



IRONHEART



ALLAN BOURGHS

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CHAPTER 1

THE WITCHES' TEETH



India Bentley stopped wading through the thick tidal mud and checked the horizon for any sign of southsiders. The first thing you learned when you lived on the North London shores was to keep your eyes peeled for southsiders. They'd come tearing across the water in skim boats and if they caught you unawares then you'd most likely get taken. Mehmet said it was the women they wanted mostly, them and the livestock. He said India shouldn't think she was safe just because she was only thirteen neither, 'cos a girl of thirteen was a woman as far as southsiders was concerned'.

But there was nothing much to see, just the vast swollen body of the Thames and the dead towers of the old city, sticking out of the water all hollow and bird-streaked, like witches' teeth in the distance. A lone scav-trawler sailed back and forth between the towers, dragging its iron grapple across the deep city beds in the hope of dredging up something useful.

She turned her attention to the small fishing net she'd staked out earlier. It was writhing and heavy to lift but she remembered to keep looking up while she worked. Only half-wits got taken by southsiders, she reckoned, mostly because they didn't check the horizon.

When she looked inside the net she sucked her teeth. Straight away she could see it was full of boneheads with yellow-dome skulls and blind eyes and needle-sharp teeth that snapped together like traps. Boneheads were no good to eat. They tasted rotten and sour on the day you caught them and they'd take a finger off if you weren't careful getting them out of the net.

Three summers ago, Tony Patel's dog had got caught in open water by a pack of boneheads. They dragged it under and stripped the flesh off it as it howled and thrashed in the water. Mehmet and his men were there but they just laughed and took bets on how long the dog would last until one of them finally put a bullet in its head. Then Mehmet said Tony should stop snivelling because it had always been a dumb excuse for a dog anyway.

She tipped the mutant fish back into the water, taking care not to get bitten. There were some sticklebacks at the bottom of the net that could go in the pot. They wouldn't make much of a meal, especially as Roshanne had a guest for dinner tonight, but Mr Clench never ate much and anyway, India couldn't care less if he choked on sticklebones. So she wrapped the little fishes in a damp piece of sacking, stuffed them in her satchel and then began to pick her way

back across the tidal flats. She skirted the silted spoil heaps at the edge of the water where the trawlers dumped the unusable stuff: plastic bottles, twisted road signs and those mysterious orange cones they pulled from the water in their hundreds.

India wondered if she had time to fetch water from the well before the constable's men went on patrol. The sky was like a lead sheet but there was still some light left in it. She'd need to be quick though. Apart from a southsider, the last person you wanted to meet after dark was Mehmet, especially when he'd been at the wood alcohol and was waving a shotgun around.

She'd always liked going to the well. Her father had drilled it when he'd been home on leave. They'd sit together on the lid and he'd talk about a time before London was a lake, when it was a city with glass buildings and cars and everybody had enough food and fresh water. 'As much food as they wanted, India. Imagine that.' Then he'd sigh and look out over the water. 'The Great Rains washed it all away, though. All we've got left now is those dead towers.'

Then he told her stories about the cold country where he spent most of his time working, where a man could still have an adventure if he wanted it. It was a land filled with bears and wolves and ice people who hunted on reindeer sledges. A place where a hot cup of tea would freeze before it hit the ground. It was a place, he said, where ancient spirits lived beneath the mountains and living shadows stalked the forests.

When India arrived at the well she was not pleased to see someone was already there. An old woman was standing on the grassy slope, gazing upwards and holding out her arms.

‘Chicken Licken!’ she shouted to the sky as India drew near.

‘Hello, Cromerty,’ said India.

India’s mother had never allowed her to call Cromerty a witch the way other children did. She said Cromerty was just an old person who needed someone to watch out for her. She had always tried to make sure the old woman had enough to eat in winter.

As India approached she saw Cromerty was wearing only a thin nightgown and a single slipper. Her hair stuck out like grey wire. The old woman fixed her with watery eyes and gave her a toothless smile.

‘There’s something wrong with the sky,’ she said urgently. ‘Can’t yer see? It looks like iron.’

India glanced up at the uniform sheet of grey cloud. ‘It’s always that colour, Cromerty,’ she said, ‘it’s just rain clouds.’

‘Anyone can see the sky, deary,’ replied the old woman. ‘But do you really *see* it? There’s iron in the sky if you knows how to look for it.’

‘Well, I don’t think I can see it, Cromerty. Look, if you don’t mind, I need to get some water.’

The old woman was not to be put off, and shuffled along behind India. ‘There’s not many of us what’s got the seein’, deary. Maybe you got it, maybe not, but your mum definitely had it.’

India stopped and turned to look at the old woman. ‘My mum?’

‘Aye, she knowed the winds and the tides and she could tell if there were something wrong in the land just by listening to the earth spirits.’ She brightened suddenly. ‘Read your palm, deary? You never know – you might be going on a journey.’

India sighed. ‘I don’t think so, Cromerty. I really need to get on.’

‘Well, let me know if you change your mind.’

‘You should get inside the fence now, Cromerty. It’s getting dark out here.’

The old woman ignored her and began to croon to herself. India guessed that Cromerty was having a bad day.

When India turned to the well, her heart sank. The lock on the lid was broken. Not just broken either: it looked as though it had been torn apart. ‘Cromerty, did you see who did this?’

The old woman didn’t reply. She was rocking back and forth, humming softly. ‘*First comes the iron and then comes the snow,*’ she sang, ‘*and then comes the winter when nothing will grow.*’

India looked down the well. Mehmet often warned that southsiders might poison the water. She thumped the lid in frustration. The curfew was about to start and she ran the risk of being locked out. But the thought that someone might have poisoned *her* well made her burn inside.

‘Cromerty,’ she said to the old woman. ‘Go back to the

village and tell Mehmet to keep the gates open until I get back. Tell him I'll only be a few minutes.'

'Watch out for the sky, deary,' called the old woman as she retreated down the hill. 'There's summat wrong with it, I tell ya.'

India shook her head impatiently. 'Definitely having a bad day,' she said to herself. She slipped the broken lock into her pocket and began to climb the grassy slope.

The other side of the hill was where the dead city started. It was running with wild dogs and full of houses that no one had lived in for a hundred years, rotting like the bones of dead animals. It made her shiver just to see them. Even Mehmet and his men avoided going there if they could help it.

Then she spotted them: two people about a quarter of a mile away picking their way across the rubble. There wasn't much light but she could tell that one of them was a man, tall and powerful-looking. She dived under a bush where she could watch them in safety.

Suddenly the big man looked up and stared right at the spot where she was hiding. She knew he couldn't possibly see her in the failing light but even so, he seemed to look *straight at her*. He turned to say something to the second figure – a woman, India could now see – and then pointed in India's direction.

She slithered down the hill on her backside. Southsiders, cack! They had to be southsiders, they couldn't be anything else. Her heart was going so fast that she had to stop at

the bottom to catch her breath. The rules said she should run straight back to the village and report what she'd seen to the constable, but what if she was wrong? What if they were just a couple of mud grubbers from over Kilburn way or a pair of night fishermen? She could hear Mehmet now, laughing at her for having been so easily spooked. She paused.

The bank rose quite steeply where she was standing. She thought if she kept quiet and stayed near to the water, she might be able to get close enough to the strangers to get a good look at them. Then she could decide what to tell the constable's men.

She crept along the bank, staying low and trying not to make too much noise as she pulled her boots from the sucking mud. When she thought she was close enough she climbed the bank and peered over the top to take a look. The woman was less than a hundred yards away, looking at something in her hand. She had long hair, tied back into a ponytail, and she wore a leather flying jacket with a fur collar and heavy boots that came up to her knees. The tall man was nowhere to be seen. There was a motorcycle a short way off like the ones India had seen in pictures, a petrol burner, battered to hell and complete with sidecar. She shivered. No one in Highgate owned anything like that, which meant they *had* to be southsiders.

'You! Stay where you are!'

The voice made her jump and she slid down the bank into the wet mud. She glimpsed the man appearing from

the gloom to her right and then she was off at a sprint. But the man was much faster than she had expected. Before she'd gone five paces a big hand came down on her back and sent her sprawling face down into the mud.

'I said stay where you are.'

She kicked her legs and spluttered muddy water but the hand kept her firmly pinned down. She was scared now too, scared and angry with herself. Because she'd done the one thing that only dumb people did: she'd got caught by southsiders.

CHAPTER 2

THE ONLY ONE OF HIS KIND



India struggled against the heavy grip to no effect. The more she kicked and thrashed, the more firmly she was held in place.

‘Calculus, stop it, leave her alone!’ The woman’s voice sounded close by and India was immediately released. She wriggled away across the mud. But when she turned and caught sight of her attacker she cried out in alarm.

The creature was taller than anyone in her village, with a face that was hidden behind a long helmet. The body was slim and smooth, wrapped in a flexible metal skin that suggested a ripple of muscle and fibre beneath. The powerful legs were tensed and the midsection was pulled into a tight spring-steel abdomen. This was not a man at all but something else altogether, something she’d only read about in musty, waterlogged books, something she knew to be dangerous.

She scabbled in her pocket for a small metal tube and

felt its familiar weight in her hand. When she flicked the button on the side it crackled to life and the tip glowed with a blue light. ‘Get away from me,’ she growled. ‘This shock stick’s got a full charge. It’ll take your head right off.’

The creature looked at her curiously.

‘Stand down, Calculus.’ The woman scrambled down the bank towards them. She was lean and muscular, with a strong face and brown skin that suggested she had spent a lot of time out of doors. She frowned at India. ‘Why were you spying on us?’

India could tell she was American because her dad had often imitated the voices of the Americans he worked with. He called them ‘Yanks’. This was the first time India had ever heard one for real. ‘Why did you steal my water?’ she shot back, sounding braver than she felt. She threw the broken lock on the ground. The woman held up a small water bottle.

‘We only took what we needed,’ she said. ‘You don’t need to be afraid, we’re not southsiders.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ said India. She noticed that the woman wore a pistol on her belt.

The woman fumbled in her satchel and then lit a small cigar. ‘I have business with Mrs Roshanne Bentley,’ she said, exhaling blue smoke. ‘I was told she lives on the North Shores. Do you know where we can find her?’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘Verity Brown.’ The woman held out a small card. ‘I work

for the Trans-Siberian Mining Company. Perhaps you've heard of it?

India had certainly heard of it. She darted forward and snatched the card from the woman's fingers. It was white, with the words 'Trans-Siberian' in blue, circling a map of the northern globe. The same picture she remembered seeing on the front of her father's overalls. Underneath, the card read: *Verity Brown (Mrs) – Salvage Agent*. The woman folded her arms and waited for an answer while the machine creature stood patiently at her side.

'That's a robot, isn't it?' said India.

'He's not a robot, he's an android, the only one of his kind left. He's my bodyguard.' A tiny smile appeared at the corner of Verity Brown's mouth. 'Doesn't hurt to have protection. You never know who's going to come after you with a deadly weapon, do you?'

India lowered the shock stick slowly and put it back in her pocket. She wasn't quite ready to trust these people yet but she was pretty sure they weren't southsiders. She stood up and wiped the worst of the mud off her canvas trousers, taking a closer look at the android as she did so. She could see he was old, really old, from a time before the Great Rains when they'd known how to make things like that. He had a large dent in his skull and the surface of his body was scored and pitted. There was a crack across his visor and a panel in his chest had been replaced by a piece of rusty sheet steel held in place with rivets. He was the most incredible creature she had ever seen.

‘Can it talk?’ she asked.

‘Of course I can talk,’ said the android. His voice sounded richly amplified from somewhere within his body.

India thought she might have insulted it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’ve never met anything, I mean anyone, like you before.’ She wondered what was the proper way to address an android. ‘He’s pretty cool,’ she said to Verity. ‘Does he kill people for you?’

‘Perhaps you could just tell us where to find Mrs Bentley’s house,’ said Verity, avoiding the question. ‘I need to talk to her about her husband.’

‘What d’you want to know about my dad?’ said India, then she quickly bit her lip.

‘Ah!’ said Verity. ‘So you must be one of the daughters.’ She looked at the piece of paper in her hand. ‘Bella, maybe or . . .’

‘India.’ She cursed for having given herself away. ‘We live down there.’

Verity Brown looked along the shoreline where India pointed and stamped out her cigar. ‘We need to visit your mother, India. I need her help with an important matter.’

‘She’s not my mother,’ said India quickly. ‘My dad remarried after Mum died.’

Verity nodded thoughtfully. ‘OK, well we need to see your stepmother then, but we need to do it quietly. The village guards won’t be happy if they see us.’

India looked from Verity to the android and back again.

‘You’ll never get as far as our house,’ she said. ‘The guards have got dogs and guns.’

‘Don’t worry, Calculus will get us past them.’ She flashed a smile. ‘But I need to know that I can trust you, India. It’s important you don’t give us away before we speak to Mrs Bentley. Can you do that?’

India looked at the strange couple again. ‘Maybe.’

‘I guess that’ll have to do,’ said Verity. ‘Let’s shake on it.’ She extended a hand, which India shook awkwardly. ‘We’ll wait out here until it gets a bit darker. Tell your stepmother we’ll be along to the house later. Will anyone else be there?’

India thought about Roshanne’s perfectly arranged dinner party for Mr Clench and smiled. ‘Oh, no!’ she said. ‘We’ve got nothing planned for this evening at all.’

She watched the two strangers disappear back into the surrounding gloom and then made her way back to the village, her head dancing after the strange encounter. Verity Brown was so completely different to anyone she had ever met and as for the android, well, if you had a bodyguard like that, she reckoned you could do just about anything you wanted. She smiled as she thought what she could do to Mehmet if she had her own android.

She was so busy with her thoughts that she didn’t notice she had arrived at the village gates, a pair of heavy iron and oak doors, set into the fortified earthworks surrounding the village.

‘Who goes there?’ The voice snarled at her from behind the closed gates.

‘It’s me, India,’ she said in a small voice.

The door groaned open a crack and three burning torches emerged, wielded by three burly men. Mehmet stood in the middle, holding a black dog that grunted and whimpered on the leash; the other two held shotguns.

‘India! What’re you doing out?’ growled Mehmet, glaring at her. ‘It’s an hour past curfew. You’ll get yourself shot and I won’t be held responsible.’

‘Didn’t Cromerty tell you?’ she said. ‘I got held up. I had a bit of trouble at the well.’

‘Trouble?’ The word carried electricity. The men bristled and stroked their guns. ‘What sort of trouble? Did you see anyone out there, India?’

She gulped. Looking at Mehmet’s red eyes and the grim looks on the faces of his men, she felt suddenly afraid for Verity Brown. ‘No, nothing like that. The lid got stuck, that was all. It just took me a while to get it free.’

But Mehmet wasn’t listening. He pushed past her and peered into the gloom. ‘Southsiders was up at Holloway yesterday,’ he said. ‘They took some goats and shot Gab Watling in the leg.’ He stared into the distance and growled. ‘They’re out there again tonight, I can smell ’em.’ He turned to his men. ‘Go and get the rest of the dogs and fan out along the shoreline. We’ll flush them troublemakers out and string them up in the trees.’

‘No!’ said India, too quickly. ‘I mean there’s no one there. I’d have seen them if there was, you can see all around here from the well.’ She was further into the lie than she wanted

to be but she couldn't back out now.

Mehmet studied her for long seconds. 'All right,' he said, dismissing her with a jerk of his head. 'Get home then.'

Relieved, but still worried for Verity Brown, she pushed her way through the ugly group.

'I hear your mum's got Mr Clench coming over, *again*,' Mehmet shouted after her. The way he paused before he said 'again' said everything about what he was thinking. The other men sniggered.

'Roshanne's not my mum,' India shouted back over her shoulder.

She walked quickly down a rutted lane, past the tangled heaps of salvaged steel waiting to be fed into the flaming jaws of the village smelter. The stink of burning rubber made her hold her breath.

Their cottage was a damp, stone building that stood apart from the others near the edge of the water. Her heart sank as she walked up the path and saw her stepmother standing by the kitchen door, radiating impatience.

'What sort of time do you call this? I've been waiting all afternoon for those fish. This dinner won't cook itself, you know.' Roshanne Bentley's untidy smear of red lipstick was coming off on her cigarette. She wore a pair of satin slippers and her best lounging robe. Once richly embroidered, it was now threadbare and faded to a ghost of its former colour. The hem was damp and muddy from the house puddles.

India pushed past her stepmother and dropped the wet

sacking on to the kitchen table. 'That's all I could get. The rest were boneheads.'

Roshanne looked distastefully at the crushed and broken fish inside the damp parcel. 'Is that *it*? How am I supposed to feed our guest with that? Where the hell have you been all afternoon?'

'I just went to check on the well,' she said. 'That's all.'

'What, *again*? Sometimes I think that wretched well is just an excuse for you to sit around on the hillside while I slave away after you and your sister.'

India snorted at the thought that her stepmother might slave after anyone. Roshanne never emerged from her bedroom before midday and certainly never bothered with anything as mundane as housework.

'Why don't you just put chemicals in the water like everyone else?' said Roshanne. 'Then you might have time to give me a bit more help around here.'

'The chemicals kill off the fish,' said India wearily.

Roshanne picked a stray bonehead from the sacking and dropped it outside the back door with a shudder. 'A good thing too,' she said. 'Personally I couldn't give a stuff about the fish and I'm sure your hole in the ground would still be there if you left it alone for one night. I have to say I'm heartily sick to death of working my fingers to the bone in this ghost town of a village. It's no way to live for someone with my background.'

India sighed. Roshanne was not entirely wrong about the emptiness of the village. As the southsider attacks had

got worse, so more and more of her friends' families had moved away. It didn't help that the few people who were left tended to avoid their house because of Roshanne's snobbery. India had got used to spending a lot of time on her own.

'It's tough for everyone,' she said in a weary voice.

'Not everyone, India.' Roshanne parked the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and began to sever the heads from the little fish and pull out their insides. 'Fortunately there are still some people who understand the importance of good breeding.' A clump of ash fell on the chopping board. 'At least Mr Clench knows how to live with style.'

The previous year, Thaddeus Clench had bought the largest house on the north shores and instantly became the subject of great discussion in the village. Some said he'd been a slave farmer in the West Country, while others said he'd made a fortune as a pirate rigger – or that he was a gold prospector who'd once killed a man in cold blood. He had first appeared in their house at her father's memorial service, when he'd stayed behind after the other guests had left, to 'comfort the grieving widow'. Then he had put his arm around India, urging her in a beery voice to 'call me Uncle Thaddeus'. After that he had started to come to dinner regularly in spite of Roshanne's truly disgusting cooking.

India dug her hands deep in her trouser pockets and curled her lip. 'I'm not that hungry tonight. I thought I might just stay in my room.'

‘Oh no, young lady!’ Roshanne wagged the knife at her. ‘Mr Clench will arrive in one hour and I need you here.’

India’s suspicions were aroused. ‘Why do I have to be here?’

Roshanne rolled her eyes and let out one of her ‘give-me-strength’ sighs. ‘You might not think it’s important to have influential friends, India, but one day you’ll learn the value of being well connected. When Mr Clench arrives I want you to be well presented so please make an effort. Why don’t you wear a dress for a change?’ Her voice took on an oily tone. ‘You’d look nice in a dress.’

India wondered if now would be a good time to tell Roshanne about Verity Brown but decided it probably wasn’t. She picked up one of the oil lamps and escaped upstairs. She found her sister Bella sitting on her bed, scribbling in a dog-eared sketchbook.

‘What are you drawing?’ asked India.

‘Southsiders eating Tonya Solomon.’

‘Southsiders don’t eat people.’

‘They do too! Levi Sloat said they ate his dad.’

‘Levi Sloat’s dad got drunk and fell down his own well.’

Bella thought this over for a moment and then shrugged. ‘You’re in my room,’ she said.

India dutifully took a step backwards and watched her from the doorway. ‘What do you think of Mr Clench?’ she asked casually.

‘He’s OK, I guess,’ said Bella, without looking up from

her scribbling. 'He talks to me sometimes, when I see him out. What's for dinner?'

'Sticklebacks,' said India. 'It's all I could get.'

'Stinky sticklebacks?' Bella wrinkled her nose. 'Are you sure about that? It smells like roast chicken to me.'

'With roast potatoes?' said India with a smile. They played this game whenever they were hungry. They played it a lot.

'Yeah, and parsnips and peas and onion gravy.'

'And apple pie and custard?'

'Ice cream!' said Bella blissfully. 'Let it be ice cream.'

They both fell quiet, lost in thoughts of food.

'So what does Mr Clench say to you?' said India after a while.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Bella, going back to her drawing. 'He just asks about Dad's job and stuff.' She suddenly brightened. 'He's got a cat and it's going to have kittens. Do you think Roshanne will let me have one when they're born?'

India shrugged. 'I shouldn't think so. What sort of questions does he ask?'

'I don't know! Just stuff, that's all. Mind your own business and get out of my room!'

India retreated to her own spartan-looking room and frowned at the floral dress Roshanne had laid out on the bed. She wiped her filthy hands on it and balled it up under the mattress. Then she swaggered in front of the mirror with a pencil stuck in the corner of her mouth like a cigar,

squinting at her reflection through narrowed eyes. She wondered idly where she might be able to get hold of a pistol and a leather jacket.

She changed into a fresh work shirt and ran her hands through her thick black hair, pushing it into a set of wild peaks until she was satisfied with the effect. Not wanting to go downstairs, she picked up a picture from the mantelpiece and sat down on the bed. Tall and blue-eyed, John Bentley stood in the centre of a group of tough-looking men in overalls. He had the same half-smile he always wore when he sat in India's room at bedtime.

'Read me a story,' she'd say.

'Which one?' he'd say, teasing.

'You know which one.'

'What, *again*? OK. Which part would you like me to read?'

'The part when she meets her friends. You know, when they follow the yellow brick road.'

When he was finished she'd pull the sheets closer as he tucked her in.

'I'd like to have an adventure one day,' she said. 'But what would happen if I got trapped in the witch's castle, like Dorothy?'

'Then I'd come and rescue you,' he'd say, smoothing her forehead and kissing her goodnight.

'And if you got trapped in a witch's castle I'd come and rescue you too.'

India reached instinctively for the small metal pendant

inscribed with her name that hung on a leather cord at her throat. Bella seldom wore hers, but for India the little pendant was the last thread that linked her to a happier time.

A burst of adult laughter from downstairs startled her and she realized she had been daydreaming. She supposed she should put in an appearance and, as if on cue, there was a familiar shriek from the hallway.

‘In-di-a! Are you up there? Please come down at once! Mr Clench has arrived.’