

Chapter One

It ran out of sight.

“Get it!” Jimmy squealed at Bobby, tottering across the curb towards their prey. A small, shabby cat with a grey streak above its right eye ran forwards and snuck through a torn wire fence. The boys pushed through the same gap, widening it with their bodies, pressing their stomachs and limbs against the jagged mesh. Nylon snags of their clothes caught and clicked on some of the sharper spokes. The concrete posts scratched white marks into the soft palms of their hands.

The fence was tall and frail but imposing – the sort of barrier that could physically be crossed yet seldom was. It separated the back end of the estate from the rest of the world. From civilisation, snider neighbours would say. The wire was gapped and broken and the concrete crumbling and vandalised, swimming in a sea of litter and broken glass. On a tattered car bonnet that rested against the fence the words ‘Fucking Filth’ had been sprayed in neon pink paint. A vague representation of a policeman spewing non-specific fluids accompanied the text. For all their fragility the pillars stood tall, meaning that whatever the weather there were always shadows cast upon these streets.

They ran on across muddy grasslands away from the estate. They had not planned their attack; it was simply a spur of the moment decision – shared intuition on seeing the creature;

something to do. The greenery itself had turned a dank, brutish yellow that led from the estate like dinner in reverse after a heavy night out. The air of another grey September made the whole expanse wither and sag. Sporadic onyx-patched sparkled throughout the field, remnants from a bonfire or car burnout, and glistened in the silvery light like false promises.

“Come on, there it is... under the brown one.” Jimmy’s vowels hardened and swapped around one another, making his prepubescent voice sound sweet and unthreatening.

A ginger cat sprang to its feet and darted in front of them, away from the allotment and out of sight, leaving its friend to fend for himself. Jimmy picked up a stone from the floor.

“Do it then!” Bobby shouted.

“What you gonna do about it if I don’t?” Again his vowels stretched and rearranged themselves effortlessly. The ‘o’ of ‘Do’ became a long, syrupy ‘eee’ and the usually soft, rounded ending to ‘about’ climaxed into a jagged crescendo. ‘Ooooot’ it said. Word endings stopped short and the beginnings and middles remained unformed; half words, spirits of sounds, as though Jimmy’s tongue had been paralysed. This was not an affliction specific to Jimmy, however, but the Geordie tongue in all its glory.

“I’ll give you a tab if your finish it off.” He said taking three cigarettes from his top pocket “Nicked them off me mam last night. She reckons it was Aunty Alison.”

“Yeah right!”

“I will!”

“Fucking right!”

The allotments had been all but abandoned save for the occasional squatter or when used as a hiding place by some of the local pharmaceutical experts. And enthusiasm for maintaining vegetable patches had dipped somewhat among the residents themselves, meaning the once vibrant plot had been left to shrivel and rot.

Jimmy looked beneath the shed; the cat cowered behind a narrow patch of grass. He made a barking sound. The cat jumped in shock and sprang forward. They followed it stealthily, its sleek body winding in and out of daylight, seeking survival amid the dark shade of the delicate wooden structures. They reached the end of the line and the cat stopped still beneath the last shed, a particularly unwelcoming, tar black square with just one small window encased in dirt and mould. Bobby took a step back while Jimmy gripped his stone tighter and ducked so that his head was beneath the shed. The cat looked directly into his eyes, struggling to gain some empathy between hunter and hunted. Jimmy paused for a moment, locked in the black gaze of a helpless creature.

“Psss, psss, psss,” he beckoned, stretching out the hand which held the stone, teasing his fingers together to endear the creature further. The cat stirred, curious as to its change in prospects. Slowly but cautiously it edged forward, first just a nose, then a head, then its neck, followed by a small, smooth, ripple of a step in Jimmy’s direction.

He flicked his arm, jolting his wrist, and allowed the stone to curl towards the cat at great speed. The hard, jagged surface hit the creature and sent its head flying back with a painful screech. Bobby laughed in the background. The cat limped unsurely towards the back of the shed, injured and bleeding. They followed it quietly as it shuffled back into the shock of daylight. As it limped forward its feet trailed along the wet dirt and its head hung low, solemnly and unhealthily.

“Finish it off then,” said Bobby, taking another step back. Jimmy picked up a second stone.

In the distance a woman’s voice could be heard, loud and coarse. “Jimmy, back in this fucking house. *Now!*”

“Shit. It’s my mam. I’ve got to go.”

Bobby made a chicken noise that Jimmy ignored while running past him back to the torn rear entrance to the estate.

“Here,” he said, passing back through the wire, “What about my tab?”

“You never finished it off, did you?”

Outside of the estate two pleasant rows of houses stare at one another like disapproving neighbours, their eyes whispering truths their lips daren't. Trees even in the autumn dark flourish and grow tall. Halfway through one street, beneath two unassuming if small homes, lies a gap. Most streets contain a gap; however this one is different. This is the gap that leads to another world. Behind it lays a labyrinth of homes, some boarded up, almost all vandalised. Sprayed messages warn off visitors and glass carpets the pavements along with cigarette ends and crushed bottles. It has been this way for so long that any good that once was has been forgotten; the carcass of the estate has been left to rot in the sun. Assumed that it would pick away at itself, decay through time, until eventually there would be no trace of it left.

If these streets could talk they would do so through broken teeth, through stubbled jaws and the salty sting of held-back tears. They would talk of beautiful industries and proud homelands; of safe environments and well-maintained estates; of socialist dreams and community pride. In fact, if these streets could talk they would probably prefer not to; sometimes it's easier to remain silent than to accept what you once had. And sometimes its better to break something fast than let it fade and die slowly. Behind this gap lies the Meadow Well Estate.

The fuzz of the radio stuttered static belches into the smoke-filled interior of the car.

It made him feel like he was on the television. His first fortnight on the job had been bliss, if slightly more monotonous than he would have liked. But, nonetheless, his enthusiasm overtook even the most objectionable aspects of the job – pri-

marily his newly assigned partner, Constable Charlie Bowers. A large man with a face like fallen velvet whose bald head thinly encased the most cynical thoughts Billie Morgan had ever experienced. He was the sort of man, thought Billie, to whom no words were ever required. When Charlie Bowers was confronted with a scenario his opinion seemed to pop and burst straight from his head like cartoon bubbles. A naturally suspicious man, the only quality that surpassed his cruelty was his own laziness. Billie found this annoying on a personal level, yet enjoyed the prospects it presented; next to Constable Charlie Bowers it was difficult not to seem like the better man.

‘...We have reports of an incident in the Job Centre of the Meadow Well Estate, two males believed to be violent, over.’ The voice ended as abruptly as it had begun with an artificial beep. Morgan, for all his wide-eyed enthusiasm for the job, looked sceptically at Bowers.

“The Ridges,” muttered Bowers, exhaling smoke through his nose in two almost perfect arrows, “You’ll be lucky love.”

“Now now,” Billie said, eager to persuade his partner to change his views, but equally keen to keep on his good side, “It’s The Meadow Well now, remember? Rebranding they called it... Running water, the lot.”

Bowers rolled his eyes suspiciously and sped up towards the gap where the entrance to the Meadow Well Estate lay.

“They can toss it out among themselves. They made their bed, they can fucking well die in it.”

He drove straight past the entrance, marking their passing only by forming his hand into the shape of a gun, which he shot directly into the centre of the two trees. ‘Boom’ he mouthed silently, the smoke of their exhaust pipe lingering momentarily in the chilly afternoon air.

Chapter Two

A gang of children passed by Shirley's front gate heading towards the burnt out car at the centre of the estate – a regal vantage point, from the top of which you could see the entire area; from the entrance out towards the small row of shops and pubs; the back exit; and the criss-cross of boarded-up houses that formed the main body of the Meadow Well. In the distance the doctor's surgery was just visible. The brick-red of the newly built community centre roof glistened brightly like a star. Graffiti adorning the vandalised bus stops shone like a slick sentence in a bad novel.

Shirley's house was as feeble as the rest – a tangled, thorny, dying garden led to a front door that had chipped and tarnished over time. Small, self-scrubbed patches of window glinted like peepholes through the dirt and litter from the street blew into the garden and caught on the spokes of the gate and the jagged bricks of the wall. The inside, however, had been well-maintained. Small time pleasantries was how she thought of her trinkets and ornaments, her comfortable furniture and clean surfaces, patterned wallpaper and pathologically vacuumed carpets. Life may be one long hard slog, but so long as it was slogged from a pleasant and well-kept home then you had nothing to complain about.

The coffee table and expertly placed photographs created a beating heart inside of the withered corpse. A colour television

on loan from a local delivery truck was the focal point of the front room and, accordingly, every chair pointed towards it. On top of the flickering plastic box stood Shirley's prized possession – Jack's one and only school photograph. There he sat, every day and every night, where she could keep an eye on him, still just a boy, trapped in innocence and nylon.

Shirley's one time prettiness had been held hostage inside the shell of her circumstance, her twinkling eyes framed by the worry lines and liver spots. A deep line from the time her husband had left her, eight months pregnant and without so much as a pot to piss in. One circle around each eye from the night her window had been smashed during a brawl that had gotten out of hand. A piece of glass had gotten into Jack's cot and when she couldn't locate it she had rushed him to hospital, frantic at the thought that he might have swallowed it. Cheeks hung heavy like overfull shopping bags, drooping from the sleepless nights she had experienced since Jack had been away. A short enough sentence and barely even a crime, but enough to make his mother worry and her face to fall. Her forehead hung low, her cheeks mourned beneath their natural resting point, dipping towards her mouth.

However Shirley's was a mouth with just the faintest trace of a smile, today at least. A smile at the prospect of a son's return. Twenty-two and back where he belonged – in his mother's arms, in the house he grew up in.

She sat on the living room floor. Her ornaments had been placed with a killer's exactitude around her bent legs so she could polish the uncluttered face of the coffee table. She scrubbed hard though carelessly, with no pattern to her movements.

"He's been learning a trade too, you know?" she said while facing the window. In the kitchen Bob's radio played a familiar tune. He stood on a ladder, eyes to the heavens, penetrating a light socket with his screwdriver. "Joining, I think he

said it was,” Shirley continued, upbeat. “And with skills like that he’ll walk straight into a job. We’ll see though... *Here!*” she was taken aback with her own sudden idea. “He might even be able to start his own business. Get a run around, work to his own hours and that.”

“Yep,” Bob’s voice drifted through from the kitchen, “Let’s just walk before we start sprinting, eh love?”

“But its not half bad though is it?” Shirley stubbed out her cigarette and placed her ornaments back on the coffee table as she stood up. “Free food and board for a couple of months and he gets trained for a job while he’s at it. Who needs uni, eh?”

“Shirley love, he’s not been to Pontin’s for a fortnight, he’s been in the bloody nick – and it’s no holiday camp I can tell you.”

“How the hell can you tell me?” Shirley said, walking into the kitchen. “You don’t even watch *The Bill*.”

“No, but I hear things. Bad things. Down the pub, from the lads.”

Bob loved Shirley the way most men love their wives. However the thrill of their affair – illicit only because they made it that way – was part of the appeal to both of them. Both single save for one another they had been enjoying each other’s company for the past six months. Bob had high hopes that one day he could make an honest woman of Shirley. She on the other hand lived in desperate hope that Bob would never change their arrangement by making any rash demonstrations of love. Her love for him was undeniable and unflinching but marriage had ruined the only good relationship she had ever had.

Once she and Jack’s father became official he turned almost overnight into a man who talked with his fists and kissed with his forehead. A man that never asked. By the time he left it was not his company that she would miss. But then again it was not his company that she was hoping would provide for

her and his child over the following two decades. Afterwards her superstitious streak had frightened her into believing in some sort of jinx. It wasn't, she had concluded, financial troubles, or whiskey, or casual domestic violence that had ruined her time with Him. It was marriage. As such it was something she was keen to avoid, lest her humble happiness with Bob ever fade.

"And don't you be raining on my parade, either," she said, gently nipping the hanging denim at the back of his jeans, causing him to jump slightly on the ladder.

"Hinny, man! You'll have 'us over the bloody edge if you're not careful. Here, pass 'us that spanner will you?"

On the stove a pan of specially boiling soup began to bubble and hiss in the pot. Flecks of liquid formed into oily balls and popped at the rim, splattering the surface of the hob. The pan began to vibrate on the gas rung but neither Shirley nor Bob noticed. She passed him the spanner and lent gently against the table, stroking his leg.

"*You bloody love it.* Anyway, I just want him back, here, where I can keep an eye on him. He's not bad you know Bob?"

"Aye."

"Misdirected intelligence – that's what the social said when he got kicked out of St. Cuthbert's the second time."

"Always was a clever 'un."

"Yeah." Shirley thought back to her boy. One of the few good ones around. Stupid, but never nasty. That was the difference. Stupidity could be cured; nastiness went all the way to the bone. "Still doesn't stop him acting thick as pig shit sometimes though." Bob placed his spanner back on the kitchen table.

"Well," said Shirley, poised for a defence. "Nah," she gave in, ultimately aware of Jack's ability to drop common sense on a whim. "But it was only a glitch; we'll soon have him on the

straight and narrow. So long as her over there keeps her miserable trap shut.”

“Who?”

“*You know.*” Shirley looked at Bob conspirationally though this left him none the wiser.

“I don’t know or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“...*Bangladeshi Mary!*” Shirley spat through pursed, angry lips. “Nosy cow. In The Comet the other night she comes up to ’us and tries it on like.” “

What did she say?”

“She says she hears my Jack is coming out of prison and that it means we’ve all to pray for safety with one more menace on the streets. I said ‘what bloody God would that be to then?’ You know she’s going to church now?”

“*Mary?*” Bob asked in disbelief. A first generation Pakistani immigrant, Mary was the owner of three shops in and around the estate. A local empire as far as most were concerned and a force only a brave few had the courage to confront.

“Oh aye,” Shirley continued without taking breath. “She’s still one of them, but I cornered her Sayeed the other day outside the shop, reckons it’s so she can get tanked up on the communion wine before the pub. Tight cow!”

“What did you say?”

“I told him it’s a waste of her time; they’ve been using Vimto since Adam was a lad.”

“No man,” said Bob, attaching the new light to the ceiling with one final screw “*about Jack.*”

“Oh,” Shirley rolled her eyes, “I said my Jack’s never hurt a soul in his life, couldn’t even if he wanted to. He’s soft as you like once he stops growling. *And he’s only in for breaking and entering and petty theft.* But he said he never even nicked the wallet; he just picked the wrong one up on the way out. Anyway, I said if he ever did want to go inside for something

more serious than I'd make sure he handed out a bit of GBH. And do you know what she said?" She looked up at Bob in complete disbelief at the words that were about to leave her lips.

"What?"

"She said she blamed the parents." Shirley's face clouded and stormed.

"Oh Shir, you didn't batter her did you?"

"Bob McGregor! I'm a woman of certain repute and I'd like you to bear that in mind at all times!"

He looked sceptically at her, all too aware of Shirley's tendency to resolve things as quickly and brutally as need be. The mother who claimed that Jack had been responsible for the nit outbreak during his third year at school ended up having her arm reset in two places. And the inspector whose report led to Jack's ultimate expulsion was unable to believe that one person had had both the time and inclination to collect such an abundance of dog shit in the space of just one afternoon, a collection that Shirley had deposited through the smashed window of his new car.

Bob still didn't know what exactly became of the sister of the woman Shirley's husband had run away with after she goading the jilted, expectant mother one night in the pub. All he knew was that hushed tones were used on the rare occasion that her name materialised.

"What did you do?" he asked again, firmly but not entirely seriously. Shirley looked petulant, like a child forced to recite a silly incident in the head teacher's office.

"I had young Sean piss in her Pernod and black while she was in the loos."

Bob screwed his face up like a damp tea towel ready for the wash. "Oh Shir, you didn't?"

"Well!" Shirley sprang to her own defence. "She shouldn't be so bloody interfering. And everyone thought she deserved it – else they'd have tried to stop it."

Both Bob and Shirley knew that this wasn't entirely the case. "And besides, if alcohol's kosher then a bit of pale ale won't do her no harm."

The pan on the stove began to boil more rapidly. The heat pushed gaps of air between the hob and the pan, which was skittering slowly forward like its feet had been tied and it were trying to escape. The liquid spat angrily in graceful arches over the rim and landed in splotches.

Shirley bit the top of Bob's leg as he put the finishing touches to the light. He climbed down, steadying himself on the unfamiliar terra firma of the kitchen floor and took Shirley's face in his hands as he kissed her on the forehead

Her whole being lightened as he did this; the attention, the softness of touch from such a hard man, all of it made her life seem that little bit easier if only for a moment.

"Light's fixed."

"Cheers, *stud*." she slowly prized herself from his embrace, kissing him once more on the lips.

The pan was boiling with a white, angry heat, spitting its content onto the flames below and almost extinguishing the fire in the process. As Shirley hugged Bob the click of the metal finally caught her attention and she noticed the large metal drum teetering uncomfortably on the hob.

"My soup!" she cried as she ran to the stove and with a damp tea towel picked up the throbbing metal. The heat from the handle seared through the wet cloth and stung her fingers, but Shirley had become accustomed to blocking out pain of all varieties. That, she felt, was the key to everything in life. If you stop feeling it, it can't hurt.

"*Shit!*" She threw an empty bowl into the sink and carefully started pouring the liquid into it, expertly allowing the meat chunks to fall through with the softened barley and leek pieces, all the while ensuring that every blackened fleck that had formed on the pan's base didn't tip in. Smoke billowed out as

the scolding waterfall poured gently from one receptacle to another. The steam wrapped itself around her shoulders and made her seem ghostly and fragile, disappearing before Bob's eyes.

"Bloody hell man," she said to no-one in particular, focusing instead on the task at hand. "It's turned to bloody coal at the bottom."

"The hob," Bob added, arranging his tools onto his belt.

"What?"

"Turn your hob off."

"Oh." Shirley placed the half-full pan of soup on the bench and for once did as she was told. She turned back to the soup and hung her head, as though in shame.

"It's turned to fucking coal on the bottom," she said again, solemnly "How the hell is Jack expected to do anything with his life when I can't even make a pan of bloody soup without messing it up?"

Bob moved towards her and kissed her neck. "I'm sure it'll still be smashing," he said softly, the warmth of his breath causing her neck to prickle and rise.

"It's his favourite." She paused for a moment. The half empty pan dribbling with burnt liquid caused a carousel of memories to jump and turn in her mind; fragmented images and sepia reels flashed behind her eyes like the stuttered snapshots of information that come with the worst kind of hang-over.

"Well, I suppose if I'm careful to scrape the good bits from the shite on the bottom it'll be alright. Won't it?"

"Aye," Bob said, leaning on the surround of the kitchen door. "I'll see you hinny. Send my love to your Jack, tell him there's a pint on me when he's ready to come down the pub."

"I will," Shirley said, "mind, he doesn't know his Mam's getting a good seeing to yet. So don't you be saying nothing; as far as he's concerned you're still just my odd job man."

A filthy smile etched across Bob's life-worn face. He looked at his watch with the enthusiasm of a pantomime bit-player and snaked back across the kitchen, grabbing Shirley from behind. She screamed in protest but could do little to conceal her own grin. The attention made her feel so happy she was almost frightened that it would lead to a hangover.

"Thinking about it," Bob grabbed her waist and nipped her in areas that made her jump and squeal, "I couldn't half go for a quick odd job myself."

Shirley turned herself around so that she was facing Bob once more and grabbed him between the legs.

"Go on Shir', finish 'us off – call it payment for the light-bulb."

She dug harder into his groin and he flinched back. "Get off 'us you filthy git! You'll get a name for yourself round here." She kissed him and he kissed her back twice as hard.

"I've already got myself a name – one for each of my odd job girls."

"I'll smash their faces in." Shirley took his balls in her hands and this time squeezed tightly. "And make bloody sure you never dip your nib for the rest of your days, *mush*." She let go of him and turned back to the soup. Bob flicked his palm across the back of her tracksuit bottoms which caused her to jump. He kissed her neck lovingly and walked to the door.

"Ta for the light love," Shirley said without turning to say goodbye.

"Any time hinny," Bob said, leaving her alone in the kitchen, pouring her soup. Specks of unavoidable black tumbled into the good bowl, but Shirley was past caring; she had her boy and her man. For the first time in a long time she felt as though her life was starting to fit again.