacherous as it goes, with swirling undercurrents and tangled weeds. People drown in it regularly, I later discovered.

As the river leads out of town, it borders the Elton Gardens estate, Hadlington's own enclave of the underclass. Most towns and cities have their run-down areas, but Elton Gardens stands in such contrast to the rest of the town that it almost seems like a broad blade of the outside world trying to stab its way in.

The rest of Hadlington looks down on the residents of Elton Gardens in a way I'll always find repellent. Snobbish, dismissive, wilfully ill-informed. The residents of Elton Gardens either work in the town's least desirable jobs, or scratch an existence on the edges of the law. Kids from Elton Gardens go to the schools along the A-road that heads towards London, the sort of schools you see in Channel 4 documentaries designed to shock the middle classes.

The estate was apparently quite smart when it was built in the late 1960s but it rapidly declined. The final nail in its coffin were the floods of 2007 and 2012, when the Arvan burst its banks and gurgled up from the drains, gushing across the ground floors of all two hundred and twenty-seven homes. There was sodden rubbish in the streets for months.

On hot days in the summer, so I learned, teenagers jump off the clattering green metal footbridge that crosses the river beside the estate. They don't listen to the warnings, of course. Two or three times a year, there's a huge headline in the local paper, above a picture of the grieving family. Sometimes, people get pulled down and the bodies are never found.

At least, so it's believed.

We didn't drive around the estate. We'd just left that kind of place.

The park and the estate border one side of the river while, up a steep and landscaped hill, Maybrick Road runs parallel with it on the other. Maybrick Road is the poshest part of Hadlington. That's where you find Maybrick High School and five-bed detached houses that cost six times the national average. People put themselves into serious debt just to send their kids to Maybrick High and have a Maybrick Road address.

Priory Mews joins Maybrick Road a few hundred metres from the school. Gently swaying trees, pleasant views down the hill towards the park and river. Bins and recycling boxes out of sight. When we drove into

the short cul-de-sac on that Wednesday afternoon, the removals van was already parked outside our new home. The car glided to a halt and we got out, my door clunking behind me with a deliciously expensive *whump*.

Mum bustled over to the three removals men, who were propped up against the side of the van smoking. She fumbled in her bag for the house keys.

Dad leaned against the front of the car and gazed around, a grin lighting up his chubby features. "You made it, sunshine," he said to himself quietly.

To be honest, I could see his point. I was grinning, too. There were three detached houses nestled in a semicircle: big, solid homes with curving bay windows and smoothly tarmacked drives. Ours was the one on the left, No. 3.

This was the first time I'd ever seen it, except for in the estate agent's photos. Mum and Dad had only visited it once before paying the full asking price.

Dad had made a million. Or near enough. Out of the blue, two songs he'd written in the 90s got picked up by a trendy girl band and became global hits. 'Sweet Angel' and 'Boppin' Hoppin'', by the Blaster Rays - you must have heard them. Dad wrote them as solid guitar rock, and they got turned into cheesy pop. Utterly hideous; I actually felt sorry for my father. But worldwide sales, downloads, radio airplay, stadium performances - they all added up to a lot of money. Suddenly, we were quite rich. Mum grabbed her chance and we got a Maybrick Road address. No. 3, Priory Mews, Maybrick Road, Hadlington.

While the removals men were unloading our stuff, ninety per cent of which was Dad's assorted 'treasures', Mum and Dad skipped about the empty house like a couple of kids. You could hear Dad's whooping echo off the walls.

The house was great. Two enormous living rooms downstairs, a couple of little rooms at the back, a

kitchen with a long annexe leading out into the garden. Upstairs, five bedrooms, the ugliest bathroom I've ever seen, and a narrow door opening on to creaky wooden stairs up to a vast and dusty attic space.

My room was at the front corner of the house. Or rather, rooms. There was an en-suite shower room at one end, and at the other was what I presume was meant as a walk-in wardrobe, lined with shelving painted in off-white gloss and with three chrome hanging rails. It alone was larger than most of the rooms I'd ever called my own.

We lived here now. Not in some just-for-now, until-we-can-afford-something-else, stop-gap place, but *here*. Everything I owned filled two big cardboard boxes beside the door.

It was only when I stood beside my wide window, overlooking the removals van and the front of the house, that I noticed the fourth building in Priory Mews. How I'd missed it outside, I'll never know. Too busy gaping at our place, I suppose.

From the moment I saw it, it unsettled me.

It was set well back from the others, surrounded by tall, narrow shrubs like leafy security guards. A broad gravel pathway led up to an imposing entrance. The house was three storeys high, its two lower levels topped with a series of windows jutting out from very high, angular sections of roof. One of these sections rose up even taller than the others, punctuated by chimney breasts. At the corners, the walls had the kind of inlaid stone you see on old manor houses and castles, like zigzag reinforcements.

The house was more than double the size of the others in Priory Mews. A long, glassy ground-floor extension had been added at the side. Above loomed the tortured, twisted grey branches of ancient wych elms and silver birches in the back garden. A separate, modern two-door garage had been built closer to the road.

This, I later found out, was Bierce Priory, built in 1812. That extension was constructed in the 1920s, at the same time as our house. Even at first sight, even with the excitement of the moment sending my mood soaring, the Priory looked cold and austere. As if it was watching me back.

Despite my impressions of the place, I paid no more attention to the Priory that day. Now, merely writing the name sends a rush of horror through my guts. We had Chinese takeaway for tea, and Mum and I spent hours dragging cardboard boxes from one room to another. Dad spotted our new neighbours at No. 2 getting into their car, an elderly couple, and called them over with a whistle and a wave. I didn't catch their names but they seemed taken in by that studied chumminess of his. He talked at them for nearly twenty minutes, while they smiled blandly.

I hooked up the TV in the biggest living room. The sound bounced off the bare floorboards as I sat on our threadbare sofa. I patted its stained arm a couple of times. *You'll be chucked out soon, old friend*, I thought to myself, *without a doubt*. I watched gangsters shoot each other while Mum scrubbed the bathroom and Dad clattered about. "Ellen! Where did you pack my... S'OK, babe, I found them!"

By eleven I was snuggled down on my mattress on the floor of my room. The pieces of my wooden bed frame were stacked in a corner, waiting for when I could be bothered to put them together. My anglepoise lamp threw a yellowy glow over the thick paperback anthology of '70s *Doctor Strange* comics I'd got on eBay just before we moved.

I was starting at Maybrick High the following day, Thursday. I'd tried to squeeze a couple of days off, to start at the beginning of a week, but with the school only a two-minute walk away and me already being late for the start of the Maybrick term, I had no excuses. I yawned, clicked off the light and went to sleep.

When I got up, Mum had already left for work. Some things never change. She didn't need to do that job any more, but she did it anyway. I had suggested to her that she could free up her job for someone who really needed the money, but she'd just looked at me as if I'd asked her to boil her head. The only difference now was that she'd chosen which bank branch to work in, rather than letting the bank send her anywhere it liked. I imagined that the Hadlington branch was a little more prestigious than the last one.

I was up, washed and dressed nearly an hour before I needed to leave. I got through two slices of toast and a mug of orange juice, with first-day nerves jangling at my stomach. I made my sandwiches with a care I never normally took. Displacement activity, to mask the jitters. Cake in my lunchbox? Did I want cake today?

I still had forty minutes before I needed to leave. I took a slow tour of the house. The silence was only broken by the clump of my shoes on the floorboards and the sound of Dad snoring.

I told myself not to be such a wuss. No need to be nervous. Best school in the district.

I checked myself in the unhung mirror in the hall. My new uniform was embarrassingly fresh and unworn. My stomach knotted all over again.

Outside, the air was sharp and damp, a fresh autumnal morning. I looked across to our two neighbouring houses, but nothing was stirring there. Opposite them, the Priory seemed a touch less sinister in the cold early light, glowering behind its spiky shrubs.

As soon as I walked out on to Maybrick Road, I could tell something was up. There was a steady flow of uniformed kids along the pavements. From the end of Priory Mews, you could just see the main entrance to the school, but kids were going straight past it. They were hurriedly crossing the road and taking a wide path that led down the hill, ending at the green metal

footbridge over the river, which led to the park and the corner of Elton Gardens.

As a handful of younger pupils passed me, I stopped one of them.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Dead body!” said the kid excitedly. “A Year Nine’s put a picture on Facebook.” He and his friends scurried on.

A what? Surely he meant an animal or something? A larger group of pupils, who looked my age, also crossed the road and headed for the path. I wondered if some of them were my new classmates. I allowed curiosity to drag me into the flow.

The path sloped in long, graceful curves down to the river. To either side were broad stretches of grass, and beyond that sprouted bushy swathes of tall reeds and sedges.

As the flow of kids approached the river, I could see a gathering arranged in a ragged semicircle. I’d almost caught up with the group who looked my age, but hung back. I wasn’t sure if the best way to meet classmates was rubbernecking at the scene of an ... accident?

A girl suddenly detached herself from the semicircle, staggered a few metres and vomited noisily on to the grass. A couple of her friends rushed to her side.

By now I was at the spot where the gathering of pupils had trampled flat a haphazard patch of the reeds. I could see something stretched out on the ground. Someone was saying that a woman walking her dog had found it a few minutes ago, that she’d already called the police. For a second, the scene flashed through my head: the dog sniffing around, not coming when called, taking a few licks.

I drew closer. I saw it in detail now.

My first day nerves vanished, replaced by icy horror.

It was a man, flat on his back on the damp ground, legs pointing away from me. He was dressed in dirty trainers, fleece tracksuit bottoms and a jumper. His

limbs were straight, as if he'd calmly lain down on the spot. His face was upturned; dull staring eyes pointed at the grey sky.

His face was spotted with blood. Much more blood, long sprays of it, fanned out around his head like some hideous spiked wig. The top of his head was gone. He simply ended, just above the face, sliced open like a pepper.

Chapter Two

“Someone’s taken his brain!” cried the kid I’d stopped up on Maybrick Road.

“Eurgh, I bet that woman’s dog had it!” squirmed one of his friends.

The others groaned in disgust.

There was an empty, blood-smearred bowl of skull where the man’s brain had once been. I stepped back, almost without thinking. It was difficult to take in what I was seeing.

Suddenly, there was a general rush of pupils away up the path. At the same moment, I heard a single whoop from a police siren. A patrol car had driven across the park’s lawns, leaving muddy indentations, and was parked beside the footbridge. Two officers, a man and a woman, were dashing across the river.

“Get away from there, you kids! Don’t touch anything! Has anyone touched anything?”

There was a chorus of “no”s and “no way”s. Pupils scattered and scurried back towards the school, looking over their shoulders as they went.

A woman I hadn’t spotted until now, with a white West Highland terrier bouncing around her, intercepted the female police officer and they started talking in hushed tones. The male officer jogged over to the corpse, let out a short exclamation at the sight of it and immediately radioed for backup.

I was more than a dozen metres away by now. Everyone was running, as if a gruesome creature was snapping at our heels. The younger ones laughed and shouted, while the older ones merely threw wide-eyed looks at each other.

I don't really remember what happened for a few minutes after that. My mind went a bit numb. I must have gone to the school reception, to tell them I'd arrived. I presumably waited, then the Deputy Head must have collected me and led me to his office.

It was a pokey little room on the top floor of the main building, with a narrow floor-to-ceiling window, looking out on to the sports field. His desk was a litter of papers and dog-eared paperbacks. I sat below a cluttered corkboard. The Deputy Head himself, Mr Stainsby, was one of those naturally scruffy people who can't look smart to save their lives.

Only now, for some reason, did the obvious thought flash into my mind: that was a murder, in the park. A killing.

"Well, it's great to welcome you to our school, Steve," he began, pulling out drawers and looking for something.

"Sam," I said.

"Sorry, yes, Sam." He searched among his papers. "OKaaay, I'm afraid I'm filling in for the Head; he normally likes to have a chat with new students, but he's away at a leadership seminar. I hope you're feeling up to today's challenges. Forgive me, but I just heard a moment ago there was some sort of incident in the park? You didn't happen to see anything, did you?"

The man had been horribly murdered. Cut open.

"Er, no, I didn't see anything," I said, not wanting to talk about it.

"Oh, right, OK," he said, finally pulling out a slim file. "The Office was, umm... Anyway, here's your timetable; we're on the two-week system here - are you familiar with that?"

"Yes, we had the same thing at my last school," I said, taking the sheet of paper from him.

He consulted the file. "I've got the reports here from your last school. You're clearly an excellent student, which is great, but it does look as if you'll have some

catching up to do. In most of your subjects, we're further along in the curriculum than you were at -" he flicked a sheet - "Oak Vale."

"What will I need to do?"

"Best action plan is to talk with your form tutor, who is... Miss Marlo. I was going to say that I'll give you a whistlestop tour of the school first, but I think..." He checked his watch. "I think if I take you down to your form room right now, I can hand you over to Miss Marlo straight away. How's that sound?" He looked up at me and grinned.

"Fine," I smiled. Already I didn't like him.

He led me back through a labyrinth of corridors and stairwells, much of it laced with the mixed odours of air freshener and human beings. My nerves began to jangle again. I got looked at quizzically by everyone we passed. New face.

Miss Marlo taught English, and her classroom was at the end of a wide walkway covered in pictures of writers and some poster-sized reproductions of famous book covers. Mr Stainsby knocked once and marched inside. I followed him meekly, conscious that everyone in the room would be examining me, marking me out of ten for coolness and acceptability. I wondered if I should try to act casual. Or would that look obvious?

My new form tutor was younger than my parents, very blonde and very thin. As Mr Stainsby came into the room, she swung round. Her expression was flustered.

"Mr Stainsby, I need a word at once," she said in a low voice. Looking at her, and at the thirty other faces in the room, I guessed she'd just been told about the corpse.

The two teachers bustled out into the corridor, Miss Marlo pointedly shutting the door behind her. I was left standing there, up in front of the whiteboard. The whole class did exactly what I'd expected them to do: stare right at me. There was a pause.

“Awkward!” I said loudly.

They all laughed, a release of tension via a weak joke. As if on cue, the bell rang. Everyone rose, chair legs scraping loudly.

I recognized a couple of faces from the group that I’d shadowed down the path to the river. One of them was blinking back tears, and I assumed it was them who’d told Miss Marlo what had happened.

Everyone was shouldering bags, shuffling out and chattering to each other. Miss Marlo suddenly appeared at my side. “Hello, sorry about that. Do you have your timetable?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Come back here at break; we can talk then. For now, we’ll just have to throw you in at the deep end.” She fluttered a hand at a tall boy who was shuffling out with the others. “Liam, you’re a sensible lad – can you take Steve Hunter here under your wing this morning?”

“Sure,” said Liam. He had small eyes and a slightly chunky nose, topped with a dense mop of brown hair. He clearly wasn’t too keen on having the new kid tag along. “What’s your first lesson?”

I whipped a look at my timetable. “Er, history.”

“Most of us, too; follow me. H3.”

We were halfway down the corridor outside, squashed in the mass of students, me trying not to lose sight of the back of Liam’s head, when he turned and spoke again. “Steve, is it?”

“Sam,” I said.

“Sam, OK,” he said.

History was fine, mostly. Maths likewise. I was gawped at, and issued textbooks, and singled out by teachers, and called Steve. It had to be wrong on a vital piece of paper somewhere.

The contrast between the pupils of Maybrick High and those of my last school was so huge as to be almost comical. Oak Vale was a school where there was a daily

fight beside the bike shelters, where a twitchy weirdo in an anorak sold drugs to sixth formers outside the gate, and the Head banged on about league tables being unimportant in the broader picture. It was the sort of place where teachers kept saying how every kid was 'brilliant' and every piece of work 'incredible' in order to cover up how dismal and bad it all was, until whatever they said became meaningless. I didn't really have any friends there, not proper friends, and I'd been glad to leave it all behind.

Maybrick High kids were far more affluent, that's for sure. Many had the self-assured confidence you see in people who come from a history of money: the unspoken assumptions, the certainty of approval and advantage, that comes with being completely secure, and knowing your future.

I couldn't even imagine myself being like them. But here I was.

It was halfway through maths when the command came from on high. Mr Stainsby, in the Head's absence, issued a statement to be read out in every class. "Any students who witnessed the tragic incident in the park this morning should attend specially arranged trauma counselling in the upper school hall during the lunch break. An officer from the local police will also be on hand, if any student has information they would like to bring forward. The police officer will not, repeat not, be answering questions relating to the incident. It has come to the staff's attention that a small number of students took photographs at the scene using their phones, and that some of these photographs are now circulating around the school. These photographs are to be deleted immediately. The school has been advised that students may be committing an offence by storing them, uploading them to a social-networking website, or sending them to others."

The murder was more or less the only topic of conversation outside lessons. By lunchtime, Chinese whispers had included everything in the story from a pack of wild dogs to a carful of drug dealers. The one consistent thing, the one thing everyone appeared to agree on, was that at the root of it all was the Elton Gardens estate. No doubt about it. That was where these things started, definitely, no question. Bet it was gangs.

Being the new kid, I didn't like to butt in. I had plenty to say about the fact that the corpse had obviously been dissected with care, and certainly not gunned down in a drive-by shooting or anything like that. I also had plenty to say about sweeping generalizations and appalling prejudices. I said none of it.

I did make a few guarded comments to Liam. We got talking a bit more after maths, mostly about the homework we'd been given, which was on a topic I'd never even heard of, let alone studied. I surmised that he was the class expert on science and technical subjects.

When the bell for lunch break went, Liam and I joined the long queue in the canteen. I'd expected to be able to find somewhere quiet to eat my sandwiches in peace, but absolutely nobody appeared to have brought a packed lunch with them, so I left my lunchbox at the bottom of my bag and stood in line for pie and chips.

"They given you a pre-pay card yet?" said Liam.

"No, I've got some cash," I said, as casually as I could. Luckily, I'd taken a fiver from my wallet before leaving home. I just hoped pie and chips wouldn't come to more than that!

The canteen was the standard model: the trailing queue, dinner ladies clanking their pots behind enormous metal serving units, rigidly arranged tables and chairs. A few minutes later - £4.20, phew - we weaved our way across the room with our plastic trays.

Liam made a beeline for a small table in the corner where a girl was already sitting. She nodded a hello as Liam and I approached. The table was meant for two, but Liam found a spare chair and I squeezed in awkwardly at the side, pulling the chair as far forward as I could, so I didn't stick out too much. Our three trays took up about a hundred and twenty per cent of the available table space.

"This is Jo," said Liam. He pointed at me. "This is Sam Hunter, new today, Marlo's class."

"Hello," smiled Jo. She was moon-faced and freckly, with a mass of messy curls. She and Liam had the same date of birth, they later told me, which was how they'd originally got talking.

"Hi," I smiled. I had no idea what to say next.

"How are you finding this place?" said Jo.

"Er, different," I said, with raised eyebrows. "It looks like I've got some catching up to do."

"Yeah, they said that to a girl in my class," said Jo.

"She's new this year, too, and she seems fine. I wouldn't worry."

Liam was already halfway through his pie. "I wish someone would send me one of those murder pictures," he said, through a mouthful. "Have you two seen any?"

"No," said Jo. "Fat Matt in our class said he was there, but that's crap."

"I was there," I said.

They both gazed at me. A morsel of pie was poised on Liam's bottom lip. "Really?" he said.

"Really," I said.

"You lucky sod," grumbled Liam. "The most interesting thing that's happened in ages and I missed it."

"It's no joke," I said. "I really don't think you'd want to see any pictures. It was horrible."

"Are you OK about it?" said Jo. "I saw a few people going into the upper school hall a minute ago."

“I’m fine, weirdly enough. I think I’m still a bit shell-shocked. It keeps popping into my head, though. And nobody around here seems too surprised... I mean, no offence, but except for those who saw it, people seem to have your attitude to it.”

“None taken,” grinned Jo. “Sorry, we’re not being jokey, it’s just, y’know, Elton Gardens. There’s *always* stuff going on over there.”

I had to say something. “It clearly wasn’t gangs, or anything like that. The poor guy was deliberately cut up.”

Liam edged forward slightly. “Is it true his head was chopped off?”

I hesitated. “Not really... The top half was. That’s what I mean - he was cold-bloodedly opened up, he wasn’t beaten or shot or anything.”

“Even so,” said Jo, “Elton Gardens really has got a terrible reputation. Honestly, I don’t think there’s anything you wouldn’t put past them. Actual murders are pretty rare, I admit, so this is serious shit. They found a garage full of ketamine the other week and they found an arm in the river about a year ago. It’s like Gotham City!”

“An arm?” I said. “On its own?”

“Yup, no body, nothing. Severed arm, sliced clean off. It was pumped full of drugs, too. Medical stuff, I mean, not Class As. They kept those sort of gory details out of the press, for some reason.”

“How do you know about it?” I said.

“My dad’s a journalist on the *Hadlington Courier*,” said Jo. “So I get to hear all kinds of good stuff.”

“Really?” I said. I unintentionally blurted my enthusiasm. “Would they be interested in an article? By me, I mean. About what I saw? I’m thinking about a career in journalism.” I don’t know what made me say it. I wouldn’t have, normally.

“Yeah?” said Jo. “Well, I can ask. They don’t usually take much stuff from freelancers, but you never know.”

If not, when we get to Work Experience week, I can definitely get you into Dad's office."

"That'd be brilliant!" I beamed.

"What do your parents do?" said Liam.

My stomach suddenly turned inside out but I tried not to let anything show on my face. "Er, my mum works in a bank, and my dad ... has his own business." I knew for a fact they'd been assuming that Mum was a branch manager and Dad was some sort of suited entrepreneur. Embarrassment clawed at my guts.

"Are you two, er...?" I said, swinging a hand between Liam and Jo.

Jo blinked at me. "What? No! No, just mates," she laughed.

"Just mates," said Liam, a touch less earnestly. He'd finished his pie and chips.

"We're both complete nerds," said Jo. "We both love comics and old sci-fi movies and the same TV."

"Really?" I said. I admitted to my own nerdiness at once.

"Nooooo," grinned Jo. "We're *three* nerds! Yay! What are your favourite comics?"

"*Watchmen*."

"Ding!" declared Liam, striking an invisible mid-air bell. "And?"

"Early *Spider-Man*, Ditko and Romita."

"Ding!"

We chatted enthusiastically, the rest of the room and the morning fading away behind me. It turned out that Jo even drew comics of her own.

"She's the school's top artist," said Liam, holding his gaze on her. "Have you seen the painting near Stainsby's office?"

"The big one?" I said. "On the stairs, pop art that looks like a Roy Lichtenstein?"

"That's Jo's," said Liam. She blushed and returned his gaze.

“Wow,” I said. “It reminded me of that one of his with the drowning girl.”

“Liam can’t draw, but then I can’t do science,” said Jo. “Did he tell you he’s got a lab at home?”

“A lab?”

“In the garage,” said Liam. “I experiment with making electronic gadgets. I started with a couple of kits I got ages ago, but I make my own from scratch now. Are you doing electronics and DT?”

“No, they clashed with English lit and politics, so I’m doing those.”

I was beginning to suspect that everyone at this school had something brilliantly impressive in their CV. How the hell was I ever going to measure up?

It was at that moment that a subtle ripple ran through the canteen. You know when you get an odd sense that someone significant has walked into the room? Maybe it’s the combined effect of everyone suddenly taking notice of someone. Or maybe it’s more psychological, something in the collective subconscious, if you happen to believe in that sort of thing. I suppose some people have a presence. One of them was the girl who was now in the dinner queue.

On any number of websites, you’ll see pictures of the most attractive women on the planet – film stars, pop stars, models. Even at first glance, this girl made every last one of them look like a tired old hag. You didn’t want to blink, in case you missed a single millisecond of her.

She was athletic, but not obviously sporty; graceful, but not fragile; vibrant, but not flashy. She was smoothly sculptured, with an elegantly contoured face and large bluey-grey eyes. A gentle flow of russet hair fell about her shoulders. As she talked to the friend standing next to her in the queue, her smile seemed to radiate across the room. She was exquisite, extraordinary.

Liam's face was suddenly beside mine. I think I must have been staring.

"That," said Liam quietly, trying to suppress a grin, "is Emma Greenhill." He sat back, giving me a look that seemed to suggest that this was all anyone needed to know.

"Miss Perfect," muttered Jo, with a caustic edge to her voice as she watched the girl over her shoulder. "Academically excellent, good at the piano, star of the hockey team, large circle of friends, a hit in the school plays, obvious candidate for Most Popular Girl In The School."

"Yeah, she seems nice," I said, as off the cuff as possible. Liam smirked to himself.

"She is nice," said Jo, with a sigh. "Genuinely kind and thoughtful. Makes you sick."

I suppose it was unthinking bravado that made me say: "Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Believe it or not, no," said Liam. "I always get the impression she's not interested."

"Oh," I said. "Does that mean she's...?"

"No, she's not," said Jo. "She's just too busy being cool to bother. Dedicated to being completely great. Come on, have we finished?"

She stood up. Liam and I followed her across to put away our plates. Then, on our way out, we walked right behind the queue.

Emma Greenhill was being glared at by the dinner lady at the till.

"Sorry, can't I owe it?" said Emma.

"You know that's against the rules. Another 80p, or put it all back." The woman was all hairnet and housecoat, with a scowl in between. Emma's friend, behind her, was rummaging in her bag.

I'd acted almost before I thought about it. I dug into my pocket for my change, and dropped the coins into the dinner lady's hand. "There you are."

Emma turned. Her beautiful face shone at me. "Thank you," she said. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," I smiled. Wow, I was so smooth.

"That's very kind of you," said Emma. "I'll pay you back tomorrow."

"No need," I said. "What's 80p?"

She laughed. A sound like the singing of an angel.

"You going to stand there talking all day now?" grunted the dinner lady.

Emma moved aside. Her focus was still on me. "Well, thank you. I had a bit of a late night, and forgot my card. I should carry more change. Sorry, I don't know your name."

"I'm Sam," I said. "Sam Hunter." Bond, James Bond.

"Nice to meet you, Sam-Sam Hunter. See you around."

"See you," I smiled.

Ding!

I didn't dare look back. Liam scurried up to me outside the canteen.

"That was cool," he declared. "She was totally flirting with you!"

"What? Really?"

"She was doing the curling her hair with her finger thing," spluttered Liam.

"Was she?" I said, frowning.

"I can see you're a hit with the lay-deez," he went on, jabbing me in the ribs.

"Actually, no, never," I said, feeling a little unsteady. "But I was cool, wasn't I?"

"You were. You were."

I took a deep breath. This had to be the weirdest day of my life.

"Where does she live?" I asked.

"Emma? Oh, just down the road," said Liam. "There's a little cul de sac called Priory Mews. She lives in this whacking great mansion - her family is loaded. Bierce Priory, that's the place."

I told him my new address.

“You,” said Liam slowly. “Live. Next door. To Emma Greenhill?”

“Apparently.”

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