

LARK

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*To Mairi Kidd, who mothered my boys*

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This book has dyslexia-friendly features



## Prologue

“I don’t bloody like it.”

“Language, Kenny,” I said to my brother. “You don’t have to bloody well say bloody all the bloody time. It’s not clever, and it’s not funny.”

I copied the whining voice of Mr Kimble, our English teacher. But it was wasted on Kenny, as he didn’t go to my school.

“But it is bloody cold,” Kenny said.

“I know.”

“And we’re bloody lost.”

“I bloody know.”

I looked around. It had stopped snowing, but the path had almost vanished. I saw white fields and stone walls. The black skeletons of trees climbing out of the frozen earth. The sky was a sort of pale grey, like a seagull’s back. In fact,

the sky was the weirdest thing about it all. You couldn't see any clouds, or any of the blue in between the clouds. Just this solid grey nothing like cold porridge, going on for ever.

I had Tina, our Jack Russell, on the lead. She'd enjoyed the snow to begin with, snapping at it and chewing mouthfuls, as if she'd caught a rat. But now she looked as fed up as us. She was getting on a bit, and the cold had got into her bones.

"And there's worser words than bloody," Kenny said. He had his big hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans to hide them from the wind. "There's this boy, Milo, at school, and he knows all of them."

"What?" I snorted. "He knows every bad word there is?"

"Yeah."

"What, every bad word in the whole world?"

"Yeah, course," Kenny said. "Well, maybe not in the world, but in England. Cos, yeah, there might be bad words in other countries he doesn't know, like the Chinese for knob and the African for arse."

"African isn't a language, Kenny," I told him. "It's not even a country. There are loads of countries in Africa and hundreds of languages. They all have mucky words in them."

"Whatever," Kenny said, getting annoyed. But at least his mind wasn't on the snow and the cold and the mess we were in.

"Go on then," I said.

"What?"

"These bad words Milo told you, let's hear them."

"You won't tell Dad or Jenny that I know them?" Kenny asked.

"Course not. I'm not a grass."

"You told them where I hid the turkey."

"I had to," I said. "Otherwise there'd have been no Christmas dinner."

Kenny nodded. He could see the logic in that.

"OK, then," Kenny said. "Right ..."

And then Kenny told me all the dirty words he knew. It made us laugh, but not enough to warm us up. Half of the words weren't even real. Stuff like "splonger" and "bozzle". I don't know if this Milo kid had said it for a joke, or if someone had told him that nonsense and he just passed it on.

The best was when Kenny said, "A sod, do you know what that is?"

"Not really," I replied.

"It's one of the worst words there is," Kenny told me. "Even saying it gets you a million years

in hell. A sod is a man who digs up dead bodies to have it off with.”

“I’m not sure it is, Kenny,” I said, spluttering.

“It is! And a daft sod is one who forgets his spade.”

And then I laughed so hard I cried, and snot came out of my nose. The tears and snot were warm for a moment on my skin, and then cold, cold.

“You, you’re a daft sod,” I said.

Kenny shoved me, and I was laughing too much to keep my balance and I fell over. Tina got excited for the first time in ages and barked and scampered around.

I hit the ground and felt the snow under me, and under the snow the hardness of the frozen earth. Then I realised just how much trouble we were in.

I stood up and brushed off the snow. I think Kenny was expecting me to push him back, so he was laughing but keeping his distance. Then Kenny saw my face, and he stopped laughing.

“We better get off this hill, Kenny,” I said. “Or we’ll catch our bloody deaths.”



## One

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. It was meant to be a stroll, a laugh.

A lark.

It was our dad’s idea. Kenny had been bored and excited at the same time for a while now, and that made him act up a lot. Sometimes he sulked, not saying anything for hours. He’d stare at the rain running down the windows as if he was watching the telly. And then something would set him off and he’d go manic. He’d punch the cushions on the settee or shout out random stuff in the street or scramble to the top of the climbing frame in the park and howl like a wolf. That made the kids playing there laugh, but it freaked out the mums and dads and child-minders smoking on the broken benches.

Kenny was bored because it was the Easter holidays and none of his mates were around. He went to a special school, and the kids travelled there from all over the place. None of them lived near us.

He was excited because next week our mum was coming to visit us from Canada. She left us when we were little, and we hadn't seen her since. It turned out that she'd sent letters and cards every birthday. But we moved so many times, flitting from paying the rent, that they never reached us. And then she finally tracked us down.

She was coming to stay – not with us, but in a hotel. She couldn't stay with us because my dad had a new girlfriend, Jenny, and it would have messed with Jenny's head.

So that's why Kenny had been bored and excited.

And he wasn't the only one.

I was just as messed up about our mum coming as Kenny, but I'd got good at hiding my feelings. Years ago, I'd hidden my feelings about my mum and everything for Kenny's sake. But after a while, it gets to be a habit. You keep the feelings on the inside, like the way you hide a sweet in your mouth

in lessons at school. Except the feelings aren't sweet.

And there was another thing I wanted to stop thinking about. I'd had a girlfriend, and then I didn't. I couldn't talk about it to Kenny or my dad or Jenny. It was a sick feeling inside me all the time, like when you've eaten something a bit off.

So, yeah, I was in a state, too, and when my dad said I should take Kenny up for a walk on the moors, I was well up for it.

"It's nice up there," Dad said. We were sitting in the kitchen, having a cup of tea. Dad had just come home from a long night shift and looked knackered. "Your granddad used to take me up on the moors when I was a nipper, before he got sick," Dad told me. "And it's not like now, when you see people going for a stroll all kitted out as if they're off to the South Pole. All we'd bring was a carrier bag with a bottle of pop in it and some jam sandwiches. And we'd walk until we got somewhere high, so you could see all the world below you – the fields and woods and hills. Until in the distance your eyes came to a dirty smudge, and that was Leeds."

My dad didn't talk much about his mum and dad. They'd died before me and Kenny were born.

Granddad had been a miner, like my dad was before they shut the pits and everyone lost their jobs.

My dad was looking into the distance now, not across the fields but back. Back to the hill and the moors, and the pop and the jam sandwiches, and *his* dad.

After a couple of seconds, he went on, “At this time of year the larks will be singing.”

“What’s larks?” asked Kenny, who’d just burst into the kitchen.

“A lark is a bird,” I said.

I was good on birds. I knew what a lark was and what it looked like from pictures in books, but I’d never seen one in real life.

“Aye, that’s right,” Dad said. “They used to be dead common in the fields round here, but you don’t see ’em any more.”

“Why not?” Kenny asked. “Did someone kill ’em all?” Kenny may not have known what a lark was, but he loved animals and hated the thought of hurting them.

“Eh?” Dad said. “No, not really. The farmers changed the way they do things, so there’s not as much for the larks to eat, especially in the winter. But back then, in spring and summer, you’d be walking down the lanes and all around you the

larks would be shooting up straight into the sky like little brown fireworks. They’d sing their hearts out as they climbed – the dads showing off to the mams.”

I looked at Kenny. His eyes were shining as he saw the larks soaring up into the blue sky of his mind. He loved fireworks more than anything. He was probably imagining the larks with sparks flying out of their arses.

So that’s when we decided we’d go for a day up on the moors. Dad helped us plan it all out. “I know just the place to go,” he said. We found it on Google Maps, and Dad printed it out. But the ink was running out, so the map was faded and blurry. We had to catch three buses to get there, changing at York and then at Thirsk. I liked the idea of getting three buses. It made it seem more like an adventure.

“You get off the last bus here,” Dad said as he pointed it out on the map laid on the kitchen table. “There’s a nice little lane.” His finger traced a line that curved across the fields, joining up two villages. “It’s only a couple of miles. There’ll be shops and stuff there if you need extra supplies.”

He jabbed again at the map. “You can pick up the bus back home from here.”

We had to set off early, or we’d never get there and back in a day. My dad worked nights, wheeling sick people around on trolleys at the hospital. We’d have to get going before he got home. Normally, Jenny would have been there to help us sort everything out, but she was working shifts, too. So that morning it was just me and Kenny.

He’d woken up when it was still dark, the way he always did when something good was going to happen.

“Get up, our Nicky,” Kenny yelled at me, and ruined a perfectly good dream I was having. Tina, who always slept with her bum in Kenny’s face, picked up on the excitement and started barking and yapping.

Tina had a body the colour of a dirty hanky, and a brown face. She wasn’t a genius, but she was loyal, and she’d have died for Kenny. We got her after she’d been left for dead by some bad lads. They’d been using her to hunt badgers. I suppose we’d saved Tina’s life, and she thought she owed us.

“You feed Tina, then make the sandwiches,” I told Kenny, “while I get the kit sorted.”

“What sandwiches shall I do?” Kenny asked.

“Jam of course,” I said, thinking of my dad and granddad back in the olden days. “And cheese. Do cheese as well.”

I crammed some gloves and a scarf and an extra jumper and a bobble hat in my Adidas school bag, because I knew Kenny would have gone out without them. The scarf and the hat were in the Leeds United colours – white with yellow and blue stripes. I had the printed-out map and my phone was charged up. And I packed my good penknife in case we had to do some emergency stick-whittling or fight off zombies.

And I took a lighter as well, cramming it in my inside pocket. Just a cheap plastic one. I couldn’t remember where it had come from. My dad didn’t smoke. Sometimes I wondered if it had belonged to my mum. That’s why I kept it, even though it had probably just been left behind by one of my dad’s mates back when Dad was drinking all the time.