

# THE SCEPTRE

*Peter Wrigley*

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All the characters, locations and events in the book are entirely fictitious. As far as the author is aware there is no Smithincott High School, nor a drama group called The Great Nerds.

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*Dedication*

To Cynthia, Joe and Susie.

## Part One

# UNDER THE STAGE

He was only in the play because Mrs Dingle had said that everyone who turned up would be given a chance to act. Mother Well as they called her had been horrified when he arrived. She tried to hide it but just for a second horror was chased across her face by despair.

“Well, I suppose you’ve come to disrupt, Matthew Holt.”

They called her Mother Well because she started everything with ‘Well’. Tim Jackson had come up with the name and it stuck. And she was a Scot so they wound her up by calling out Scottish football scores in her classes. “Motherwell 2 Kilmarnock 1.”

“No Miss. I’ve come to act.”

This was worse!

“Well, I very much doubt if we’ve got anything to suit you. We’re doing a nativity play but not like one you’ve seen before.”

Matt shuffled over to the stage and stood on his own for a bit. He wasn’t in the least surprised when Mother Well allocated all the parts to others.

“Well, all the rest of you can be extras.”

Mrs Dingle didn’t even look at Matt. ‘All the rest’ turned out to be just Matt and Andy Smith. “Stuff Well!” Andy shouted. He never showed up again. Matt didn’t give up so easily. He was used to things being tough. His mum was a heroin addict. He practically ran the flat for the two of them. His dad was just a myth.

He’d been surprised by the play and by its title ‘The Babykiller’. It wasn’t the usual baby stuff about baby Jesus. Herod was the main character and it was more like a thriller than any nativity he’d seen. There was a lot of noise and threats. Herod was a madman. Matt wished he could have played Herod.

Mrs Dingle found costumes for all the named characters. She said you needed costumes from early on if you were to act the characters properly. Matt thought she was right.

“See if you can find something for yourself, Matthew. “Well use your initiative,” she continued when he had said he didn’t know where to look.

He went off round the back of the stage. He pulled at bits of wood and cloth and he tried moving some big flats of scenery but they were too heavy. He noticed a door. It was mainly hidden by a painted screen and he first thought it was just a door painted on another bit of scenery. Mr Adams the art teacher did the scenery each year. Really convincing it was.

Matt was small and thin. Wiry. He could just squeeze behind the scenery. It was a real door. He tried the handle. It should have opened inwards but it was stuck. He had no space to give it a shove or kick it. He leant back on the scenery, forgetting it wasn’t a wall, and it fell with a massive crash. It hurt his ears.

“Well, well, surprise, surprise! Matthew Holt is wrecking Smithincott High School now! Come out Matthew Holt.” Mother Well almost managed to sing this.

At the next rehearsal, Matt was sent again to find a costume. He wasn’t bothered. He knew it was a ruse to get him out of the way. Behind the stage, the big flats of scenery were still lying across the other props. No-one had bothered to lift them back up. So now there was space around the door. It was locked. Locked or just stuck? Matt’s problem was that he needed to be quiet but he shoved at the door a few times. It gave a bit at the top and then at the bottom but not by the door handle. Locked then. He turned away and looked at the wall. There was a piece of card hanging on a hook. Yellowing old card with yellowing old string like an old luggage label. He lifted it off the hook quietly and nearly shouted. Behind the card, attached by the string, was a key. *The* key, Matt reckoned.

It was hard to be completely silent with all the scenery and the boards of the stage. On the other hand Mother Well might be suspicious if she didn’t hear him moving around. She’d think he’d bunked off. So he moved a couple of boxes and walked around a bit.

“Five minutes, Matthew!” yelled Mrs Dingle.

He tried the key. He was amazed. It turned smoothly. “Good old lock,” thought Matt.

Inside were wooden steps down. They creaked a bit. He found himself in a brick-built cellar. He was under the stage but he could stand up easily. He felt for a light switch and flicked it on. It was only a dim and very dusty bulb but some extra light filtered down through cracks in the stage. There were lots of boxes at the far end. Dust covered everything. Some of the spiders were huge. Matt didn't mind spiders but these were so big and scurried so fast he was not keen. He heard the actors up on the stage. He was right under Herod's feet.

"I'm sending you now to Bethlehem. Find this king of yours, if indeed he is a king, and come back and tell me where he is. Then I too can go and worship him." Alex Walker was Herod. He got most of the star parts. Matt admitted to himself, though, that Alex was good. He sounded sneering and menacing.

Matt reckoned his five minutes were almost up. He didn't want people to come looking for him, so he locked up and hung the key exactly as he had found it.

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The following week was half term. He'd collected his report. It was rubbish as usual. His tutor, Mr Gardner, spoke to him about it and said he was really worried that Matt's social worker would recommend he was taken into care if his mother couldn't cope with him. Matt nearly laughed. He took care of his mother, not the other way round. Only he and mum really knew what it was like at home. He always signed his reports with his mum's signature. He didn't laugh though because Mr Gardner cared about him. He could tell that. Matt was often late, sometimes not in uniform and rarely did any homework. And he fell asleep in lessons. And his behaviour got him into trouble. Even so, he felt Mr Gardner was on his side. He could have done with a dad like him. Matt took the warning seriously. He couldn't tell his mum though. It was another load for him to carry on his own.

Matt went back to school in the same clothes he had worn before half term. He had meant to do some washing but there had been too much to do around the flat and he'd been out a couple of nights. Mum never knew.

“Well, well!” Mrs Dingle called out to Matt at the next rehearsal. “What on earth does your mother think, sending you in dirty...”

“Don’t you ever, ever criticize my mother you ... cow.” Matt broke down. And ran. He ran to the only hiding place he could think of—under the stage. He heard all the fuss he had caused: pupils coming back saying they couldn’t find him; the Head of Year was coming; above it all, Mrs Dingle yelling and taking her anger out on the rest of the cast.

Matt sat on a box and tried to control his breathing and his sobs. He had to stay quiet or they’d find him. He was so angry. Then his anger turned to cold fear. The door. He’d left it unlocked. He crept back to the top of the stairs and turned the key. They couldn’t get him now. He took his mind off his feelings by opening the box next to him. Old clothes. Old costumes presumably. They smelled of mildew. Even in his dirty clothes he wasn’t prepared to wear any of those in the play. If he was still in it.

The row above his head was still going on. Mother Well had lost the plot somewhere and the cast were not cooperating. Matt reckoned they were fed up with her taking it out on them. The disruption he had caused was the perfect cover for him to rummage around some more. He searched in a second box. It looked older but the things inside smelled less musty. He threw out robes and cloaks and jackets. Near the bottom was a roll of fabric that was heavy to lift out. Matt unwound the cloth. Little better than a rag really. Inside was a piece of red velvet and inside this was a—what?

It was black. Its heaviness caught Matt out and he nearly dropped it. He weighed it in his hands. It felt cold, sounded like metal, maybe solid, shaped like a sort of hook with a circular hole in one end. With his fingers he traced the patterning on its surface.

He pulled the ragged cuff of his sweatshirt over his hand and started to rub at the metal. He wasn’t going anywhere for a while so it gave him something to do. The black began to come off. It didn’t seem like paint. He worked patiently, taking off more layers of black until he began to see a patch of pale grey metal. He switched cuffs and the grey turned to silver and began to shine. Was it

some sort of valuable metal? What was this thing he'd found?

Something deep inside him told him it was his job to clean up this thing. He knew too that it was his secret—at least for now. He had a strange feeling it had been left here for him to find and for the first time in his life he felt important.

But now he had to come up with some answers to a whole list of questions that had been going round his head:

How was he going to get out of here without being seen?

How was he going to take this thing with him?

He never brought a bag to school, so how could he get it out of school too?

If he left it here, how could he get back under the stage unseen?

What would they do to him? Would they take him away from his mum?

How could he find out just what it was he had found?

How could he get some lunch? He was hungry.

Should he give himself up?

Matt hadn't noticed before: the school hall had gone quiet. Lessons must have finished. Must be lunchtime. He came to a decision. There was no way he could take this thing out from here—yet. So he carefully wrapped it up as he had found it and covered it with layers of musty old clothes.

He climbed the steps quietly. If he walked right at the sides they hardly creaked. He stood inside the door listening. Lucky break or what? He heard Mr Gardner's voice in the corridor. He was Matt's only chance.

Matt slipped out onto the stage and locked the door. This time he put the key in his pocket. Then he stood behind the door onto the corridor, listening to voices outside. Two girls from his tutor group were talking with Mr Gardner; Jenna, and he recognised the giggle of Anna. The girls were OK. They always seemed to be on his side somehow.

He opened the door. Jenna spotted him first: "Sir! Look!"

Matt was told to apologise to Mrs Dingle but when he found her she refused to listen and she demanded that Matt was punished. He was excluded for a day.

Matt knew the system. He had been excluded loads of times before. So he used the day off to plan ahead. He had to stay one jump ahead of the school and his social worker. They would set him silly targets like last time. He had to make sure he could keep getting under the stage. He decided he would get a school bag. That would impress them. They were so easily pleased, so long as they had something to tick their boxes. And he'd have something to carry his secret in. And he did his Maths homework.

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Matt's meeting was at 8.30am before school. Early for him. He was usually late but not this time. It was him against his social worker. (The Crocodile, Matt called him, because his fake smile went all the way back to his ears.) And against Mr Green, his Head of Year. It was an uneven contest. They were no match for Matt. He was too clever for them and they played into his hands by asking him to set his own targets.

"I've bought a bag and maybe I need a new homework planner. Be more organised. I've done my Maths homework."

"That's a pretty positive start. Well done Matt," said Mr Green.

"I got here on time, so I reckon I can make a target of 'no lates'."

"OK, Matt. Let's be realistic and say no more than four lates this half term", suggested Mr Green. "But what about in lessons, Matt?"

"Well, maybe I owe it to Mrs Dingle to get to all her rehearsals."

"Shows good intentions, I think you'll agree, Mr Green." The Croc smiled widely and Matt could see big gaps between his molars. Mr Green looked long and hard at Matt without saying anything. Matt worried he might have sussed him out.

"OK Matt, let's try it. I'm sure Mrs Dingle will be delighted. Target three then: attend rehearsals and

cooperate with Mrs Dingle. Cooperating is what matters in all your lessons.” As Mr Green wrote he had the faintest of smiles and for the first time Matt felt Mr Green understood him.

For the next week he appeared to keep his targets and he took care to keep out of trouble. He left lessons to go to rehearsals but did not arrive, each time hanging around the toilets until the rest of the cast were in the hall. He didn’t imagine Mrs Dingle would expect him to turn up and she certainly wouldn’t complain if he didn’t. He went quietly to his place under the stage and unwrapped his ‘treasure’.

Gradually he cleaned up this mysterious metal thing. It took time but he was certain it was important—it mattered. He began to notice that he felt better about himself too. It was as if he was being cleaned up whilst he was cleaning up the thing.

Then something weird happened. He was under the stage again and had just unwrapped the thing. He wished he had a proper name for it. A word came into his head: ‘Sceptre’. He’d never heard the word before and he didn’t know how to spell it. Somehow he knew it was the name he needed. Something or somebody wanted him to know what he’d got. It was awesome; his eyes prickled but he held back tears and sat perfectly still, wondering what ‘sceptre’ meant.

“Becky, shut up and just listen to what I am saying!” Mrs Dingle’s shout was like a sharp arrow. But on a day of weird things, Matt found another weird thought came to him. But like the word ‘sceptre’, it wasn’t a thought. He hadn’t been thinking. It was just knowledge that came into his head. It was like he knew why Mrs Dingle was so horrible to people, so angry. She’d been badly hurt herself. She’d had four husbands and none of them had loved her.

It was something to do with his sceptre. Something about being with it and holding it and caring for it. They might be weird ideas but Matt knew they were true.

Then he heard the bell go and he got to his next lesson quickly so as to be on time. It was History with Mr Grey. He could make trouble for Matt if he was late.



Matt quite liked History because sometimes it was like detective work and you had to try and work out stuff from evidence like documents and paintings. This time they were looking at how workers were treated in Victorian times. Mr Grey was in a good mood. For a change. He walked up past the tables and when he came to Matt, Matt said, "Sir, can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away young man."

"What is a sceptre?"

"Have you been reading history books, Matt? Well, a sceptre," he went on without waiting for Matt's reply, "is like a symbol of authority and power. It used to be carried by kings and queens. Loaded with jewels sometimes."

"Are there any around now?" asked Matt.

"There's at least one, probably more, in the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. Why the interest?"

This was the question Matt had been dreading but he was rescued by the class beginning to make a noise. Mr Grey spun round and clapped his hands.

"Come on class, focus on your work. You've got five minutes and then I'm going to ask you what you've found out."

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As soon as Matt got home he Googled the internet. He typed in 'septre'. He'd never seen the word written down.

Did you mean "scepter"

Maybe, he thought; the sites listed for septer didn't seem relevant. So he clicked on scepter. Loads of stuff was listed and he found that the English spelling was sceptre. Scepter was American. He found a picture of a king holding a silver eagle mounted on a staff. Another one had a horse with wings. He remembered the circular hole in one end of his sceptre and saw that it was designed to fit a pole or staff into the bottom. The heavy metal part that he had found was incomplete. It had to be mounted onto the staff to be held by the king. He found more sceptres with eagles on and with crosses but none like the hook shape of his one.

Matt thought he heard his mum call out for a coffee, so he went into the living room. There wasn't much to show that Mrs Holt was alive let alone awake but it was

already 7 o'clock and Matt knew his mum's timetable. He liked this time a lot. He had something to eat, she had a cigarette and a coffee and for about an hour they sat together, mostly in silence. They had an agreement between them: no questions, no lies.

Tonight though, Mrs Holt looked at Matt and just for a second her dull eyes seemed to sharpen.

"Matt, you know what you promised—no drugs, right?"

"And I've kept to it Mum. Honest!"

"But you look different. Like, aware. Too wise or something. I don't know. Can't put a word to it."

"I'm OK Mum. Trust me."

Mrs Holt went silent again. She had never managed to tell Matt, but there were two things she was sure of: she was very proud of him, and she needed him. And she could trust him. That was a third. She disappeared into her bedroom. Matt knew why. He knew he would not see her again until tomorrow evening. Sometimes he wondered if he would ever see her again and he had to push the idea away quickly. He wanted to get back to the internet but it had to wait. Homework and housework. Just enough of each to get by.

When his mum had called out, he had just typed in 'Crown and Sceptre' because they seemed to go together in a lot of things he had read on the computer. On screen was a list of pubs all called 'The Crown and Sceptre'. One was in a place called Shepherd's Bush. And the one below was with a brewery called Shepherds Neame. Funny name, thought Matt. He was tired. He had meant to start to shut down but he must have clicked on Shepherds Neame by mistake because the page had come up. On the logo was a shepherd's crook. Matt sat staring at the screen but in his mind's eye he saw his own sceptre—not hook shaped but crook shaped. He was tired but excited, but puzzled too. Why would a king carry something like a shepherd?

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In the boring routine of school, most things happened the same as usual. But more and more Matt had a feeling that things were happening to him that had been planned.

He was sure that he had not clicked on the brewery website. So why did it open up? It was as if somebody wanted him to see the shepherd's crook.

It happened again in the RE lesson.

"Get yourself into groups of three or four." Mrs Gover had said. When the class had reluctantly dragged themselves out of their chairs and noisily dragged chairs around the room, there were arguments about the groups. It got sorted quickly. Mrs Gover was strict so it always did get sorted quickly.

Over the last couple of lessons they had been looking at the miracles of Jesus. Mrs Gover asked for someone to recap for the class.

"Jesus turned water into wine then a paralytic man started jumping around," Tim Jackson volunteered. Even Mrs Gover joined in the laughter.

When order was restored, Mrs Gover handed out sheets with the next story on. In their groups they had to read about Jesus meeting a foreign woman at a well whilst his followers went into town to get some food. Mrs Gover warned them that the miracle might not be as obvious this time and they needed to imagine what it was like to be the woman.

### **Worksheet: The Miracles of Jesus:3**

#### THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus had to go through Samaria to get back to Galilee. He came to a town called Sychar, near a piece of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph thousands of years before. Jacob's well was still there, so Jesus sat down to rest because he was tired from walking. It was around the middle of the day and his disciples had gone into the town to get some food. A Samaritan woman came up to draw some water from the well and Jesus asked her, "Will you give me a drink?"

Jesus was a Jew, and Jews did not normally have anything to do with Samaritans, nor drink out of the same cups. The woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I'm a

Samaritan woman so how can you ask me for a drink?”

Jesus answered her, “If you had any idea of the gift of God and who it is who is asking you for a drink, you would be asking him for one and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir, you have nothing to draw the water out of this well and it is deep. Where can you get this living water from? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who is our spiritual father? He gave us the well and drank from it himself and so did his sons and all his animals.”

Jesus answered her again, “Everybody who drinks from this well will soon be thirsty, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty again. The water I give him will become a spring of water welling up in him to eternal life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me your water so I won’t get thirsty and I won’t have to keep on coming to draw water from this well.”

Jesus told her, “Go home and call your husband and bring him back here.”

“I haven’t got a husband,” she replied.

“You are right when you say that,” answered Jesus. “The fact is you have had five husbands already and the man you are with now is not your husband. What you say is true.”

“Sir,” the woman spoke again, “I can tell you are a prophet. Our fathers have worshipped on this mountain but you Jews claim that we should be worshiping in Jerusalem.”

Jesus said, “Believe me, woman, there will come a time when you worship the Father, neither here on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation comes from the Jews. Even so, there is a time coming when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. In fact this time has already come. The Father is seeking people who will worship him in spirit and in truth because God himself is spirit.”

The woman said, "I know that the Christ is coming and he will explain everything to us when he comes."

Then Jesus spoke out, " I am he who is ;already talking with you."

Matt was still tired from last night and the classroom felt stuffy to him. He knew he was in danger of nodding off, so he scanned the page in front of him. A sentence jumped off the page at him: **"The fact is you have had five husbands already."** Just like Mrs Dingle. Almost the same words he reckoned fitted Mrs Dingle.

He sat very quiet in his group. It was like he didn't want to break a spell. Again something or someone was leading him on, like they were teaching him something. And he knew that the next bit of the jigsaw was going to come from Mrs Gover.

It always amazed Matt how much the class discovered for itself: Jesus wasn't too snooty to talk with a foreign woman; the religious leaders were racist; Jesus' disciples were sometimes too thick to understand what he meant; Jesus didn't care about what other people thought about him. But all the discussion in class kept coming back to the one question: How did Jesus know about this woman's husbands when he had never met her before? That was the only thing that might be a miracle.

"Did God tell him, Miss?" It was Tim again.

"The Bible says that Jesus saw what God was doing and heard what God was saying. He said God was his Father. That is what most made the religious leaders angry about Jesus," explained Mrs Gover.

"Is that the miracle, Miss? Him knowing about all the husbands?" asked Jenna.

"It's one of them, yes. Some Christians today call it a Word of Knowledge. It is when someone gets a bit of information that they could not possibly know themselves. Some Christians believe that God's Spirit tells them."

Word of Knowledge. He'd had a Word of Knowledge! Matt sat absolutely spellbound and his head seemed to go dizzy. God had told him about Mrs Dingle.

He heard his name called. “Matt, why do you think God told Jesus about this woman?”

Without stopping to think, Matt said, “To show that he knew all about her and he cared about her.” He spoke so quietly that most of the class couldn’t hear.

“Brilliant answer, Matt. I see you have been awake after all,” said Mrs Gover. She repeated what Matt had said so that the whole class could hear. “OK class, we are running out of time. Homework planners out. Take home your copy of the story and find one more miracle in the story. You’ll need to think about it.”

Matt left the room with the rest of the class when the bell went for the lunch break. Mrs Gover called him back. “Matthew, I’ve been watching you over the last couple of weeks. Are you OK? You were almost asleep today and you did nothing to support the rest of the group. And yet your comment at the end showed real insight. You’ve got a wise old head on your shoulders, Matt.” Matt said he’d had some late nights and then he managed to escape.

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On Friday, with the first night of the play getting close, Matt decided it was time to take the sceptre out of its hiding place for the last time and take it home. It turned out to be so simple he wondered why he hadn’t done it before. He took his bag with him and put the sceptre, wrapped in its red velvet cloth, in with his PE kit and homework planner. The bulkiness of his kit made a natural disguise for the sceptre.

When lunchtime came, Matt emerged with his bag and was the first in the canteen for his free lunch. It was good food here and he quickly scoffed chicken curry and rice, then apple crumble and custard. Within fifteen minutes he was out of the canteen and heading out to the school field. He threaded his way through a massive game of football where the goals were great mounds of coats—and bags.

Bags! He’d left his bag in the canteen! Under the table. How could he? He ran straight across the pitch, getting in the way of the ball but ignoring the protests. He tripped, fell, picked himself up, collided with a player, got elbowed in the face but he got there. He pushed through the

queue at the canteen door. The place was heaving and very noisy. His table was now full of Year 11s. They were laughing and kicking something under the table. His bag.

Matt squeezed between the table legs and feet. He got kicked hard but he grabbed a strap and yanked his bag out.

“Oi! That’s our ball you’ve got there, Holt, you little crud,” shouted Alan Jones.

“It’s my bag!” yelled Matt.

“Oh is it? Prove it,” sneered Toby Simpson, seizing the other strap.

Matt kicked him hard on the shin and Toby let go. He legged it between the crowded tables. There were advantages to being small. He got through gaps where the Year 11s had to barge chairs out of the way. He glanced back. The mealtime assistants were yelling at the Year 11s. One large lady had blocked Toby Simpson. Matt couldn’t see the rest of the group.

He ran round the Technology block and down the side of the gym, past the boiler room. He punched the brickwork and sucked his bleeding knuckles as he ran. But at the corner he ran into them. Five of them. They must have come round the other way.

Alan Jones spoke first. He was the nastiest in the group and Matt was scared of him.

“You’re going to be very sorry you kicked my mate Toby. And sorry you stole our football.” He pushed his face very close to Matt’s. “Say ‘Sorry Sir.’”

Matt stayed silent. He was looking for a line of escape. He was trapped. There was no-one else around. He knew he was in for a beating or a kicking. And there were rumours of knives in the school. Even so, all he could think about was his sceptre. Was it damaged? How could he stop them taking it? Could he swing it up onto the roof?

He heard Jones again.

“We all reckon you’ve got something for us in your bag. Something from your mother perhaps? Something ‘user’ friendly?” Jones turned to the others for approval of his joke. Half the school thought Matt used drugs and some reckoned he was a dealer. The teachers probably thought the same. They’d be shocked though if they knew who did bring stuff in.

He looked around again without moving his head. He hoped a teacher on duty would come looking for smokers. Instead it was Toby Simpson, limping but running.

Toby ran straight into Matt, knocking him to the ground. They all closed in on him. He tried to get up, still grasping his bag.

“Oh God, help!” Matt shrieked.

The kicks never landed. He heard shouts of panic. Footsteps running. Running away. He looked up. Running away from Tim?

“Did you see them, Matt?”

“See who? What made that lot run? Did you have a knife or something?”

“No, stupid. You really didn’t see them? Two giants. One stood by your head, the other stood right over you.”

“Angels,” said Matt.

“What?”

“Angels! Can’t be anything else. They aren’t here now, are they?” Matt wasn’t as sure as he sounded. “Where’s my bag?”

“In your hand, dummy.”

Matt lifted his bag off the ground. He sucked his bleeding knuckles again. He was shaking. He was relieved, frightened, in awe, confused, worried about his sceptre. All mixed up.

He knew those six would have a story to tell so they wouldn’t lose face. And it would get all around the school. He was right: the story went round that Matt was dealing drugs in school and he had two minders to protect him.

“Tim, I’m going home. Tell Mr Gardner at registration I’m sick.”

On his way home, Matt tried to sort out his head. He was still shaking and close to tears. He knew all six would have kicked his head in. Worse, they would have found his sceptre. Knowing them, they would have kicked that in too. Morons. He’d have to wait till he got home to check it out. But what about the angels? Were they angels? Why had they come? How did they know he needed them? What was Tim going to tell the rest of the school? Matt was more worried about Tim telling the truth than about the others’ lies.



It was a long walk home because he lived across the city. Then it hit him. He'd called out to God to help him. And he had! He didn't even know if there was a God, he'd just said it. But God had heard him and sent angels. Not one, two! Instantly. In the time it took the Year 11s to raise their feet to kick him, two angels had travelled from—where? Heaven? One to guard him, one to guard the sceptre, maybe?

By the time Matt got home he had lost all his shakiness and he kept wanting to laugh. He desperately needed to talk with someone though, but that meant trusting. Who? Mum? Mr Gardner? The list wasn't exactly long.

He fell onto his bed and slept with his bag on his chest. He had a dream and in the dream he was walking down a line of people, like an identity parade. He was looking for someone but he wasn't sure why. They were all adults. The Crocodile was there and Mrs Dingle and Mr Green. And his mum. They all seemed so little. Standing at the end of the line was Tim. It was surreal. He knew it was Tim but he had a lion's head. In the dream, Matt pointed at Tim and he heard himself say, "Its him."

When he woke up, his mum was at the door. "What's going on Matt? It's past coffee time."

Matt rolled off the bed and his bag fell to the floor. "Sorry Mum. I fell asleep."

He made coffee and he had a sandwich. The two of them sat in silence as usual and Matt thought about his dream. He figured it might be the answer to who he should trust. But he didn't really know Tim. And why the lion? How had he known it was Tim? He had no answers, but as he sat there he had the same feeling as when he had discovered the sceptre. Once again he had a strange feeling of importance. Like some sort of destiny.

Then he thought back to when Toby and Alan and the others were going to give him a kicking. Like they kicked his bag under the table, taking it in turns and laughing. Everyone says, 'Oh God'. Doesn't actually mean anything. Like people say, 'Jesus' when they swear. It's just a word.

But Matt kept coming back to the unarguable fact that six Year 11s, angry Year 11s, who wanted to kick the hell out of him, who were going to take his bag off him, who

were sure he'd got drugs, six big blokes, all bigger and stronger than him, ran away. It wasn't from Tim and there was no one else around. They must have been angels. So there must be a God. A God who heard him call out and hadn't minded that he didn't believe in him. It must be the same God who wanted him to find the sceptre, who even told him what it was.

Matt struggled with this. If there was a God who protected him, why did he let his mum get addicted to drugs? why did he let her life go to waste? why did he let his dad disappear? why did he let Mrs Dingle go through so many failed marriages? why did he let wars and famine go on? It was all one question really. Again he had no answers. But something started to move inside him. It was like when a balloon is blown up. First of all it is all floppy then it stands up on its own. He felt big! He felt like Tim seemed in his dream. Big. He got off the sofa and stood up in front of his mum. The dim light from the lamp cast his shadow over his mum's face and his mum looked up at him. She looked old and ugly, even to Matt. The tiredness, the sorrow, the years of self-neglect, self-abuse, they were in her eyes, on her face, even in the way she sat. But before Matt's eyes they slid off her, slithering down to the floor like some sort of snake, like a conjuring trick. Like a list being ticked off, job done, tiredness went, sorrow left, the flat dull eyes that had terrified Matt became alive and she stood up.

"Matt, I'm going to have a shower. When I come out, I'll make us a bite to eat. I'm hungry." What Matt found so wonderful was she said it as if she had said it every day of Matt's life. Like it was normal.

Matt went into his room and cried. He thumped his bed. He picked up his bag and pulled out the sceptre. It was unharmed. He held it up high, like footballers hold up a trophy. "Thank you, God!"

When Mrs Holt came out of the bathroom she called out to Matt, "I'll start cooking in a minute. I've just got to get rid of something." Then Matt heard the flush go and he knew what she had got rid off. He wanted to shout and hug his mum and celebrate. But he knew this was all very fragile at the moment and he had to give her time.

He wasn't hungry. He'd had a big lunch and he'd just had a sandwich. And he'd gone through one of the worst times of his life, followed by the best time ever. His whole digestive system was bubbling. There wasn't a lot in the kitchen and they had beans on toast. But he ate the meal like it was a feast.

~\*~

On Saturday morning, Matt was worried in case all the changes of the previous day hadn't lasted. But he heard the vacuum cleaner going. He'd got his mum back. And a great load fell off his shoulders.

He shook out his PE kit that was a bit smelly and could do with a wash. There was also his homework planner lying on the floor which had taken quite a bit of the kicking and parts of the wire binding had come off. He picked up a torn sheet of folded paper and unfolded it. It was from RE. Matt remembered the discovery of the word of knowledge and he remembered something Mrs Gover had said in the lesson: something about the religious people getting angry when Jesus said God was his Father. Matt scanned the sheet. It was quite hard stuff to follow at the end but, if he'd got it right, Jesus seemed to say God and Father are the same thing. That made God a person. It also made it a problem for Matt. His father was just someone who had run off. He'd left him and his mum. It was probably his fault mum had taken drugs. And why she'd been so down. He likely made mum use the stuff in the first place. Fathers were useless traitors. Matt worked himself up into a real rage. He hated his father. Derek. He was just a name. Matt had only seen a photo of him once. It had been in a newspaper and someone had brought it round. He never ever ever wanted to meet him. If he ever dared to show his face he'd kill him. Matt put his pillow over his face and punched it over his mouth. He hid in the darkness. Who needed fathers? He sobbed; his shoulders shook. He bit into his pillow.

Then he had a picture in his mind: all those leaders angry, raging. Why? What's it to them? And Jesus: Why did he think it worth stirring them up? He must have known it would. Maybe they were jealous. It made Matt

curious. He lay still but kept the pillow over his face. Related: Jesus was saying he and God were related. Matt reached out and leant down to the floor. Without removing the pillow he swept the floor with his hand till he felt the piece of paper. He pulled the pillow down onto his stomach, propped the paper against it, and read through it again.

There was a knock on the front door. A quiet knock like someone wasn't sure they should be knocking. Matt rolled off his bed and went to the front door. He opened it a crack, leaving the chain on. Old habits. It was Tim.

"Hello, Tim. What are you doing here?"

"You OK? I need to talk with you."

"I'll come out. Hang on." Matt shut the door again. He hadn't had any friends round for years and he wasn't sure whether it was OK with his mum yet. "I'm just going out, Mum."

Matt and Tim walked down to the corner of the road and sat on a wall.

"What is it Tim?"

"Y'know yesterday. Well, I haven't told anyone yet. About those angels."

"Why not?"

"No-one would believe me."

"Is that all?"

"I get enough stick already."

"Why?"

"Cos I believe in God. People try to get me to swear and they try to get me into fights. They keep nicking my stuff."

"How come I didn't know?"

"You were probably asleep. You've changed a lot though. What's going on?"

Matt thought about his dream with Tim in it. He never told anybody anything if he could help it. There was quite a long silence till he decided he'd better tell Tim about the sceptre.

~\*~

Matt was walking up the stairs in school to the IT Suite. Down the stairs came Mr Green.

“Ah, Matthew, I was just coming to find you. Come with me to my office. We need to talk.” Warning bells rang in Matt’s head. Mr Green only called him Matthew when he was in trouble. “Close the door, Matthew. How are the rehearsals going?”

It was a casual question, as if this was general chat before getting to the real matter. But he knew he’d been found out. If he lied, he knew Mr Green could check up. But he found he didn’t really want to lie to Mr Green any more.

“I’ve not exactly been going to rehearsals, Sir”, said Matt.

“Why not?”

“Well it started when I went to the first meeting. Everybody got a decent part except me, and Mrs Dingle got costumes for all the others and told me that as I was just an extra I could find my own clothes. She sent me away to look and I found a way into the space under the stage. I really liked it under there. I could hear everything that was said but I could be private and quiet. In a way I never missed a rehearsal.”

“So what did you do all that time, Matt?”

“Bit of rummaging, a lot of listening, and ...” Matt paused. What should he tell Mr Green? He somehow thought this was an important time. Mr Green was just sitting waiting without putting any pressure for him to go on.

“Sir, have you ever had an experience that made your life different somehow?”

“Yes, teaching you lot! No, it’s a serious question and it deserves a serious answer. Yes, I have, Matt. The main one was when I discovered that there is a God who loves me.”

It was as if Mr Green was giving him a way in. Matt spilled the beans. He spoke about the sceptre and him cleaning it up, about Alan Jones and Toby Simpson and the angels and Tim, about taking the sceptre home and about the change in his mother. He even told him about Mrs Dingle’s husbands. Mr Green just listened.

“Matt, you don’t need me to tell you that you should have been in the rehearsals or in your lessons. Did you know that the play is probably going to be cancelled because Alex Walker has broken his leg?”

“I know the part, sir! I know almost the whole play. I could play Herod! Go on Sir!”

“Its not up to me, Matt, and it would take a miracle for Mrs Dingle to accept you in Alex’s place. I will ask her though, if you like. I’ll have to tell her where you’ve been hiding or she’ll never in a million years believe you know the script.”

~\*~

“Matthew Holt? Ha!” Mrs Dingle put all her dramatic scorn into her scoff. “Mr Green, I think you’ve gone soft in the head!”

“Just thought I’d mention it. Might save your play. But no worries.” He walked into the staff room for a coffee.

At the end of break, Mrs Dingle stopped him by the door. “I’ll give him an audition. We’ll see how much of the part he really does remember. No promises, mind. I must be going soft too.”

When Matt met Mrs Dingle after school he was shocked to find he was to audition in front of the whole cast.

“We’re all here to listen to you, Matthew Holt. We are all ears. Start from where Herod speaks to the Wise Men for the first time.”

Five minutes later, Mrs Dingle clapped her hands together to stop him.

“Well everyone, what do we think?”

“Let him do it, Miss,” said Jesus’ mother.

“Yeah. Cool,” said a Wise Man.

“You can’t not give him the part, Miss. He was excellent,” called out a soldier

“Well, Matthew, we’ve had more downs than ups together. Can we shake on this and move on? We’ll need to go through all the movements that Herod makes—unless you saw those through the cracks in the floorboards!” said Mrs Dingle.

“Does that mean, I get it?”

“Of course.”

~\*~

The dress rehearsal for 'The Babykiller' was held on a Tuesday afternoon. The audience were mainly year 6 pupils from the local Primary Schools. It was a way of getting them used to the school they would be joining next year. In the back row there were also a few year 11s who had been sent out for disrupting exams. Mr Yates, Deputy Head, had nowhere else to put them. Three of the boys, Toby, Ants and Jamey, were close to permanent exclusion and had a record with the police. For some of the year 6s they were heroes. A few, who wanted recognition from the 'big boys', were turning round and smiling or making gestures.

The rehearsals went well for the whole of the first act. Early in the second act, Mr Yates left the hall for a few minutes. Immediately the year 11s started making grunting noises to impress the younger ones. It worked too. There was a lot of giggling and turning of heads.

Then Herod came onto the stage with two soldiers.

"Why, if it isn't our little Matthew Holt with his minders again!" called out Toby Simpson. Sniggers started around him.

"Thought Herod would be bigger, didn't you Jamey boy?"

"Who does he think he is? God?" Jamey replied.

Matt turned and pointed straight at Toby.

"If you dare to challenge my authority again, you will be a dead man." His voice was powerful. Despite Matt's size he was scary. It was as if he had the whole of the Roman Empire behind him. The year 11s went very quiet. The year 6s thought it was great. They thought the lads at the back had been planted in the audience as part of the play. Mrs Dingle loved the improvisation, though she knew Toby had been out to make Matt look a fool. She explained to Mr Yates on his return what had happened and they agreed a suitable action to take. Toby and James would be in the audience for each performance of the play and they would repeat their little drama. Mrs Dingle was concerned that the school might not be allowed to do this. Mr Yates laughed. "I think we'll have the full support of both sets of parents. They'll be only too glad that they don't have to be responsible for Toby and James for four evenings! It'll keep them off the streets."

The four performances of the play went OK. Matt's mum came to the third night and he fluffed his lines twice. He was annoyed with himself for that: he'd wanted to get it perfect for his mum. Even so he was chuffed that his mum actually came. In three and a half years she had never stepped inside the school. She sat next to Mrs Simpson who had come to see Toby do his bit. Despite Matt's disappointment with his own effort, Mrs Dingle gave him high praise and talked about next time. His mum said he was great. "Never knew you had it in you to act."



## Part Two

### ROOM 7

It was a hot day despite being early Spring. Windows were open. Pupils were restless. Teachers were tired. The sound of a helicopter overhead went unnoticed. Then it grew loud. It was directly overhead. Teachers struggled to make themselves heard. It descended, hovering at head height above the grass in front of the school. Windows rattled. Pages in textbooks whiffled over. Papers flew across the room. There was mayhem as teachers ordered windows to be closed.

“What, Miss?” “Can’t hear you, Sir!” Pupils rushed to the windows to look out. And as soon as one was shut another pupil opened it again.

“Air ambulance! Who’s that for?”

“Must be bad if it’s air ambulance.”

“Maybe a teacher’s had a heart attack.”

“Nah. Sports injury I expect.”

Then the helicopter settled right outside Matt’s geography class. Maps on the wall billowed out and then tore from the drawing pins. Everybody covered their ears. Mr Thompson gave up trying to teach. All the class were pushing to get closest to the window anyway. In the middle of all the row, Matt heard the quiet voice he now knew to be God: “Go now.”

“Can I go to the toilet, sir?” said Matt.

“OK. We’re not achieving anything here. No, hang on! I think it would be better if we all stayed here.” But Matt was already out of the door and down the corridor. He watched to see where the paramedics would go. The road!

“It’s Toby,” the voice told Matt. “Be ready for a miracle.”

All traffic had stopped in both directions. There was a big crowd on the pavement already. Police, drivers, teachers, school caretaker, and a few kids. Could he get away with mingling with the kids? No, staff were trying to get them back into school.

“I can’t leave him, he’s my mate,” said Jamey.

“You can do what you ... like but I ain’t moving. I’m staying, alright?”

Adults were saying all the right things, like, “Let’s give the paramedics a bit of space,” “Toby’s in good hands,” “You can’t do anything to help him now,” “Come inside and we’ll make some tea in the office. You’ll be nice and close if anything changes.”

PC Tomkins, the school liaison officer, arrived. He knew the students who were standing around. He’d known their families for years and had developed a sort of trust with some of them. He knew all of them by name. He also knew better than the others there how to get them to cooperate.

“Your mate Toby?” he asked Jamey.

“Bastard just drove up and hit him.”

“OK. Were you with him?”

“We’d just done a runner over to the chip shop,” said Alice.

“That explains the ketchup on your shirt then. At least it’s not blood.”

“He’s going to be all right, isn’t he?” Jamey said. He sounded wobbly. There was fear, anger and desperation.

“Let’s all move over to by the wall. That way I can hear you better and you can tell me what happened,” suggested PC Tomkins.

Inside the school there were already rumours flying around. Someone had a broken leg. Someone had cracked their head open. Someone had been knifed. Someone was dead. Unusually, this time the worst rumour was the truth. The paramedics were checking Toby for a pulse and signs of breathing. None.

Toby’s friends were desperate to talk. They were so keen to talk that they talked at the same time, interrupting each other. PC Tomkins sifted the information and jotted it down in shorthand. His notes read:

*South Road. Toby Simpson. Smithincott School.*

*Dodged truck—hit by hidden car in bus lane.*

*Getting chips*

*Toby, Alice, Jamey, Mohammad, Tanya, Oz*

*Playing chicken: Lights red for pedestrians*

*Not on bridge.*

*Mitching\**

*Toby last to run; dropped chips. Went back.*

*Running order: Mohammad, Jamey, Tanya.*

*Alice on bridge. Oz with Toby, ran quicker.*

\*In some parts of Britain, mitching is the local word for truanting.

Alice looked over to where the truck had stopped. It had only just started to pull away when the lights had changed. The driver was now ranting and shouting about “stupid, stupid kids”, “what’s the school doing letting them out,” “my boss will kill me if I’m late,” “selfish b...”. He suddenly stopped when a policeman went over to him. “Sorry. Didn’t know. That bad eh? Could’ve been my son.”

Two more policemen were talking to a driver thirty metres past the lights. His car was in the bus lane. It looked like it might be a taxi. It had started to drizzle.

Mrs Harris, Headteacher, was talking with a Police Inspector. “It’s going to be break-time in about five minutes. We’re going to need help to keep the school from coming out to look. She turned to where Toby had been lying but there was just a dry patch where the stretcher had been. Two paramedics were carrying the covered stretcher through the school gates towards the helicopter.

“Stop!” shouted Mrs Harris. “In heaven’s name stop! You can’t go parading Toby’s body in front of the classrooms. Please! There must be a better way.” She was a strong woman but she was only just holding herself together. Even so she still had the imagination to see the bigger picture of the school she was responsible for.

“Agreed,” said the Inspector. He called out to the paramedics to bring back the stretcher.

Matt had been wondering what he needed to do. He had stood with two ladies from the school office who were too upset to think of sending him back into school. Everyone else must have thought that they were dealing with Matt, so he was left alone.

“Go and stand by the stretcher.”

Matt moved out from his cover. He expected to be stopped any second. He was frightened. He’d never been near a body. It made it worse that it was Toby. Someone he knew. What now?

“Get very close. Do not touch him. Say, ‘In Jesus’ name, Toby, get up and live.’”

So Matt did. He'd never felt so exposed in his life. He felt like he was standing in the street with no clothes on. Like those terrible nightmares. Still nobody moved to stop him. Why? Matt felt a presence with him like he'd never known it before.

"In Jesus' name, Toby, get up and live."

"Where's my chips?" said Toby as he flung back the sheet.

Suddenly there was shouting, squealing, shrieking, crying, laughter, all at the same time. No-one paid any attention to Matt. All eyes were focused on Toby.

"Get back into class." Matt quietly moved to the school entrance and back to his class.

"Where have you been all this time, Matthew?" Mr Thompson challenged him.

"Helping Mrs Harris, Sir."

"I think we'd better give you a helicopter ride, mate," said one paramedic to Toby. We need to give you a thorough checking over. Anyone fancy coming with him?"

"I'd like to but I think my place is here. And I need to ring parents," said Mrs Harris. "The bell for break is just going and I think it would settle things a lot if people saw Toby going with a friend to the helicopter."

"Can I go, Miss?"

"Yes Mo, that would be excellent. Thank you."

~\*~

## **CHICKEN AND CHIPS BOY KILLED BY BUS LANE TAXI**

The reporter for the local evening newspaper hadn't hung around long enough to witness developments after Toby's accident and the front page news in the early edition somehow managed to blame parents, children, police and schools for the increasing menace of children playing chicken on roads and railways. Later editions picked up on Toby's escape from death.

## **ROAD MENACE ESCAPES DEATH**

Sixteen-year-old Toby Simpson was lucky to escape injury after he threw himself in front of a

taxi outside Smithincott High School this morning. Simpson, a pupil at the school was truanting and playing chicken with friends on the busy main road. Their thoughtless and irresponsible behaviour caused distress to drivers and major traffic jams ...

It took three days for the full story to reach the press and by that time the national papers and television stations were involved.

## **BOY FAKES DEATH**

### **FIFTEEN YEAR OLD BOY LIVES: SUPERNATURAL OR MEDICAL EXPLANATION?**

### **CLAIMS OF BOY RAISED FROM DEAD**

### **SIXTEEN YEAR OLD CLAIMS NEAR- DEATH EXPERIENCE**

### **ROAD RAGE VICTIM SAYS HE DIED EXCLUSIVE: BOY TALKS OF HIS OWN DEATH**

Reporters followed Toby and even turned up in school to try to get photos. He did eventually talk to the press and appeared on television just to get everybody off his back. They mostly chose not to report his whole story but his parents saw the opportunity to make some money and they sold Toby's story to a Sunday newspaper. Within a week the interest had been blown away by new headlines. Toby said that he and his friends had skipped French and been to the chip shop. They were dodging the traffic outside school. The lights changed just as they were stepping off the kerb but most of them decided to risk the dash. Getting past the traffic on their side of the road was easy apart from badmouthing from a driver but the far side had three lanes including a bus lane. They could have stopped on the traffic island in the middle of the road but the only traffic moving off was a long articulated

truck and a learner driver. The truck was slow and the learner driver seemed to have difficulty getting into gear. So they ran. Unfortunately the truck hid a taxi moving fast in the bus lane. His friends just made it across but he was hit full on by the taxi. He only remembered a flash of blue come from behind the truck and that was it. The next thing he knew was a voice saying to him, "This is not the end."

Toby said, "It was like I'd been booked to go into darkness but this voice spoke out of a bright light." Then I heard another voice that seemed to be standing by me. It said, 'Get up and live.' My face was covered with a cloth, so I threw that back and sat up. Apparently I asked where my chips were. The medics took me off to hospital in the air ambulance with my mate Mo."

"Mo told me that everybody had said I was dead. The medic said there was no mistake about that: I was definitely dead and the side of my head was crushed. He handed me a small mirror and said, 'Look at it now.' Mo started blubbing. I said, 'What a good-looking dude.' I couldn't believe what they were saying. At the hospital they wheeled me in like a celeb. I could have walked but they insisted I waited till they had discharged me. Covering themselves, they were. Anyway, they reckon I was dead for eleven minutes and there was no sign of life at the roadside. Apparently, I was checked twice by both paramedics to be sure. They said the state of my head alone was evidence that I would probably have been brain-dead even if the rest of me worked."

After the accident, Mrs Harris called a special whole-school assembly. It was important that everybody knew that Toby was OK so that rumours did not spread and normal school life could return. She warned that any pupil caught crossing the road without using the bridge would face a detention and then exclusion for a repeat offence. She said personal safety and the well-being of drivers and neighbours mattered enough for the school to take strong action. She said that for a time the paramedics had thought Toby had been killed. She made no mention of him being raised from the dead, no mention of Matt's part in it.

Over the next few days, Matt had great difficulty in settling back into normal routines. No-one spoke to him about him praying for Toby; nobody even seemed to have noticed that he had been there. It was as if everybody had been blinded and their ears blocked. Nobody had thanked him. It was hard to concentrate in lessons and it was hard to get on with mum at home. He felt out of sorts with God too. After all, he had just raised Toby from the dead! He began to wonder if Toby had actually died. Each lunchtime people seemed to ignore him. Even Tim. In a way he was glad. He needed to get his own head sorted.

~\*~

About a week after the incident, when Matt got home from school he felt uneasy. He couldn't explain why but he felt a tenseness deep down inside him. He went straight to his room. He threw down his bag and glanced into the corner where he had propped up his sceptre. It was gone!

"MUM!" he shouted.

No answer. Matt ran to each room, calling out, banging on doors. No-one there.

"THIEVING BITCH!" he yelled. He was deep red with anger. He could hardly breathe. Only she could have taken it. No-one else could have been in his room. Burglars. He instantly switched blame. Windows. They were all shut. Nothing out of place. Mother. Could only have been his mother. Where was trust? Couldn't he even leave stuff in his own room?

An idea came into his head and took root. "Your mother's taken your sceptre to pay for drugs. Back on drugs, back on drugs."

"NO!" he shouted at the mirror. Drown out the thought. "NO! NO! NO!" He was shocked at the sight of his own face—red, blotchy, twisted. He went quiet but the thought still haunted him. Then a quiet questioning came. "Don't you trust your mum?"

Matt hadn't thought about that. He'd been scared and angry and lashed out at the one closest to him. He recognised the quiet voice that had challenged him. It was God, his friend. He needed that friendship more than

anything else. He'd been so angry he hadn't been alert enough to recognise the other voice, the one that accused his mother, the lying voice. It was the same voice that for years had been telling him he would never succeed at anything.

"LIAR!" shouted Matt. He turned back to the mirror. "FOOL!" he yelled at himself.

Matt sat on the floor and leant back against his bed. Where was the sceptre then? Now that his anger was burning out, he was left with fear. His life had been changed by the sceptre. His mum had been given back to him, his schoolwork had got better, his behaviour had changed. Till now. How could they manage without the sceptre? Where is it? Who's got it? Who took it?

"I took it." God's voice was quiet. To Matt it seemed like God was smiling. "I took it because you don't need it anymore."

"Yes I do!" Matt shouted.

"No you don't. I let you find it because I knew it was what you needed then and I knew you could be trusted with it. It was a gift, but now you are learning to trust me. Whilst you still have the sceptre you are tempted to trust it and not me."

"But what about the power? The sceptre made me feel clean when I cleaned it. It made me feel important. And the sceptre changed my mum."

"No it didn't. I did. Without me, the sceptre is powerless."

"But I like the sceptre. I've got used to having it around."

"That's why I took it. I have given you something much more precious anyway."

"What? I've not seen anything?"

"I gave you my Spirit and He is inside you. I sent Him when you picked up the sceptre and valued it. The Sceptre of Righteousness is the Sceptre of my Kingdom."

"What on earth does that mean?"

"It means I chose you, Matt, and I have made everything OK between you and me. I have given you my authority."

Matt heard the front door key turn and his mother calling him.



~\*~

Matt stood at the window looking out over the school pitches. For ten minutes now he had watched Luke Cromer practicing rugby kicks. Luke was the son of the Chairman of Governors. He was great at sport and very brainy. He was expected to get straight A\*s at GCSE. Somehow though he got along with everybody. He stood in front of the posts ready for his fourth attempt at kicking the ball between the posts. He'd learnt all the techniques of preparation from watching the professionals: walking backwards from the ball with his eyes on the target, steadying himself, controlled breathing, crouching with his hands fisted together over the ball, waggling his fingers at his side. But despite all the rituals, each kick drifted wide of the posts.

Matt had to wait anyway, so he was glad to have something to watch. God had told him to come to Mr Green's office at 4pm. It meant Matt staying on after school. He wasn't too pleased but he was learning to do what God told him.

It was now 3.57 and he was tempted to knock on the door. Luke had set up the ball again. Toby Simpson walked up with a couple of mates. He strolled up to the ball with his hands in his pockets. With one casual kick, DOOMF, he sent the ball straight between the posts. Matt couldn't help smiling, even though it was Toby. No preparation, no run up, no careful breathing. Just one good welly of a kick had achieved what Luke had strived for and failed.

"Its all in the timing," said God. Immediately the door opened.

"Hello Matt. Come in. I was expecting you. I've got something for you." Matt checked the time. 4pm exactly.

~\*~

The following day, Matt went to room 7 at 4pm. Something inside him told him he needed to be there. He had spent the time since the end of school in the IT Suite. The door to Room 7 had been left unlocked and wide open by the cleaners. Matt walked straight in. As soon as he was inside the door, he felt as if he had been thumped

on his chest. He had to push his way in. It was like walking against a storm. He was being forced onto his knees

“Wow! What’s going on?”

The room was empty but there was an unseen force at work. It was awesome. He expected papers to be flying like when the helicopter had landed, but everything was still. He heard a movement in the store cupboard behind the teacher’s desk. Out came Tim crawling on his hands and knees.

“What is going ...?” Matt started. Talking was difficult.

“Don’t know.”

“Why’re you here?”

“Meeting.”

“Oh.” A pause then: “Who with?”

“Maybe you.”

“Why in the cupboard?” asked Matt

“Miss took it from me...”

“What?”

“Show you.”

Tim squirmed round and crawled back. He reappeared with one hand raised and bright light glinted on the polished surface of the sceptre. Matt gasped. “You gotta put it back!” Tim looked exhausted. Then he worked his way round like a seal on the beach. There was a long wait before he slowly wormed his way back into the classroom.

Matt lay on the floor, face down. Tim, too gave up trying to move. If anyone had come into the room they would have shouted for help, assuming that Matt and Tim were dead. But no-one did come, and if they had they would not have got in. At the door stood the same pair of angels that had rescued Matt and they leant on massive swords.

For half an hour the two boys lay totally still and totally silent, pinned down by the force that filled the room. Then Matt felt a gentle breeze on his face as if someone had just walked past and Tim whispered,

“Did you feel that? ”

“Yes it was like someone breathed on me.”

“Me too.”

They stood up, stiff from lying on the hard floor. They moved to the back of the room and pulled down two chairs off the tables and sat together, hidden from the door by a mass of chairs.

“We’ve just met God,” said Tim. His eyes were wide open and piercingly bright.

“That’s his sceptre in the cupboard. Where did you get it?” Matt asked.

“I woke up with it across my bed. What does God want with us?” Tim sounded close to tears.

“I think that something in this school is just starting. When it was all quiet did anything happen to you?”

“I dunno. Hard to describe really. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. Don’t know the right words. But it was like someone was talking to me, except there were no words really. I knew I belonged. I thought I might be imagining things but it was like I was being given orders. Like being set homework at the end of a lesson. But much nicer,” said Tim.

“Cool! What orders?” Matt was so glad he had Tim to share this God thing with.

“We’ve got to meet here every week at the same time. The room will always be empty for us.”

“OK, and I think...”

“No hang on Matt. We have to meet and pray.”

“Don’t know how to pray.”

“I think we’ll know next time. What about you?”

“You know that power that made us lie on the floor. Well every time we meet, no-one will be able to get in unless God lets them. And no-one will be able to stay out if God wants them in. It’s not just going to be us two.”

“Wonder who it’ll be!”

“Whose classroom is this anyway?”

“Mrs Carruthers. French.”

“Shall we go now?” Tim moved down the classroom. “I need to get home or I’ll be in trouble for staying late without telling. I’ll just get my sceptre.”

“No!” Matt called out like an army officer. It was an order. “Leave it. It’s not yours to take back.”

“But someone else might take it.” Tim was having the same battle that Matt had fought. He wanted to own the sceptre and he’d only had it for a short while.

“I have a feeling it is meant for someone else now. Leave it Tim. We don’t need it.”

~\*~

Mrs Carruthers had just about the hardest job in Smithincott. Very few pupils really wanted to study French. Some of them could barely cope with English and parents were putting pressure on Mrs Carruthers to ‘let them off French’. It wasn’t her decision but it was she who got all the aggression from kids and parents. She dreaded Parents’ Evenings. The French department had the worst behaviour record in the school and the worst exam results. She had been teaching at Smithincott for 12 years and had had enough. For the second time this term she had been away with a stress-related illness and she had only agreed to come back on the understanding that extra classroom assistants were drafted into all French lessons. It had been arranged for her to return on a Thursday so that she only had to teach for two days before the weekend.

This Thursday was the day after Matt and Toby’s meeting in Room 7.

When the bell went at the start of the school day, Mrs Carruthers’ tutor group were lined up outside the classroom door. At least, some were lined up against the wall; others were lounging against the wall opposite, two boys were throwing glue sticks at the girls in the line, and three girls were pushing and shoving each other over accusations and counter-accusations about stolen boyfriends. Mrs Carruthers nearly went back to the staff room.

She was loaded up with books so she passed her key to Trish at the front of the line. Everybody piled in without waiting for any instruction and Mrs Carruthers followed them in, defeated already.

“Miss, are you wearing special perfume today?”

“No Becky, I’m not. Let’s all settle down so I can take the register.”

“I can’t smell anything, Miss,” added Josie.

“It’s well cool.” Becky got up to find the source of the fragrance.”

“Sit down Becky. Please.”

“OK, Miss.” And she sat down straight away.

As far as Mrs Carruthers was concerned she had just witnessed a miracle. In all her time of being tutor to 10MC she had never known Becky Smith to obey without a major argument. Hope flickered in Mrs Carruthers and she sat enjoying the rare feeling. In that moment she realised that she too could smell Becky’s fragrance and she breathed it in deeply. She took the register without incident and walked around having brief chats with small groups of her tutees.

She went into her store cupboard, concerned that it had been left unlocked by whoever had taken her last lesson. The perfume was strongest here but she could find no obvious reason. She couldn’t believe the mess the cupboard was in. She looked back into the classroom. “Becky, come here a moment, please.”

“What have I done now?”

“Nothing. But there is something you could do for me. Look at this mess. Do you think you could give me a hand sorting it out sometime?”

~\*~

“Here Miss, look at this!” Becky held up the remains of a very old cheese sandwich. “It was under them old papers.”

Mrs Carruthers laughed. “Throw it in the bag. Goodness knows how long that’s been there.”

The two of them were clearing out Mrs Carruther’s storeroom in Room 7. Piles of old exercise books, exam papers and ancient textbooks almost filled the space. Some of the stuff dated back to before Mrs Carruthers had joined the school twelve years before. Becky loved to help. Staying on after school meant she didn’t have to go home to an empty house while her parents were still at work.

“Miss.”

“Yes, Becky.”

“Its really funny in here. It ought to stink with that mouldy cheese but it don’t. It smells really nice. Have you noticed?”

“I suppose I assumed you were wearing something fragrant, Becky. I knew it wasn’t anything I use. Anyway let’s get on. There’s a meeting here at 4 o’clock.”

“What, here in this cupboard?” The question went unanswered.

“Miss, what’s this?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see from here. What is it? Show me.” Becky lifted up the sceptre. “Oh that! I expect it’s something that was confiscated from a pupil whilst I was off sick. It can’t be all that important if no-one’s come to claim it. Get rid of it please, Becky.”

Becky went out to the big bag of rubbish by the classroom door. She hesitated for a moment, holding the sceptre close to her cheek and feeling the cool metal against her skin. It felt nice. A fragrance wafted as she held the sceptre to her nose.

“Just going to the toilet, Miss,” she called out. The corridor was empty and she went straight to her locker. It was a struggle to open it. All the locker doors had been kicked in at various times. Some were completely wrecked but Becky’s still worked. She looked over her shoulder to check that no-one was watching. Then she lifted out a towel from the bottom of her locker to reveal a collection of items; mobile phones, bracelets, a watch, pens and an assortment of books—all stolen and stored away. Becky was a compulsive thief. She laid the sceptre on top of the pile and carefully replaced the towel. She had another battle to shut and lock the misshapen door, pushing with all her strength to line up the lock.

“I’m back, Miss.”

“Good. Take this pile and chuck it in the bin bag, while I lock up the store.”

~\*~

When Matt and Tim came to Room 7 for the second time, Matt arrived carrying a box. Tim met him outside the door.

“What you got there, Matt?”

“Bibles. Mr Green gave them to me.”

“What for?”

“God knows. I mean, God really does know.”

“How many you got?”

“Twelve.”

“But there’s only two of us.”

“There’s ten more coming tonight. God told me.”

The door was open, just as it had been last time. The two boys could already feel the power.

“How are you going to get in carrying that lot?”

Matt grinned. He put the box down on the corridor floor and slid it into the room. Once again they were forced to lie down by the presence of God’s Spirit. Over the next twenty minutes others arrived.

Tammy Smith from year 9 was first, then Maria Levchenko, a Polish girl who had only joined the school a week ago. Her family had come to Britain to work and none of them spoke much English. As soon as Maria came in, Tammy started speaking strange words, like some sort of spell.

“How can you speak Polish?” whispered Maria.

Everyone looked totally amazed but they all lay still. Outside they heard the loud voice of someone doing Dalek impersonations. “You will obey! You will obey!” The voice suddenly stopped and Chris O’Brien dropped to the floor, just missing Maria’s head. Chris was the chief clown in year 10 and no-one took him seriously. He was always in trouble in lessons because he had the attention span of a goldfish and preferred to tell jokes or mimic teachers. Louise Gibbins, Anya Hughes and Chas Barnaby from year 11 came in so quietly that no-one heard them until they slumped to the ground.

Far down the corridor, there was the sound of barking. It was not quite like a dog. It got closer. Matt recognised the sound. Hairs on his neck lifted. It was Adam Prince. He had been permanently excluded from school but he kept coming back. He was violent and angry. When he ‘lost it’ he was uncontrollable and unbelievably strong. It had taken four teachers to pull him off Rob Allsop. Rob was in hospital having his nose rebuilt.

The barking turned to a growl coming from deep in Adam’s throat. It was very near. During the day there were teachers around and police came and dragged Adam off site. But who was around to help now? The growling was just outside the door. Then silence and a door

banged. Adam was gone. Matt remembered God's promise: "No-one will get in who I haven't called."

A bit later, John Cardew came in. John was in year 11 and had learning difficulties. He was obsessed with the school boiler and counted everybody with blue eyes. Nina Parkes followed him in, then Ji-Sung Wu, both year 8s.

Most of the time Matt was unaware of the arrivals. He was listening to instructions God was giving him. But he couldn't help hearing Toby Simpson calling out:

"Catch you later, Mo. Got to go to some meeting."

"Says you," thought Matt. But unbelievably nothing stopped Toby. He even managed to stay on his feet long enough to step over bodies and find space on the floor. Then he went down like a felled tree.

"Not Toby. Surely not Toby!?"

"I've chosen him just like I chose you."

"Yes, but he hates me. He'll wreck things. He always does."

"Trust me."

There was complete silence in the room and no-one moved. Somewhere a cleaner's bucket clanked and a phone rang.

Then Chas spoke: "I have called you by name. For now, you are my twelve chosen ones. Later there will be many more. Accept each other."

Nina took over: "People have prayed for this school for years, even when it seemed beyond hope. That is why it has not been closed down. I have plans for it and now you are going to see my answer to those prayers."

Tammy Smith said: "Don't think, 'What use can I be?' If you do what I show you, you will see amazing and miraculous things."

"You will obey!" said Chris in his normal voice. Nobody laughed. The power of God was in Chris's words this time and God had been preparing each one differently as they lay on the ground.

The atmosphere relaxed and the twelve looked around at each other. They felt a bit like they had woken up after a weird dream. But each one had met God in that room and a lot of their questions had been answered. Everyone looked at Matt. He hadn't said anything, he hadn't done anything, but they all looked at him as if waiting for instructions.



Matt said, "We've all met with God, right? Seems weird but cool. Now we need to understand him more and get wise. We're all going to have to read the Bible. So here is one each."

"Oh yeah, like I'm gonna to carry one of these around," said Toby. "Anyway, I can't read."

"Didn't God promise you anything when you were on the floor?" asked Matt.

"Yeah, he said I would be the best reader in my class. I believed him then but it's not so easy now like he seems to have gone."

"We've all got to trust him for different things. He stopped Adam from coming in, didn't he? We all know what chance we would have stood if Adam had made up his mind to fight."

"How come he didn't come in?" asked Louise.

"Angels," said Tim. "I saw them by the door when I came in. One gold, one silver."

"Oh wow!" shouted Chas. "And what was that stuff you said, Tammy?"

"She spoke in perfect Polish. I understood every word," answered Maria. "She said, 'Maria, it was no accident that you came to England and to this school. I brought you to England to know me and receive power to take back with you to Poland. As soon as you hear these words you will speak and understand English as if you had been born here.'"

Everyone stood amazed. Toby's doubts about his reading just disappeared.

"So what do we do with these Bibles? There's so many pages. I've never read a Bible before." Louise was anxious. Matt answered:

"God said we don't need a teacher to help us because he will be our teacher. He said that Toby must put his hand on each of our heads and God will give us what we need to understand what the Bible says."

"You're joking! Me? OK then if you say so, but I don't see how." As Toby lifted his right arm he began to shake. He never spoke a word and nothing else seemed to happen but he said, "I know it's done. I get it now. It's like Chris said about 'you will obey'. That's all we've got to do."

Nina had stayed quiet all through the meeting. She was very shy and had always been left out of friendship groups.

“What’s a gospel?” she said softly.

“It’s books about Jesus,” said Tim.

“Well, when Toby put his hand on my head, someone told me we should start by reading Luke’s Gospel. Do you think it might have been God?” Nina asked.

“How do we find that?” asked Louise.

“Don’t you ever ask me where to find anything in a book until you have checked in the Contents Page at the front and the Index at the back.” Chris mimicked Mrs Johnson. They all laughed. Most of them had been taught Science by Mrs Johnson at some time or other and Chris’s impersonation of her repeated instruction was perfect. “Here we are,” said Tammy. “Books of the New Testament. Luke, page 930.”

“Right,” said Matt. “We’re all in this. Try and read a bit by next week.”

“Shall I put it in my homework diary, Sir?” joked Chris.

~\*~

“Anyone taught Toby Simpson today?” Mrs Chalmers was one of the Deputy Head Teachers. She was a big woman with a big voice and she dominated the staff-room. People stopped talking when she spoke—pupils and teachers alike.

“I had him period 1,” called out Mrs Strutton. “Why? Has he truanted again?”

“No. Our fine Mr Toby Simpson has been conning us all for years. He’s just read out almost a whole chapter. Read it out loud like a natural till I had to stop him.”

“You’re joking! He’s always needed Learning Support staff to read out questions for him in geography. That’s right, Jane, isn’t it? You’ve worked with him in most lessons,” said Mr Yates.

“You should know me by now, Mr Yates. I do not joke about such matters.”

“Couldn’t read a bus ticket, couldn’t our Toby,” grunted Mr O’Donnell. “He gets so frustrated, he wrecks

most of my lessons. Sure you've got the right man?" Mrs Chalmers ignored the question.

"Mrs Chalmers, you know we monitor pupils with learning difficulties." Ms Timms' voice barely carried across the room. "Toby has made some progress but he still only has the reading age of an eight-year old."

"Absolute rubbish," he reads as well as you or I. He's been having us on since he joined us. Who's got him after break?"

"He's with me for double PE," shouted out Mr Grant.

"And after that? Oh, it's me again. Such a joy to have that class twice on a Friday. Right, who's not teaching Period 4? John, Terry, Jane. I want witnesses: Room 5, Period 4. I'll only keep you a few minutes."

~\*~

Out by the school gates a big crowd had formed around a fight. Jake Timms and Tariq Bassama were locked in a wrestle. Tariq's forehead was bleeding from Jake's head-butt and Jake had a bloody nose. Most of the crowd had no idea why they were fighting but it hadn't stopped them taking sides. They were chanting and jeering. Jake and Tariq were normally friends. They would have stopped by now if they'd been left to themselves but each time one of them backed off, someone pushed them back into the fight.

Two mealtime assistants tried to force their way through but the crowd resisted them. Jamie and Toby joined the crowd. Jamie yelled out, "Hit him, Tariq." Toby pushed his way through, using his reputation to clear space. He stood by the two boys and instantly the fight stopped and the crowd fell silent. Tariq picked up Jake's bag and handed it to him. As they shook hands, two ugly creatures, black and spindly crawled out from the group and loped through the gate. Only Toby saw them go.

"Come here you three. I want an explanation." It was Mrs Chalmers. She was still seething about Toby's reading and was pleased to have a chance to take action against him now.

"It's all right, Miss; it's sorted," said Tariq.

“No, Tariq, it is not all right. I will not have fighting in school and you chose to fight where neighbours and passers-by could see. You’ve harmed the reputation of the school. I will decide what is all right, thank you young man.”

“It was just between Jake and me. Toby stopped us. It’s over.”

Mrs Llewellyn, one of the mealtime assistants, one of the few people on site that Mrs Chalmers had time for, took her to one side. “Tariq’s right. Bit of a new role for Toby, peacemaker like. No-one else could get near them. Toby just walked through the crowd and they stopped. I don’t think he even said anything.”

Mrs Chalmers looked perplexed. She looked long and hard at Toby. What stunt was he going to pull in her next lesson. He needed watching. Leopards can’t change their spots.

“OK, Toby. Thank you. You may go. No, not you two. My office. Now.”

In her office, out of sight of the crowds, Mrs Chalmers showed her other nature. “I’m surprised at you two. In my lessons your behaviour has always been excellent and you’ve always got on so well together. Your joint project was very well put together. So what’s been eating you? Tariq, you first.”

“He called me a ‘black monkey’.”

“Yeah! But what did you call my mum?” Jake’s mum was on the Learning Support staff and Jake found it hard to be in the same school sometimes.

“It’s not like you to make a racist comment, Jake.”

“He called my mum a ‘stupid effing bitch’, just because he reckoned she wouldn’t help him in Maths.”

At the end of the discussion, Mrs Chalmers decided a racist issue required her to get parents in. Left to herself she might have let the whole thing drop as the boys had sorted out their differences.

In the meeting the following day it turned out that both boys had told the whole story to their mums. Mrs Bassama came in on her own because her husband had gone back to Nigeria. Ms Timms, feeling a little defensive as she was a staff member, came in with her partner Mr Craddock.

“What would you like me to do?” Mrs Chalmers asked Mrs Bassama.

“I think Jake should be excluded for a racist comment like that. I know they are friends but it is not right that he should speak like that to my son.”

“And you, Ms Timms?”

“Too many kids are getting away with obscene and rude comments to staff. It’s time more pupils were excluded. They are getting away with murder.”

“OK. And you, Tariq and Jake? Do you think I should exclude you?”

“No Miss, me and Tariq have sorted it. We just flared up. We’re mates again.”

“No Miss. Like Jake said, we’re mates.”

“Yes, but what about Ms Timms? She has been badly offended. The question I want to ask is ‘is what Jake said any better or worse than what Tariq said?’”

“It was racist,” said Mrs Bassama. You’ve got to take action against racism.”

“Yes it was. And yes I have.” said Mrs Chalmers. “I also have to take appropriate action against your son for making an obscene comment to one of our staff. It is all about respect. If I exclude Jake, are you happy that I will also exclude Tariq?”

“No, I am not.”

“Then I propose not excluding either of them. I think we can do something more constructive. You boys work well together. I suggest, Ms Timms, that Jake and Tariq meet with you one lunchtime of your choice and do something that would help you, such as using their skills to put up a display, or helping someone learn to read. Thank you all for coming in.”

### **Part Three**

## **BENT BETTY**

Matt walked up through the woods where most of the trees had thin silvery trunks. He didn't know their name but he loved the colour of their bark and the way light filtered through tiny leaves. His mother had dropped back and seemed to be looking at every flower. She was like a small child discovering new things whereas Matt didn't yet feel comfortable in the country. He was used to being hemmed in by buildings and noise. They were on holiday together for the first time ever. His mother had managed to borrow a car from a man she knew. She only said to Matt that he wasn't local any more so he wouldn't know him.

Up ahead he could hear water. The path twisted around a huge rock and came out of the woods. A frothing white stream ran over stones but where the water was clear he could see the bed. It was as clear as tap water. Matt put his hands in the stream and scooped up the water to drink. It was icy.

To his left the path continued upstream. Sometimes he was out in the open; sometimes he was forced by the twisting course of the water back into the trees. There was no-one around. Even his mother was out of sight. Despite the noise of the water the place was strangely quiet. He felt like he was exploring a whole new country. The space seemed so big and it was unsettling. He heard a sound overhead like a little kitten mewing and he looked up. A big bird circled over his head. What a feeble call for such a huge bird! He'd never been in the proper countryside before. Part of him wanted mum to catch up and he turned to look for her red sweater between the trees. Part of him felt an urge to press on, to be the first to see whatever lay ahead.

The stream got more twisty and ran over rocks. A dark brown bird landed on a boulder in mid-stream. It kept bobbing on its little legs and its tail kept wagging. It turned towards Matt and he saw its pure white chest. Then it dived into the foam and appeared twenty metres upstream. Matt never knew birds could swim.

He scrambled up a massive rock that blocked the path. The top was like a table. The sudden noise of a waterfall made Matt gasp. It roared down a high cliff into a pool. He'd never seen anything like it. He jumped from boulder to boulder, skidding on the smooth surfaces wet

from the spray. Down in the cracks he could see the stream flickering way under the rocks.

The pool had gravelly edges like narrow beaches, scattered with bits of broken branches bleached white. Still no sign of mum. This place was all his. Spray drifted into Matt's face. He followed the shoreline to the foot of the waterfall. The noise was awesome and he was getting soaked but he couldn't help pressing in closer.

The cliff rose way above his head and Matt wondered if it was climbable. Then a little bird flew past his face, grabbing his attention with its bright yellow front. It flew straight into the side of the waterfall and came out on the far side. How did it do that? No way could it have flown through the water. Matt edged closer to the waterfall, slipping on green weed. Water ran off his hair and down his face. There was a gap! Behind the waterfall there was a gap and the rocks formed a sort of path. Matt stepped behind the water and stood behind its curtain, completely hidden from view. There was even a natural seat in the cliff and he sat down.

This was the most amazing place he had ever been in. Magic. He just sat and listened to the noise. Being behind the curtain reminded him of the times he had spent behind the curtains on stage at school. Suddenly he felt something of the same isolation, loneliness. Where was mum? He pushed his hands through the water and for a fraction of a second made a little window. It was like the shutter on an old-fashioned camera. And in that split second he saw a flash of red. He walked along the secret rocky shelf and stepped out from his hiding place.

"Didn't you hear me, Matt? I've been calling you for ages!"

"The waterfall was too noisy."

"Not that noisy."

"Come and see." Matt took his mother by the hand and led her behind the waterfall.

"I've read about places like this in books. I thought they were just stories." His mother started to cry. "It is just so beautiful. Can I have a minute or two in here on my own like you did?"

~\*~

They headed back down to where they had left the car. On the way down, Matt stayed alongside his mum. Neither of them spoke. Matt didn't know what she was thinking but his own mind was turning over the strange contrasts he had seen. They were right on the edge of The Beacons and they could look down onto built-up valleys. They had driven up past boarded-up houses and empty industrial sites. There was graffiti on the walls and cars propped up on bricks, with wheels missing. But people were still living there.

Standing on the edge of the woods, it was like he was in silver and green looking down on black and grey. But he knew his heart was still a city heart. He belonged with people. He had discovered this sitting on his own behind the waterfall. He couldn't put it into words. He'd sat on the rock with his eyes closed. The roar of the water was so close to his face it seemed to pound his brains and he couldn't think. Then he had a picture so clear and real that he opened his eyes. The picture was still there on the back of the waterfall! And it started to move like a film at the cinema.

A man stood in front of a big crowd of hungry people. They were sitting on the grass, eating bread and fish. He knew it was Jesus. He knew enough of the Bible now to know the miraculous story of Jesus getting his followers to feed 5000 people from five loaves and two fishes. It was like Jesus turned to him and said, "Now you do it. Be my hands," and at the same time Jesus held up something: a wooden walking stick. Jesus moved his hand down the stick and Matt gasped. The stick was a shepherd's crook and the top curved in the exact shape of the sceptre. Jesus was a shepherd. He cared about his sheep. He made sure they all got fed. Matt remembered the sceptres he had seen on the internet. So, not just shepherd but king.

But what could Matt do? He was only 15. Like an answer to his thoughts, the picture on the waterfall showed a boy offering his little basket of loaves and fishes to Jesus. It was his packed lunch. All he had. Did he volunteer it or did an adult tell him to take it to Jesus? Matt reckoned it was the boy's own idea. The adults would never have thought of offering something so small. That boy saw it could happen. He was the one who really



saw who Jesus was and what he could do. But what could Matt do? The only times he'd done anything were when God just seemed to turn up.

~\*~

At the Bed & Breakfast where Matt and his mother were staying, Mrs Evans greeted them with cups of milky tea. Although the place was OK, Mrs Evans hadn't caught up on ideas like tea- and coffee-making facilities in the bedrooms. And the only television was in the lounge.

The three of them sat with their teas in front of the television. It stayed on whilst Mrs Evans made the teas and it stayed on whilst she told them everything about Mrs Rhona Williams two doors down the road.

Despite the babble of gossip and television, Matt heard God's quiet voice: "Ask her about Evan Roberts."

It took a while for Mrs Evans to draw breath, but Matt grabbed his chance. "Mrs Evans, do you know a man called Evan Roberts?"

"Indeed I do, young man, indeed I do. There's an Evan Roberts at Pontychurch and there's an Evan Roberts at the Post Office. Oh no, there's me forgetting now, he was laid to rest only last Thursday. But the most famous Evan Roberts was a good friend of my father. They came from the same valley. My father used to go with him when he preached. Evan Roberts brought a great revival to these valleys, that he did. Is that who you mean?"

Matt had no time to answer.

"A remarkable man, was Evan Roberts. Some people looked down on him because he had been a coal miner and he left school when he was only 11. He wasn't ordained by chapel but they say that when he preached whole towns were changed. Some meetings you could not get in the door and people crowded the streets outside. They even got rid of the police force. There was no crime, you see. It all started with a little prayer meeting, they do say. My father was a proud man to be seen carrying the bags of Evan Roberts."

~\*~

The following day, when Matt got on the bus every head turned and conversations stopped. He was not local. They weren't unfriendly faces exactly, more curious maybe. He had left his mother in the city centre in Pirtlington to do some shopping and perhaps see a film and he'd caught the bus up into the valleys. He got off in the centre of Llanrace and set off up the hill. Everywhere seemed to be on a hill. He hadn't a clue what he was looking for or even who he was looking for. He walked past rows of tiny terraced houses, poor houses but most of them cared for. He felt like a trespasser. He turned into a road where every house was boarded up, waiting for demolition. They didn't seem any worse to Matt than the ones he had just left behind. One of them looked lived in. There were bags of rubbish and a bike outside. Squatters maybe? Someone was an artist. They had painted all the boarding with life-size portraits of people staring at you as you walked past.

At the end of the street the rows of old houses turned into lines of newer ones. Matt thought he'd rather live in the old ones. At least they seemed to fit into the landscape with their blackened brick and stone. The newer ones were a sort of biscuit colour and had no chimneys. The area was untidy and looked uncared for. Front gardens were already filled with bits of broken fencing, old cars and thrown-away plastic toys.

Matt had been climbing ever since he got off the bus and he reckoned he had reached the outskirts that he had seen from The Beacons. He sat down on a broken bench and looked around. What next? A ginger and white cat looked at him and set its course purposefully towards him. The cat sat at his feet and weighed up its choices, then it jumped onto his lap and stood kneading his thighs. It arched its back as Matt started to stroke it. From across the road, a little bent old lady pulling a shopping trolley called out:

"I thought it was only old ladies that made a fuss of cats."

"He chose *me!*" Matt shouted back.

"He chose me," Matt repeated to himself. God had chosen him. But why? Why had he led him to this God-forsaken place? There was nothing to see.

Matt's hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He hadn't seen anybody approach him but he knew he was not alone. The cat jumped and fled. A great pair of invisible hands gripped his shoulders and lifted him high off the ground. "This place is not God-forsaken. I have never left them but so many of them chose to leave me. And I want them to come back. Look at that woman: what do you see?"

"She's all bent over."

"What else do you see?"

"Nothing!"

"That's right. Nothing in her trolley. You fill it."

"How? I've only got a tenner!"

"Stop her before she gets to the corner. I'm going to heal her, as well"

Matt found he was back on the ground. He ran. When he got near to the lady, he called, "Excuse me!" She stopped and sort of shuffled round. She could barely lift her gaze above waist height and she screwed her face up with the effort of seeing who was after her. She looked frightened. There was nobody else in sight.

"I want to help you."

"I don't know you, do I? Not one of the usual gang of little horrors round here are you?"

"God wants to heal you. Do you believe he can?"

"Ooh! I haven't heard nothing like that around here since I were a girl."

"God told me to chase after you. So I did. What's your name?"

"Betty. They call me Bent Betty here."

"Well Betty, in the name of Jesus, stand up straight."

There was a cracking sound like fireworks going off and Betty stood up straight. She let go of the trolley and it ran down the hill, toppling off the kerb and into the road. It lay there with its little wheels spinning. Matt ran and righted it and brought it back.

"How do you feel now?" he asked Betty.

"All my pain has gone." Matt could see that it had because her face had changed.

"I can stand up! It was as if bands of iron round my ribs were snapped off." She laughed.

"Pretty horrific noise. I thought your spine was breaking!"

“I’ve not stood straight like this for twenty years. No! Must be more than that. The kids round here know I can’t see them coming, so they taunt me and throw things at me. I thought you were one of them. Parents do nothing. Police try but they’re not always here. What happened to the good old Bobby on his bike? Are you an angel?” She pinched Matt’s arm to see if he was real.

“If you can walk OK, there’s something else I need to do. Lets go to the supermarket.” Betty grabbed the trolley for support and took a step forward. She laughed again and threw her head back.” Look! Look at that sky! You take the trolley. I just want to walk! I don’t even know your name.”

“Matt.”

The supermarket was in the next street. As they entered the store, a group of people in suits stepped up to them. A camera flashed. Betty seemed bewildered.

“How did you know about my back so soon?” she asked the manager.

“Back? I don’t know anything about that. All I know is you’re our 100,000th customer. You’ve won our prize of a trolley-full of shopping.”

Betty started to cry and she had to be led to a seat near the door. It was all a bit much for her. The men in suits looked embarrassed. This wasn’t quite how they expected their celebration to go.

“Can I help her get the shopping?” asked Matt. “Is there a time limit, like do we have to race round against the clock?”

“Yes and no. Yes you can help her. No, there’s no rush, but you have to start whilst Tracey’s here with the camera, so we can get some pictures for the papers. What’s her name?”

“I may be old but I’m not simple, young man. I am quite capable of answering for myself. My name is Elisabeth Thomas. People call me Betty.”

“Someone put a glass of champagne into Betty’s hand,” said the Store Manager. “Now let’s have a cheerful smile for the camera, please Betty.” The camera flashed in Betty’s face.

Matt waited until Betty was ready to fill her trolley. She had stopped weeping and was giggling. At the start she let Matt get items off the higher shelves but then she

realised that she could now reach for them herself. Matt was surprised how tall she was when she stretched to reach. Betty had taken basic foodstuffs at first; many years of having to choose the cheapest items had left a mark on her. Then Matt reminded her that she could have the best of everything. This really made her laugh like a child and she picked up two bottles of sweet sherry and the best ready-made meals, and a fresh pineapple. Then she chose presents for her neighbours and cakes and newly-baked rolls, still warm. As they walked round the store together, Betty said, "Now tell me about this Jesus of yours."

And Matt told her. He didn't think she was listening because she kept saying things like, "I think I'll have a trifle," or "Edna enjoys a Dundee Cake," or "We must go back and get a little bit of steak."

They got out of the store after a final photo-shoot of Betty and Matt standing by the piled up trolley. "Let's just sit down here for a minute, Matt, if you have got the time. I expect you thought I wasn't listening, like a silly old woman, but I was and I want to know Jesus too."

~\*~

By the time Matt had finished talking and praying with Betty, he wondered how he was going to carry all the stuff for her and he was in danger of missing his bus. Then he remembered the £10 note that he hadn't had to use for food. He rang one of the numbers posted outside the store and a taxi arrived after only five minutes. He got Betty and the bags loaded safely and paid the driver, then he ran down the hill towards the town centre. His knees and shins hurt with the pounding on the tarmac.

He didn't notice the car that cruised up and followed just behind him. He didn't hear it stop for a second and a door shut softly. And he ignored it as it pulled quietly alongside him, matching his pace. Then the car pulled ahead of him and stopped. The driver stood in his path, a big bloke built like a tank. As Matt tried to dodge him, he was grabbed from behind.

"In the car, my son. What have we got here then? Little bit of thieving on our patch, is it?"

"Let me go! I've got a bus to catch."

“No buses up here at this time, boyo.”

At the police station, he was asked a lot of questions. Matt could tell they thought he was a Pirtington thief trying to operate where he wasn't known. He admitted his story wasn't very believable even with the healing left out: a stranger walks all the way out of Llanrace just to help an old lady he didn't know and then took her to a supermarket to fill her trolley up for free and then was running away in the dusk to catch a bus all the way back to Pirtington. And, no, he didn't know her address exactly and he doubted she had a phone.

“Ring the supermarket. Please. They'll remember me. Or take me back there, yourselves.”

“Now why should we waste valuable time and fuel, prices being what they are these days. OK. Constable Hughes, would you be kind enough to ring the store. No rush like.”

When PC Hughes returned he was grinning. “We've got a right little Jesus here, Sarge. Been quite the Good Samaritan too it seems. Healing old ladies, helping them with their shopping, getting them taxis and the like.”

“It was only one old lady,” Matt interrupted.

“As I was saying Sarge, remember old Bent Betty? All them visits we made to Llangwyn Terrace to sort out her complaints. Seems she's Tall Betty now, thanks to this Messiah of the Valleys.”

“Well, Constable. Bowing to him now, is it?”

In the middle of this mocking, Matt once more heard God speak to him: “Ask PC Hughes about his daughter, Lindsey.”

When the Sergeant went out of the room, Matt plucked up courage to speak.

“Have you got a daughter called Lindsey?”

“How do you know that? What's it to you?”

“When you get home, you'll find she is walking.”

The policeman was obviously a hard man but this touched a soft spot. He said that Lindsey hadn't walked since she had been dropped at birth. She was now 12.

“They told us she would never walk,” he whispered. “If you can do what they couldn't, I'll do anything for you.”

“I'm no Messiah. It is Jesus who heals, not me. I'm no magician either. I didn't know your daughter's name or

what was wrong with her. The Holy Spirit of God told me while you were having a go at me. I wouldn't mind a lift to Pirtington though, if you're going to let me go."

The Sergeant came back with a form to fill in. "Phone call for you, Hughsie. At the desk. Wife, I believe. Keep it short, man."

"Now what spell have you been putting on our Constable Hughes, Mr Matthew Messiah? He looks like he's gone all soft. Not quite his usual self at all, he isn't."

Before Matt could answer, the door crashed open, banging against a filing cabinet. PC Hughes stood with tears on his face but triumphant. He was a big rugby player of a man and he filled the doorway. He looked like he had just led Wales to the Five Nations.

"Oops! Sorry Sarge! Lindsey's walking. How can that be? Trish says she just got out of her wheelchair and walked into the kitchen. There was no warning like. Lindsey says a white figure stood in front of her and said, "Walk". She said she knew it was Jesus, because she'd seen pictures of him at Sunday School. Said he was bigger than she thought."

"Sit yourself there whilst I fix up a lift for you." Matt sat by the glass doors at the entrance to the Police Station. Outside, it was getting dark. The green lights of the Martial Arts store were bright but the shop was shuttered with a steely grey screen. An ambulance went through a red light, blue light flashing. Everything else was gloomy. Good job mum was used to him keeping his own time or she'd be worried by now.

"Evening paper whilst you wait, mate?" The desk officer threw the folded paper to Matt with a whistle. Matt picked up the paper to read the front page. "Oh, no!"

## **YOUTH MIRACLE WORKER SAVES CRIPPLED WOMAN**

The story was very short. They had obviously rushed it to get into the evening edition. The worst thing was they'd got the picture of him and Betty at the store.

“Not a great picture of you, matey! We should be able to smuggle you out through the adoring crowds unrecognised. Coat over your head, like. Used to it here, we are.”

Matt looked up at him. He was joking but not mocking this time. Even so, Matt couldn't help glancing out to the street. Only a young couple walking past. The sergeant came up.

“Looks like I'm going soft too! I've told Constable Hughes he better get himself off home and I've told our gorgeous WPC Lewis to drive you into Pirlington. Lucky man you are.”

WPC Lewis was gorgeous. She told Matt to call her Sharon and she let him sit in the front so he didn't look like a criminal. She drove like a rally driver. As soon as they were out of sight of the police station, she switched on her flashing lights and siren. There wasn't a lot of traffic but it was still fun to weave down the streets. Out on the dual carriageway, Sharon put her foot down hard. The big Volvo surged forward. Matt risked leaning over to check the speed: 90.

“Well, it is an emergency of sorts, isn't it Matt? Can't have your mother unnecessarily distressed. Anyway, this may be the only time I get to drive this. I'm usually in something slower.” Matt looked over again: 100. It was scary. Especially when a truck loaded with bales of straw started to move out to pass a tanker. Sharon swore and braked hard. The truck driver saw the flashing lights late and swerved back into line. Its trailer swung dangerously onto the hard shoulder. Its high load lurched back from side to side. The Volvo accelerated past, headlights flashing and horn blasting. “Muppet!” shouted Sharon. Then, “Maybe I should take it a tad slower.”

“What's all this I hear about your day, Matt? You don't look like your average Jesus freak. I know Bent Betty. She's a sweet old dear. Poor as could be. Always being bullied. Hard to stop it. The lads round here are so bored. Maybe you should recruit some of them?”

Matt was still thinking about the truck and they were still cruising at just under 90 when a little blue Nissan Micra pulled out in front of them, doing about 60. Sharon had no time to brake this time. “Oh God!” she yelled and braced herself. Matt yelled, “Jeeeesuuuuuus!” He shut his



eyes. The big Volvo juddered. There was a sound like the beating of huge wings: thwumph, thwumph. Matt felt himself forced back against his seat. He opened his eyes. No Nissan! No crash!

Sharon steered into the inside lane and then onto the hard shoulder. She stopped and looked at Matt. Her eyes were wide with panic and she was shaking. She was silently crying. Neither of them spoke. The Nissan went past them, still doing 60, as if nothing had happened. Other vehicles went past them. All the drivers and passengers turned and stared. Some looked angry, some looked terrified, some looked amazed.

A single giant golden feather drifted onto the windscreen then dropped onto the bonnet before being swept away by the wind. Matt started laughing. Sharon whispered, "We're all right. What happened?"

"I think God sent his angels to lift us over the Nissan!"

"But we were doing 90!"

"I know."

"But why? How?" Sharon asked.

"Why what?"

"Why did he do it?"

"Because we needed him. It was life or death. We both called out to him."

"Yes, but I didn't mean it."

"Did you see that feather?"

"Yes."

"Angel's wing. It came out of an angel's wing. It explains the beating sounds I heard when I expected a crash. Did you feel that lift?"

"I saw an angel," said Sharon.

"Wow! I didn't!"

"I think there were two. Two angels. One each side of the car. I think I was allowed to see them because I needed to. I didn't see their faces, just their amazing brightness."

"Wow!"

"Why did he come if I didn't mean it? And anyway, it was as much my fault as the woman in that Micra."

"Mercy," explained Matt. "You didn't deserve help, but that's OK because none of us deserve God's help. You broke the law by speeding just for fun when you

were supposed to be the law. It's like, God put us on the earth to be God's law but we all chose to break the law and so we broke away from God. He sent Jesus to rescue us because there was no way back for us. We didn't deserve rescuing but he did it anyway."

"I'm going to lose my job over this. Someone'll report me. Speeding, putting lives at risk. Sorry Matt, I nearly killed you."

"I know. But we're OK."

"I can't afford to lose my job. I've just bought a house with my partner. We've stretched ourselves to the absolute limit as it is."

"You won't lose your job."

"We're really up against it and the mortgage payments are going to go up."

"You won't lose your job."

"How am I going to explain it to John? They'll repossess the house. He'll kill me. How do you know I won't lose it?"

"I just do. God's love covers over sins."

When Matt got out of the car in Pirlington, his mother was already out on the pavement, on the lookout. When she saw the police car she assumed Matt had slipped back into old ways and was in trouble.

"What's going on, Matt?"

"I'll tell you, later. Everything's cool."

~\*~

The drive home after the holiday was long and slow. Roadworks, rain and heavy traffic combined to create long delays. Matt missed most of it because he was in a deep sleep. He'd still been in bed when his mother had put her head round his door for the third time and told him she was ready to leave. He had been awake for half the night and had busy dreams during the other half. After all the events of yesterday and his disturbed night, he felt as though he had been drugged and pummelled.

In the car Matt made a very poor navigator as they worked their way to the motorway. He fell asleep almost as soon as he put the map down. He had yet another dream, similar to ones in the night. In each one, everybody else seemed to understand something but he

didn't. A terrible sense of frustration and anxiety came over him because he couldn't work out what he was supposed to understand. He saw himself with a group, searching. It looked like he was leading the group but he didn't know what they were looking for. Everybody else was so intense and committed to the search. Still in his dream, he heard his mother's voice say, "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. Why can't you just do it?"

Matt woke up suddenly at this point. The car was at a standstill in a traffic jam. His mother was listening to stuff on her iPod. "Do what?" thought Matt. He remembered the vision he had of Jesus telling him to be his hands. He could see the picture again in his mind's eye. Jesus held up his hands together like praying hands. Be my hands. Praying hands. Then Matt got it. He was so relieved he shouted out, "Got it!" Mum didn't seem to hear.

He understood at last the meaning of the dreams. Deep down inside he knew he had seen something in his vision at the waterfall that hadn't registered with him. He'd been too busy during the rest of the day to give it much thought, but in his sleep his subconscious was still trying to work it out. Now he understood: Prayer. It was all about prayer. He'd pretty much stopped praying over the last couple of months and the group at school had stopped meeting. Nothing much had happened for a while and nobody new had joined them. God had not seemed to be present anymore and it had all got a bit boring.

He thought again about his dreams. It was hard to put them into words but he could not get out of his head the picture of everybody else knowing what they were looking for. He thought he'd seen Toby and Tammy among the searchers, maybe Chas too. His head pounded with a headache. He fell asleep again and dreamed.

In his dream he was back in a group, searching. He noticed that everybody else had their hands together in front of them as they searched. Like they were pointing the way. No, like monks praying. And this time he was in the group, too. He saw himself slotted in between Anya and Tim. His hands were together too. He wasn't leading the group any more. They weren't looking at him at all.

No-one was leading the group. They were all in it together.

He woke up, dozed, and woke again. Why was nothing happening like in Evan Roberts' day?

"Because no-one wants to pray." The words cut like a sword. They hurt. It was true; he didn't want to pray. He wanted to *do* things. It gave him a buzz to see Betty healed and to have knowledge given to him about Lindsey, but he found prayer was hard work.

"You will see no more miracles until you and the rest of the group pray together as equals. You must all pick up the sceptre."

Matt realised he was being given a second chance; *they* were being given a second chance. God had shown what he could do in ordinary lives. To begin with he had shown, through Matt, what an amazing God he was. But now he was saying it was about being in a team.

He thought about the feeding of the 5000 people again. Jesus said to his disciples, "*You* feed them." When he had said to Matt, "*You* be my hands," he meant 'You', plural, not Matt on his own. The vision was for his whole group and maybe others too.

"Want something to eat, Matt?" said his mother. "Services are just coming up."

"OK. I didn't have any breakfast. I've got a headache, too."

"Dehydration. You don't drink enough."

Inside the Service Station, Matt queued up in Burger King whilst his mother went into the shop. She followed Matt up to the counter, holding a newspaper and some paracetamols. Whilst Matt drank his Coke and ate his burger and chips, his mum had a coffee and read the paper.

"Matt, isn't this where you went yesterday?" Matt looked at the folded page presented to him. The headline said,

**HARMLESS PENSIONER  
MURDERED IN OWN HOME  
Youths arrested after siege**

But it wasn't the headline that Matt saw first. It was the photo of Betty taken at the supermarket, alongside the

report. He looked up at the top of the paper. This was national news. Matt was shocked. In silence he scanned the story.

Elisabeth Thomas, 79, was found by neighbours who heard her cries yesterday evening. Her body lay across her own front doorstep. Police arrested two local men, Matthew Smith-Thomas and Hugh Wiggins, who were seen to enter a boarded-up house believed to be occupied by squatters....

Police surrounded a house on the outskirts of Llanrace last night to protect suspected killers from an angry mob. The fact that this crowd consisted largely of parents and pensioners shows how this murder has united the residents in their determination to see the killers of Elisabeth Thomas brought to justice. For years police have struggled to identify criminals as the close-knit community has closed ranks to protect their sons and daughters. But not any more: this death was one step too far.

Within minutes a large crowd of residents surrounded the house and prevented Wiggins, 22, and Smith-Thomas, 19, from leaving. Some tried to force a way in by levering the boards off the ground floor

windows. Police feared for the safety of Wiggins and Smith-Thomas and formed a cordon around the house. The two men are now in protective custody pending investigations.

Elisabeth Thomas was an easily recognised and familiar figure in the area. Despite being crippled with a chronic back condition she regularly walked the streets with the aid of a supermarket trolley. She briefly became a local celebrity yesterday when she was healed by a miracle. Later the same day, Betty, as she was universally known, was photographed at ...

Matt scanned down the page.

Neighbour, Edna Wright, 71, said that she had never seen Betty looking so well or so happy. "She had her first little taste of happiness and fame and then this happens," said Mrs Wright. "We're all shocked round here."

A police spokesman said that they suspected that the murder was the result of a burglary that went wrong. Unconfirmed rumours suggest that the crime may be drug-related...

"What is it Matt?"

He didn't answer. He was battling with rage. Why did God allow things like this? Where were the angels? Even one would have been enough! Then he felt guilty because he and Sharon had been protected. God had sent angels then.

"I knew her," said Matt at last.

"Let me look. Is she the lady you were telling me about? Oh, Matt I'm so sorry."

"I've got to get out of here," he snapped.

He got out into the car park. There was a grassy hill with picnic tables and a play area. It was still raining and Matt let the rain run down his face with his tears. He had so many questions.

"Forgive them and pray for them."

"No! I can't. Not yet, I can't. Anyway, it's not just them I'm angry with."

"Who else?"

"You! Why didn't you stop them?" Matt's mother was waiting for him in the car.

"Want to talk?"

"Not yet, Mum."

As they drove down the motorway in silence, Matt continued to struggle with God.

"Forgive them, for your own sake, Matt. It is urgent. I cannot work in this situation until you do."

## **Part Four**

# **JOSH AND TIGER**

It was a very cold day in early December, bright with a clear blue sky but really icy cold. In the High Street, there was still white frost in the shade at lunchtime. Matt

crossed over from the shadow side and was dazzled by the low winter sun. Ahead of him he saw a man sitting on the pavement in the sun, with a lean whippet curled on his lap. The man seemed to have no belongings except for the sheets of cardboard he sat on. His chin was on his chest and his face was buried in a scarf.

As soon as Matt saw him, he made a decision and turned back to the Burger King he had just passed. There was an offer of two burgers for the price of one. He had cash in his pocket and he bought two burgers and a large coffee, cramming his pocket with sachets of sugar.

When he got back, the man had lifted his head and was stroking the dog. Matt held out the burgers and the coffee.

“I thought you could use these. They’re still hot.”

“Thanks,” said the man quietly. “Thanks, but I’d rather just have one burger if you would sit with me and eat the other.” He shifted sideways on the cardboard to make room. Matt watched the passers-by. Someone threw a coin at the man without even looking at him.

“OK,” he said.

“Does it bother you, sitting with one of the great unwashed?”

Matt looked at the man and then glanced at the passing legs. “No. Well, yes, sort of.” He sat down anyway. Even with the cardboard it felt cold and hard.

“Should I have got veggie burgers or something? Do you eat meat?”

“I can’t afford to be picky. I’m Josh by the way.”

“Matt”. He looked into the face of Josh. He didn’t look more than about 30 maybe.

“Well Matt, it’s a long time since I sat and shared a meal with someone. It means a lot. Can you understand?”

Matt remembered when things had been bad for his mum, and how much it had mattered to him that they sat together on the same sofa at tea-time.

“Yes. I get it. What’s your dog’s name?”

“This is Tiger.”

Matt stroked Tiger. “Why Tiger?”

“Because he is so gentle. It’s my little joke. Watch him take this meat.”

Tiger lifted his head and carefully took the bit of burger without even touching Josh’s fingers.



“I knew you were coming Matt. I saw you.”

“You couldn’t have done. Your whole face was hidden when I came up.”

“No, not with my eyes. I saw you in my head. I knew you wouldn’t pass me by. I even saw you giving me food. I knew it was important too.”

“How do you mean?”

“It was important for you that you did what you did. It was like a sign, a sign that you were the one.”

“The one for what?”

“The one I was waiting for.” Josh finished his coffee and held the warm cup against his cheek.

“I’ve got a message for you from God. Do you know what prophecy is?”

“Sort of: like God speaking.” Matt felt the presence of God descend on them.

“The Lord says to you, Matt, ‘I have plans for you, plans for a hope and a future. Do not look back at your past. Do not judge yourself, nor judge others by what you see. I will pour out my Spirit on you so that you are wise beyond your years, and not just on you but on the whole of your group. I will send new people to join you and share in my work. Get that: it is my work, not your work. I will send people who see beyond what their eyes tell them, people who don’t seem very important but I have chosen them because they are willing to do what I ask them. I am making you into a team.’”

Matt and Josh sat completely still. The man and the boy were totally unaware of the movement and noise around them, completely unaffected by the cold air and the hard pavement. After some time, Matt suddenly said, “I need to go. I should be back in school.” He gave Josh a hug and Tiger a stroke, disregarding the disapproving looks of others who judged by what they saw: a dirty down-and-out and a boy in school uniform, probably truanting, probably dealing drugs.

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When Matt got back at the end of the lunch break, the school entrance hall and corridors were heaving with pupils, all moving slowly towards the main hall. He remembered then that there was to be a whole-school

assembly. They didn't happen very often because it was a squeeze to get everybody in, but the Head Teacher, Mrs Harris, said it was important to be a whole community together. Sometimes a challenge was made about topics like behaviour or expectations; sometimes an entertainment was laid on, so everyone could just have a laugh together. Last time a rock band made up of year 10s and 11s had done a couple of numbers with some year 11 girls dancing. It had been really good. It didn't look like that was going to happen this time: Mrs Harris was standing centre stage with a sheaf of papers in her hand.

Apart from the usual dribble of latecomers, the whole school was seated and all the staff were lined up around the walls. It was pretty noisy but, unusually, Mrs Harris did nothing to get order. She kept looking towards the doors.

In the school office, Maggie Hampton, the office manager, was talking with Deputy Head, Mr Yates.

"It looks like a no-show, John. They planned to be here by 1 o'clock to give themselves time to set up and get into costume."

"Try ringing on their mobile."

"I've done that three times in the last ten minutes. No answer."

"Where are they coming from, Maggie?"

"Bristol."

"Have we used them before?"

"No. Apparently one of them was at Drama School with Clarissa Dingle."

Mr Yates went back into the hall to report to Mrs Harris. Between them they would have to cook up an impromptu assembly. They had done it before and no-one had noticed.

Outside school, three year 11s came through the gates, stubbing cigarettes out on the school sign. With them was a tall thin man and a whippet.

"See you in a minute, lads," said the man. He went up to the office window. "Hi! We're here to do the school assembly."

The office staff all turned to the window and stared at the man in worn clothes and carrying old boxes.

"You're very late. Where are the rest of you? The whole school is in there waiting."

“It’s just me and Tiger.”

“Tiger?”

“Yes. Tiger comes with me wherever I go. Kids love him.” He lifted Tiger up to the window so the ladies could see him.

“Well, we better get you straight in. It’s a good job you’re already in costume—its very convincing. You look as if you’ve come straight off the streets. The dog smells a bit.”

“Don’t you worry about Tiger. It’s me that smells!”

All heads turned to look as Josh entered the hall with Tiger and walked onto the stage. Josh introduced himself and shook hands with Mrs Harris and Mr Yates, who both looked relieved. There was no need for Mrs Harris to tell the school to be quiet. Everybody was keen to know who this man was and why he’d got a dog with him.

“School, let me introduce to you Josh and Tiger.”

Josh put Tiger down and the dog walked off the stage. To everybody’s delight he went straight to Lucy Timms in the front row, climbed onto her lap and curled up. There was a chorus of “Oh, cute!” from younger pupils and a lot of smiles from staff members.

“Hi! I’m Josh. Welcome to my home.” He held up his cardboard. “The door’s always open anytime you want to drop in. You’re all welcome.” There was guarded laughter.

“Matter of fact, I had a visit only this lunchtime. Someone brought me lunch. He saw I was hungry, so he provided the burgers and coffee; I provided the seats. But I wasn’t only hungry. I needed company too. So we had a burger each and he sat down with me in the cold and we had a bit of a natter.”

“I think some of you guys understand: I’ve seen you coming in to school. Quarter to eight in the morning, come rain, come shine. They won’t let you in at that time, but you’d rather hang out in the cold and wet with mates than sit around at home on your own. Parents already out at work or maybe sleeping in after night shift. What matters is a bit of company. Right?” There was a low sound of agreement around the hall. They liked this guy. He understood where they were coming from.

“And I expect some of you come into school when the doors open and have a bit of breakfast together. Maybe a bacon roll. I love bacon rolls. So does Tiger. So, I think you already understand about belonging. I think you understand about someone sitting outside in the cold and sharing burgers. And I’ll tell you something now. The person who shared his burgers is here.”

Everybody looked towards the doors, expecting another actor to come in. Everybody.

“Tiger,” whispered Josh. Instantly the dog’s ears pricked up and he was by his master’s side. It was so quiet in the hall that you could hear his claws tick-ticking on the floor. Josh held the cardboard to Tiger’s nose. “Find him, Tiger.”

The eager whippet jumped off the stage and went quickly up and down the rows of seats. Everybody watched. Once or twice he lifted his head and checked with Josh. Each time he set off again, nose to the floor, tail wagging. When he got to Matt, he jumped onto his lap and licked his face. Everyone laughed. Then it went quiet. You could almost hear people working it out. If this was real; if Matt had met Josh on the street: then Josh wasn’t an actor. He wasn’t in costume. He wasn’t acting. A couple of teachers went over to Mrs Harris to warn her that Josh was an intruder. She just smiled confidently. She’d worked it out too, but she liked what she was hearing, there was a good atmosphere in the hall, and no-one was at risk.

“Good dog, Tiger,” said Josh.

“How many of you were out and about around 7.45 this morning, maybe 8 o’clock?” Quite a few hands went up, pupils and teachers.

“OK. Hands down.”

“Who saw something special in the sky?” Three hands went up, then a fourth.

“Come out here you four, tell me your names and tell me what you saw.” Each of the four whispered in Josh’s ear.

“Well done. You all saw what I saw. Lucy, tell everybody else, please.”

“I saw a beautiful red sunrise.”

“That’s right. It was awesome and it was there for everybody to see. But we don’t all see what is around us.

And if we see it, we don't all appreciate the beauty and the value of it. These four did. Lucy, Tammy, Tim and Mrs Dingle. Matt did, when he saw the value of this scruffy, skinny man sitting on cardboard in the High Street. Other people just threw coins *at* me; Matt gave something *to* me. Apart from the burgers, he gave himself—his time, his reputation, his listening, his company. Yes, 'and his coffee': thank you Lucy. It is about belonging. And we can only belong if we see it that way. We were put on this earth to belong to each other. Hey! Everybody give someone a hug!"

By this time, there was such a feel-good atmosphere that most people turned and gave someone a hug. Miss Davenport gave Mr Grant such a big, long hug that some pupils nudged each other, thinking she must fancy him.

A little boy from year 7 came up onto the stage and grabbed Josh's legs. "Will you be my dad?" he said. Josh knelt down in front of him and gave him a bear hug.

"What is your name?"

"Sam."

"Well, Sam, there is someone who will be dad to everyone, whether you know your own dad or not. And that's God himself. My time is running out here, so if you want to know God, you'll have to talk to Matt."

The assembly had already overrun its normal time and lessons should have started, but no-one was clock-watching.

"Belonging is what matters most. Being lonely is the worst thing of all. I can put up with being cold; I can put up with being hungry; I can put up with being homeless. What I can't cope with is being lonely. That's why Matt sitting with me was such a gift. When I was a kid, my mum and dad threw money *at* me and bought me loads of things. But they didn't give *to* me. They weren't around when I needed them. They were too busy working and buying me things. But we can't buy each other because we already belong to each other. And we belong to God." Josh paused. "Tiger."

Immediately, Tiger's head whipped round and he was off Matt's knees in one movement. He climbed onto the stage and lay down by Josh's feet.

“Tiger is special. He is a special, wonderful dog, but he is never a replacement for human relationships for me. Matt, come up here please.”

Matt, with a feeling of awkwardness, walked up to the front. He felt very exposed on the stage after Josh had set him up as an expert on God.

“Matt, these four who saw the sunrise are going to be very important to you and your group. They look up and they see the good things. And if any of you,” Josh turned to the audience, “want to know more about belonging with God, you need to go to one of Matt’s meetings here in school.”

Still clutching the cardboard under his arm, he bent and scooped up Tiger one-handed. He buried his face in Tiger’s smooth coat. Then, as he turned to go, he said, “But remember: you belong.”

Josh and Mrs Harris left the hall together.

“Am I in trouble?” asked Josh. I feel like I did when I was a kid. The only time I went into the Headmaster’s study was when I was in trouble.”

“No, not at all. You have been inspirational and it was just what we all needed to hear. There are only two things to clear up.”

“I know the first one. You’re concerned about me being in your school as an imposter? And with no proof of having been vetted to work in schools?” Josh dug into an inside pocket and held out a folded piece of paper to Mrs Harris. “You see, I was a teacher. I even did supply work up until a few months ago and that certificate is still valid. So no laws broken.”

“And the imposter?”

“Well, I never claimed to be anyone I wasn’t. The timing of my arrival and the absence of whoever you expected to turn up was all divine providence.”

“OK. Well, as I say, you inspired us Josh. Sit down and have a cup of tea with me. If the drama group had turned up we would have paid them a substantial sum of money. I want you to have this. I’m not throwing it at you. I’m giving it to you with thanks. It still leaves us in your debt. I imagine a cheque would have been no use to you.”

“I will accept this on behalf of some others who will be hungry tonight. Thank you.” Josh did not check how

much he had been given but just pocketed it. Mrs Harris and Josh had a long conversation together and when Josh left it was with the offer of a job if he wanted it.

~\*~

The following term, Matt still felt overwhelmed by the responsibility that seemed to be his. He felt stitched up by God so that he couldn't back out. The whole school knew about his meetings and his group, thanks to Josh. What if Sam did come to him to ask for a Dad? What if loads of people started to come? What if no-one came? He couldn't make up his mind which would be worse.

He was really glad when Chris caught him up as he walked home. Chris was in total buffoon mood. "Hey Matt, watch this!" He jumped onto a low wall and did a handstand. "Now you year 8s, I want to see you all on the narrow beam. Alan Jenkins, I shall be making you do this twice in a minute boy, go." It was a brilliant imitation of Mr Brimmicombe, the new PE teacher. Chris stayed upside down and his face went deep red. "Just because I'm upside down, don't think I can't see you, Matthew Holt, go." Matt couldn't help laughing and Chris got down.

"Phew. Matt you nearly killed me then. You were in such a gloom, I was gonna stay upside down till I got a smile from you. Oh my head! I thought my eyes were going to pop out. So now the school thinks you're God's gift to mankind. Ha! No pressure then!"

"Leave it out, Chris!"

"I'll help."

"Well, what can you do?"

"What can you do, for that matter. Ha! Matter Holt. Well Matt, let's not gloss over this. Whatcha gonna do about it, whatcha gonna say?"

"What are you on Chris? How do you keep it up?"

"It's all in the crisps. Cheese and Onion work best for me."

"Actually, you're right. What can either of us do? God said it was his work, not mine. Not ours. I really need you around."

"Yeah man, you sure do. You're far too serious."

“Can we meet up together and pray? It’s the only way out. Just us two to start with?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“What, out here? Its far too cold.” There was a silence. “Thinking about Josh aren’t you, Matt?”

“How did you know?”

“Cos I was too. I wonder where he’ll spend tonight. I wish I hadn’t done that hand-stand. I don’t feel too good. Give me an hour and we’ll meet up at your place.”

~\*~

When Chris turned up at Matt’s, all they could think of praying was, “Help!” Then they fell silent and even Chris couldn’t find anything to say. Then Chris did speak. “I’ve been thinking about Sam getting hold of Josh’s knees because he was so little. And Josh kneeling down because he was so big. It kind of feels like that here. You and me, we’re so little. God, he’s so big. But he’s kind of come down to our level.”

“I had a picture of Sam at one of our meetings,” said Matt. “He is so little but somehow in the picture he was very big, like he is very important. There’s lots of us who haven’t got fathers around, but Sam was big enough to go out the front and show he needed one. Matt prayed, “God, we don’t know our fathers but we all need one. Like Sam does. Be dad to us.”

Suddenly Chris cried out, “I’m being hugged!”

“So am I!” They both started to cry and then laugh. It got so loud that Mrs Holt came in. As soon as she got inside Matt’s room she started crying and laughing too. “I’m being squeezed. Gosh its hot in here!”

“After a while, Mrs Holt said, “I’ve had God whispering to me, like his lips were touching my ear. I think it was Jesus. He said such nice things. Then he said, “Tell Matt and Chris they must get their coursework in on time.”

“Boring!” shouted Matt.

“No. I get it,” said Chris, very serious. “He’s being a dad to us. He’s not nagging. He knows what’s best. My Geography coursework has got to be handed in



tomorrow and I need that grade. I've got a lot to get done."

"Stressy or what? Yeah, though. I've got three days to finish my History coursework but I've got loads to do too. I've barely even started it."

~\*~

Matt was sitting in class, waiting to hand in his coursework. He'd been up till 4am working on it. Most of the rest of the class were desperately finishing their work, sticking in last bits, adding their names and candidate numbers to the covers. He'd done all his but he was really tired. In his stillness he heard,

"You've just been playing in the shallows. I've shown you something of what I can do. It hasn't required your faith, although there have been times when you did what I asked. It has been my mercy. I rescued you and gave you a purpose and identity. Remember the sceptre? You felt good about yourself because you belonged. You just didn't know who you belonged to. Then I gave you your mother back. I turned Toby from your enemy into a friend. Do you get it?"

"Yes. It's like what Josh said," Matt answered silently.

"Think back to the waterfall. You stood at the edge of the pool and watched the spray drift across the water and wet the rocks. You stood behind the shelter of the waterfall. You were shielded by its great power and you felt safe. Now Matt, are you ready to get into the waterfall? Are you ready to get into my power? It will cost you a great deal, because if you want to survive in the waterfall you have to pray, obey and stay with me."

~\*~

When Matt and Chris next met up to pray, Chris said, "This is surreal. I wonder what teachers would say if they knew."

"Never mind the teachers! What about the rest of year 11? What would be our chances with the girls?"

"Got to be done, Matt. Anyway, feels good to me. We're not alone, you know. You OK? You're not having a downer are you?"

“No. I’ve just had to do a bit of working things out. I mean, some of those times we had at the end of the last group meetings, they were really dead.”

“They were B-O-R-I-N-G. Boring!”

“Right. And I’m not sure I can face that again. I mean, suppose loads of people turn up and then God doesn’t.”

“Doesn’t what?”

“Turn up, stupid!”

“We don’t have to worry about that. We’ve just got to do the biz. I opened my Bible last night and a few words seemed to jump out at me.”

“What did it say then?”

“To obey is better than sacrifice.”

“Is that all? What does that mean?”

“It means we only have to do what God tells us to do. He really likes it if we do what he tells us. Come on Matt. You know. It was you he told we had to pray, obey and stay. Remember? Those meetings got boring when we yacked too much. Anybody can yack. We need to listen.”

“Like now?”

Chris and Matt fell silent. Matt was thinking that Chris had overtaken him: seemed wise all of a sudden. He felt a bit of a failure. Then he realised it meant the load was already being shared and he felt really good.

“God, thanks for Chris. He’s great. Give him and me more of an idea of what you want to do.”

Chris looked up. “Yeah Father, we’re here now. Both of us. What’s next?”

“I’m not cool yet with calling him Father. My father’s a bumner. He just quit on us. I figure there’s a lot of us at school like this.”

~\*~

A few weeks later, Matt had to get to grips with his work and he had to face up to his exams. He was still trying to get his head around Betty’s death too. He felt irritable a lot of the time and he reacted angrily to people.

Chris came towards him down the corridor, larking around as usual. He was doing impersonations of teachers for a group of year 7s who thought he was cool. There was a lot of giggling. Matt felt a bit envious of Chris’s

popularity and his cheerfulness. But Chris stopped when he saw Matt and tagged along with him back down the corridor.

“Hi Matt! Ee! In’t it grand to be back in school.” Matt made a derisive noise through his nostrils. “Actually, Matt, I need to talk with you.”

Matt glanced sideways at Chris. He was amazed at how Chris could switch from being a loony into a serious human being just like that. It was the serious expression on Chris’s face that made him relax.

“Go on then.”

“God’s been speaking to me about prayer. We need to make a new start with the group. Maybe even get into the Bible together. I figured we could start meeting in Room 7 again but not speak to anyone new about the meeting; just put up one poster on the school notice-board. After that it’s all up to God. Let’s see who he brings along.”

Chris had even come up with a name for the meetings: Godz4us. Matt stopped in his tracks. Kids bumped into the back of him and pushed past.

“You’ve really got hold of this haven’t you,” said Matt. “OK. You prepare something and I’ll try to speak to the others.”

“I’ve done that already. When you were away on holiday. I rang up a couple of the others to test the water although there’s not many of us left, now the year 11s have gone. Tim and Tammy say God’s been saying the same thing to them. Tammy says we’ve all got to pick up the sceptre.”

“OK, Chris. But you’ve got to organise it. I can’t.”

Matt felt better after being with Chris. Part of it was because Chris was so likeable even when he was being annoying, but mostly it was knowing that God had been speaking to others as well. It kind of took the weight of responsibility off him. “We’ve all got to pick up the sceptre.” That’s what God had already said to him. Now he’d apparently said it to Tammy.

~\*~

Matt got to Room 7 a bit late. He had been kept behind at the end of his Maths lesson for disruptive behaviour.

He had been talking with Chris about the meeting but Chris had somehow got away with it. It was as if God was showing Matt that the success of the meeting did not depend on him. He discovered something new about Chris: he was a born organiser. Tim, Tammy, Maria, Nina and Wu Ji-Sung were all there and about ten other new people from years 7 to 10. More came later. Little Sam, who had hugged Josh's knees, was sitting on a desk swinging his legs; Lucy Timms was sitting on the floor, stroking Tiger; Mrs Dingle was sitting next to Mr Green at one of the tables; Anthea McLeish, one of the school cleaners was talking to some of the kids. She had always said she got on better with the pupils than with the teachers, though she admired Mr Green because she noticed how he listened to the kids. As Matt stood in the doorway, gawping in amazement, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"I came to look for you. Chris told me you were stuck. I thought you might need back up."

"Josh! What are you doing here?"

"I'm working here, part-time. Mrs Harris has given me a job to develop the community here. It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't stopped and given me a burger. Shows how important little things are."

Matt noticed there was no sense of God's presence though; none of the power that had been in the first meetings. Was it because the adults were there? Tim spoke:

"Matt, how would you feel if we did things different this time, like maybe shared things around?"

"Responsibility, you mean? Yeah, I'm cool. God's told me that's how it's got to be."

There was the sound of high heels trit-trotting down the corridor. It reminded Matt of Anya. What a pity she'd left school.

"Hi, can't stop. Just got a quick message," said Anya. "I was on the bus when the Holy Spirit told me to get off and come here. It was like it was so urgent. Matt, you look dreadful!"

"Is that the message? It's nice to see you too."

"No, but I see now why it is so urgent. Matt, I think God has shown me you are blaming him about something. That's not right. And you have to forgive

somebody. Two people I think. Does that make any sense?”

“Yes, Anya. Loads. It’s a tough one though. I knew this myself really but I bottled it. I guess it matters more than I thought. I’ll say the words but who knows if I really mean it? I forgive those two men who killed Betty. You’re right: I was blaming God. But not any more.” Then Matt remembered his dream of standing between Tim and Anya.

Suddenly there was a rushing sound like a wind down the corridor and a roaring noise from the ceiling. “It’s like a waterfall,” shouted Maria. Nobody noticed Becky standing in the doorway until she started to cry. Tears ran down her face and she called out, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I stole it!” She held out the sceptre in her hands and it started to glow. A tiny flame flickered on its surface. The wind rushing in from the corridor fanned the flame and a fire grew in her hands. Becky continued to shout, “I’m sorry! I am so sorry!” Then the fire went out. The sceptre had gone. Becky stood still, the palms of her hands held upwards, shaking but completely unharmed by the heat of the flames.

The wind dropped to a gentle breeze and the roaring sound of the waterfall quietened. Becky stretched out her hands. “What’s going on? They feel heavy, like I’m still holding something.”

“It’s the power of God,” said Tim. “Put your hands on anyone you’re told to. Just listen.”

“But the sceptre’s gone!” cried Becky.

“We don’t need it. It’s gone for good,” said Chris. “Tell them, Matt, what you discovered about sceptres. Remember? When you were on the internet?”

“Oh! Yeah! I hadn’t a clue what I’d found till I saw a picture of a sceptre on a website. Different pictures actually. Then I looked up the word ‘sceptre’. It’s a symbol of authority. Like for kings and queens. Our sceptre was just a symbol. Got our attention. It was pretty amazing but now God is showing us more.”

“Something better,” said Mrs Dingle.

“Yes. God’s giving us his actual authority,” said Tim.

“What? All of us?” shouted Becky.

“Wow!” whispered Lucy.

Becky's face was beautiful and full of peace. She moved from the doorway to Mrs Dingle and touched her shoulders. "God's taken away your anger and all your hurts," Becky spoke quietly. "My hands are still heavy. What do I do next?"

"Keep going," said Anya. Becky walked over to Tammy and Lucy. She placed one hand on each of them and stood still, waiting in silence. Nothing seemed to happen. Then Becky turned and looked around. "Which one's Tim?" Tim put up his hand. "OK. Put out your hands then," Becky said. Becky laid her palms downward on Tim's and Tim's whole body started to shake. "Wow," he shouted. "My hands are so hot!"

All this time, the breeze seemed to move around the room from one person to another, leaving no-one out. They could watch its progress: a piece of paper lifted and fell back, a stray lock of hair was blown, the hem of a skirt swayed back and forth. Anya, quietly slipped out of the room to catch her bus and the sound of her high heels receded down the corridor.

Matt and Tim were the last to leave Room 7. About thirty people had been squeezed into the room and desks and chairs had to be pushed back into place to leave things tidy. Neither of them felt the need to say much. When they were near the end of the long corridor, Tim said, "We need to go back."

"Why?" said Matt.

"Don't know. I just know we must."

Tim led the way and Matt followed. As they got near to Room 7, Tim paused.

"I'm scared."

"So am I. The hairs on my neck have all ..."

"Quiet!"

Matt took half a step towards the doorway but Tim put out his arm. They stood in silence. Rigid. Then they heard a low growl inside the room. It was like the sound an animal made in its throat when it was muzzled tight. Matt looked through the crack in the door and almost yelled. Standing by the teacher's desk was Adam Prince. His feet seemed rooted to the spot. His arms were pinned by his side. In his hands were two long knives but he was

powerless to use them. His eyes blazed with hate. Tim saw Matt's reaction and had a look for himself.

"There's an angel in there. He's holding Adam."

"So why are we here? Can't he deal with it?"

"It's God's plan. It's OK. That's why Becky was told to put her hands on mine. It's for now."

Tim stepped through the door. At the same moment the angel released Adam. Adam lifted his arms and coiled back to spring, spitting at Tim.

"No you don't! In the name of Jesus, go!" Tim lifted his hands and Adam was thrown back and slammed against the wall. The two knives clattered to the floor.

"Is he dead?" called Matt from the doorway.

"No. Listen."

The gentle breeze came back into the room and seemed to play around with Adam's hair. Nothing else moved. Then Adam raised his head. His face was unrecognisable. The old Adam had gone. The hate had gone. Peace was in his eyes and a slow smile came.

"Hi guys," he said. "God's cool isn't he!"

~\*~

At the school governors' meeting, Mrs Harris knew she was heading for trouble. One of the governors had warned her that the Chair of Governors, Alec Cromer, was out to get her because she had allowed Josh into the school. The meetings always went on late into the evening and this issue wasn't even on the official agenda.

Discussions started as normal, with everyone following the correct procedures of working through the agenda and addressing everything they had to say to the Chair of Governors. There was nothing in the atmosphere to suggest trouble but Mrs Harris noted that very few of the governors looked her in the eye. "They've already decided they want to get rid of me," she thought.

It was getting late when Alec Cromer said. "Right, now: Any Other Business? Perhaps I can lead off as I have disturbing information to hand." He looked around the table as if defying anyone to oppose his suggestion. He had a very dominating personality and no-one spoke.

“Mrs Harris, I hear that you had a whole-school assembly at the end of last term. Would you care to tell us about it?”

“Yes. We had a visiting speaker who stepped in at the last minute when the drama group we had expected didn’t turn up. He was absolutely excellent. He gave the whole school community a message we all needed to hear and he had the attention of the kids and the staff right from the beginning.”

“And you sanctioned this preaching of his Jesus stuff? It’s just brainwashing.”

“Josh never mentioned Jesus and neither did I. He talked about us belonging to each other. So you could just as easily call that part Humanism, if you wish to put a label on it. Then he said we all belong to God who cares about us all. How inclusive is that?”

“So you believe in this God too?”

“No, I don’t. But I do believe in the benefits we are seeing. The children and staff already seem happier. Staff absences with stress related illness were nil at the start of this term, behaviour is better. Pupils, I mean, not staff. And I’m confident that our next set of exam results will show improvement too.”

“You have evidence to back up that claim, of course?”

“On the exam results? No, not exactly. But I do have feedback from teachers.”

“The point is, Mrs Harris, I have to bring you back to the real issue. You allowed some tramp to come in off the streets with a mangy dog. He was uninvited and came in with three of the worst pupils in school. His visit was unlawful and unsafe. You put the safety of pupils at risk.”

“What makes you say it was unlawful, Alec?”

“He was straight off the streets. Could have been dealing drugs for all we know. Judging by the three year 11s I hear he came in with, it’s a raving certainty I reckon. You knew nothing about him. He hadn’t been certified to work in schools. You were downright irresponsible.”

“May I in turn ask you for your evidence?”

“I don’t need any evidence. His appearance spoke for itself.”

“Have you had any complaints?”

“One or two, yes.”



“And you have investigated these complaints and recorded them in writing, I expect?”

“The governors as a whole are concerned. He hadn’t even been checked.” Mr Cromer looked at the other governors for agreement but no-one was ready to stick their necks out. This made Mr Cromer even more angry. “Look. The safety of the pupils is paramount. The other details are side issues. You were negligent and I can only say therefore ...”

Mrs Harris slid a sheet of paper across the table. “He had a certificate.”

“What? How dare you make a mockery of this meeting.”

“Look at the paper. He had been through the vetting process and this is a copy of his certificate. Joshua Matthews. A qualified teacher who was doing supply teaching in this county up until three months ago. His certificate is still valid.”

Mr Cromer shouted across the table, “And did you know that when you let him in?” His rage had increased because his argument was now on shaky ground. He could sense that his plan to get Mrs Harris out of school was falling apart. He again glanced at some of the other governors. They still stayed silent.

“No I didn’t. We were all expecting a drama group, the Great Nerds. When Josh came into the hall we all thought he was one of the group in costume. He was good for the school. I’ve offered him a job.”

“You’ve what?” Mr Cromer went from red to white and put his hand to his chest. He fell back in his seat and stayed frighteningly still.”

Mrs Harris whipped out her phone and punched in 999.

The paramedics were brilliant. Within minutes they had checked Mr Cromer, fitted an oxygen mask over his face and carried him off to the ambulance. “He’s breathing, that’s all I can tell you. Heart attack,” said the shorter paramedic as they left.

The following day, news about Mr Cromer got around school pretty quickly. Not many pupils knew him by name although sometimes he had come and spoken when prizes were being given out. Occasionally he had come

into lessons too and sat at the back. The truth was that they didn't know him enough to take a lot of notice of his heart attack. It would have been different if it had been a teacher.

For Luke Cromer, however, it mattered desperately that his dad lived. He was all he had since his mum had died from cancer four years previously. His dad had never been the same after that. He'd been really difficult to live with but he was still his dad. There was no other family around so Luke stayed at a friend's house whilst his dad lay in Intensive Care.

Luke was sick of answering people's questions about him in school. Mrs Dingle called his name. "Oh no, not another one," he thought, as Mrs Dingle strode up. "Luke, I'm sure you don't want to be badgered with questions so I won't ask, but I have a request. You are your father's next of kin and I would like your permission for a group of us to go and pray for your father. The hospital says it's OK but only if you agree.

"What good would that do. Plenty of people prayed for my mum and she still died."

"I'm really sorry about that, Luke. But surely it's worth trying everything for your father? I believe it can be different this time."

"Well, so long as I don't have to be there."

~\*~

Later the same day, Chris and Matt walked into the school canteen. Chris for once was quiet until Matt had finished talking. Then he said, "You know this thing about Mr Cromer? It's a test."

"Who for?"

"Us. Us in the group. He wasn't exactly helpful to us but we've got to do good to him."

"What have we got to do?" Immediately, Matt had the answer to his own question. The quiet voice that seemed to have left him in favour of other people spoke: "Remember Toby Simpson. The sceptre has gone but I am with you. Go and heal Alec Cromer."

As they stood in the queue, Josh came up with a bacon roll in his hand. Speaking through a mouthful he said to Matt:

“Are you ready? Mrs Dingle has got everything sorted. She asked me to come and find you. It’s you, Tammy and Lucy. You’re to go with her to see Mr Cromer in hospital. If you’re willing.”

Matt remembered Becky laying her hands on Tammy and Lucy. Was this what that was all about? Like Tim and Adam?

“OK. When?”

“Now. Mr Cromer’s not expected to live much longer. It’s now or never. Lucy and Tammy are up by Mrs Dingle’s car.”

“Are you coming Josh?”

“Might not be very helpful for him to see me, Matt. My arrival on the scene last time led to his heart attack!”

Matt looked at Chris. Chris pushed him out of the line and Matt walked out to the car park, signing out at the office on his way. Mrs Dingle already had the engine running. “You’re our man, Matt. You started all this with your sceptre. When we get there we’re going to have to be quick. We’ve been given five minutes and that’s all. You need to be prepared for what you may see. Mr Cromer is in a coma. He’ll have an oxygen mask on his face and he will be wired up with tubes and cables. I’ve explained this to the girls and they’re being brave about it. I’m probably more squeamish than they are.”

Matt hated hospitals. He’d seen his mum wired up after one of her trips went wrong. It had scared him. It was no better this time. Nurse MacLachlan led them into a room where it seemed like there was no living soul. “I don’t know how you’ve worked this,” she said, “it breaks all the rules. It’s not even visiting time. You must know someone high up.” She left the room.

“She doesn’t know how high up,” whispered Tammy.

“OK, Matt. You know what to do,” said Mrs Dingle.

How could she be so confident in him? He didn’t know at all. Then the quiet voice directed him. He moved to the bedside and said, “I command the spirit of death to go.” Then he called Tammy and Lucy to join him. They put their hands on Mr Cromer’s lifeless shoulder. Nothing seemed to happen, just like nothing had seemed to happen when Becky had put her hands on some of the group. But Matt said, “Tammy, God’s healing Mr Cromer’s anger whilst your hand is on him. Don’t take it

away yet. Lucy, God's taking away his grief and sorrow through your hand. Keep it there."

They all stood in silence with a great sense of peace filling the room. Two things then happened at exactly the same time. Mr Cromer sat up and Nurse McLachlan opened the door. She pressed an emergency call button, ushered out the four visitors and fell to her knees by the bedside. Luke had his dad back.

## **Part Five**

### **WASTE GROUND**

Weeks after Matt's hospital encounter, he walked across the city. He walked quickly because that was how he always walked. At the same time, he felt as though

something in him held him back. In his pocket he had a photograph that Josh had given him. It looked as though it had been peeled off a passport or a membership card or something. On the back, written across the remains of the glue, were the words:

*Waste ground.*

*New Road.*

*16 March.*

*4pm.*

*If you can.*

The photograph was of his dad.

If it hadn't been Josh who had given it to him, Matt would have torn it up then and there. Josh wouldn't say who had given it to him. He just said, "If I were in your place, I'd try to get there, whatever you think of him."

For four days he had nursed the photo in his pocket and nursed his anger. Why would his dad turn up now? The great loser! Why come and stir up trouble when things at home were going so well?

He got to the bottom of New Road at about 5 past 4 and walked up the hill, looking out for waste ground. He'd never been up here before. He stopped and looked back at rows of houses spread out below him. It reminded him of his climb out of Llanrace. It was a mistake to have stopped. He was about to go back down when his mobile went. It was a text from Josh:

Hi Matt. Told Chris where u r and why.

We're both with u. Hang on in there mate.

Matt turned and walked on. On the right hand side, fences had been broken down and a wide open space was revealed. It looked like it had once been gardens or allotments. There was the odd shrub and a few self-seeded trees. But most of the ground was wonderfully open and uncivilised, covered with grasses and thistles. A flock of small birds flew around the seed-heads, landing and feeding.

Matt stepped over the wreckage of the fencing. An old concrete path, cracked and uneven, led into the grasses. The place was scruffy and uncared for but Matt

loved its wildness. There was the fallen remnant of an old greenhouse, its last pane of glass made green with age. Matt kicked at the black sticks where a small fire had been lit. There were some large white boulders, fringed with nettles, and a dump of old mattresses. No-one here. Well he was a bit late, but not much.

He sat on the springy mattresses and looked around at this big expanse, ringed with houses. It was such a mess but sort of comforting. The sun came out and a small dog chased a cat through the thistles and into the road. Matt followed them.

A man came running up the hill. His father.

“Thought I’d missed you,” Mr Holt said, breathing hard. “Bus was late.”

“I walk.”

“Good for you. I’m not as fit as you. I only chose up here so we could have some space. It hasn’t changed much since your mother and I used to walk up here. Surprised they haven’t built on it.”

“So.”

“She knows I’m here, Matt.”

“She what?”

“She passed on the photo to someone at your school. She didn’t want it to come from her and I didn’t know who I could get to pass it on to you. She seemed to know who could be trusted.”

“Why would she do that? You’re nothing to us.”

“That was true, Matt. But not any more. She, I don’t know why I keep saying ‘she’, Karen, your mother, wrote to me. Told me she was clean. Told me what was going on with you two.”

All was quiet. A car went by. Matt stayed silent.

“The thing is, Matt, I’m clean as well. We want to get back together.”

“NO WAY!! Matt looked around him. “No way! Absolutely no way!”

“You’re right, Matt. There is no way at the moment. I’ve said to your mother that I will only come back if you agree.”

“Why would you say that?”

“It was the only way I could think of to prove to you I had changed. I’m sorry. You are still my son and I’m kind of hoping there might be a way back.”

“No.”

“OK. I’ll leave it in your court. If you change your mind, tell Karen and she’ll contact me. I’ve put my life in your hands, Matt.”

Mr Holt put out his hand, then turned and walked back down the hill. Matt stood with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He watched the back of the man who had once been his dad get small in the distance. Could he ever let him be his dad again?

“Dad! Not yet!” He yelled, so hard that his throat rasped.

The distant figure raised one arm and carried on.