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## 4 September (nine weeks earlier)

**T**HE FLETCHER FAMILY BUILT THEIR BIG, SHINY NEW HOUSE on the crest of the moor, in a town that time seemed to have left to mind its own business. They built on a modest-sized plot that the diocese, desperate for cash, needed to get rid of. They built so close to the two churches – one old, the other very old – that they could almost lean out from the bedroom windows and touch the shell of the ancient tower. And on three sides of their garden they had the quietest neighbours they could hope for, which was ten-year-old Tom Fletcher’s favourite joke in those days; because the Fletchers built their new house in the midst of a graveyard. They should have known better, really.

But Tom and his younger brother Joe were so excited in the beginning. Inside their new home they had huge great bedrooms, still smelling of fresh paint. Outside they had the bramble-snared, crumble-stone church grounds, where story-book adventures seemed to be just waiting for them. Inside they had a living room that gleamed with endless shades of yellow, depending on where the sun was in the sky. Outside they had ancient archways that soared to the heavens, dens within ivy that was old and stiff enough to stand up by itself, and grass so long six-year-old Joe seemed drowned by it. Indoors, the house began to absorb the characters of the boys’ parents, as fresh colours, wall-paintings and carved

animals appeared in every room. Outdoors, Tom and Joe made the churchyard their own.

On the last day of the summer holidays, Tom was lying on the grave of Jackson Reynolds (1875–1945), soaking up the warmth of the old stone. The sky was the colour of his mother's favourite cornflower-blue paint and the sun had been out doing its stuff since early morning. It was a *shiny day*, as Joe liked to say.

Tom wouldn't have been able to say what changed. How he went from perfectly fine, warm and happy, thinking about how old you had to be to try out for Blackburn Rovers to . . . well . . . to not fine. But suddenly, in a second, football didn't seem quite so important. There was nothing wrong, exactly, he just wanted to sit up. See what was nearby. If anyone . . .

Stupid. But he was sitting up all the same, looking round, wondering how Joe had managed to disappear again. Further down the hill, the graveyard stretched the length of a football field, getting steeper as it dropped lower. Below it were a few rows of terraced houses and then more fields. Beyond them, at the bottom of the valley, was the neighbouring town of Goodshaw Bridge where he and Joe were due to resume school on Monday morning. Across the valley and behind, on just about every side, were the moors. Lots and lots of moors.

Tom's dad was fond of saying how much he loved the moors, the wildness, grandeur and sheer unpredictability of the north of England. Tom agreed with his dad, of course he did, he was only ten, but privately he sometimes wondered if countryside that was predictable (he'd looked the word up, he knew what it meant) wouldn't be a bad thing. It seemed to Tom sometimes, though he never liked to say it, that the moors around his new home were a little bit too unpredictable.

He was an idiot, of course, it went without saying.

But somehow, Tom always seemed to be spotting a new lump of rock, a tiny valley that hadn't been there before, a bank of heather or copse of trees that appeared overnight. Sometimes, when clouds were moving fast in the sky and their shadows were racing across the ground, it seemed to Tom that the moors were rippling, the way water does when there's something beneath the surface; or stirring, like a sleeping monster about to wake up. And just occasionally,

when the sun went down across the valley and the darkness was coming, Tom couldn't help thinking that the moors around them had moved closer.

'Tom!' yelled Joe from the other side of the graveyard, and for once Tom really wasn't sorry to hear from him. The stone beneath him had grown cold and there were more clouds overhead.

'Tom!' called Joe again, right in Tom's ear. Jeez, Joe, that was fast. Tom jumped up and turned round. Joe wasn't there.

Around the edge of the churchyard, trees started to shudder. The wind was getting up again and when the wind on the moor really meant business, it could get everywhere, even the sheltered places. In the bushes closest to Tom something moved.

'Joe,' he said, more quietly than he meant to, because he really didn't like the idea that someone, even Joe, was hiding in those bushes, watching him. He sat, staring at the big, shiny-green leaves, waiting for them to move again. They were laurels, tall, old and thick. The wind was definitely getting up, he could hear it now in the tree-tops. The laurels in front of him were still.

It had probably just been a strange echo that had made him think Joe was close. But Tom had that feeling, the ticklish feeling he'd get when someone spotted him doing something he shouldn't. And besides, hadn't he just felt Joe's breath on the back of his neck?

'Joe?' he tried again.

'Joe?' came his own voice back at him. Tom took two steps back, coming up sharp against a headstone. Glancing all round, double-checking no one was close, he crouched to the ground.

At this level, the foliage on the laurel bushes was thinner. Tom could see several bare branches of the shrub amongst nettles. He could see something else as well, a shape he could barely make out, except he knew it wasn't vegetation. It looked a little like – if it moved he might get a better look – a large and very dirty human foot.

'Tom, Tom, come and look at this!' called his brother, this time sounding as if he was miles away. Tom didn't wait to be called again, he jumped to his feet and ran in the direction of his brother's voice.

Joe was crouched near the foot of the wall that separated the churchyard from the family's garden. He was looking at a grave that

seemed newer than many of those surrounding it. At its foot, facing the headstone, was a stone statue.

'Look, Tom,' Joe was saying, even before his older brother had stopped running. 'It's a little girl. With a dolly.'

Tom bent down. The statue was about a foot high and was of a tiny, chubby girl with curly hair, wearing a party dress. Tom reached out and scratched away some of the moss that was growing over it. The sculptor had given her perfectly carved shoes and, cradled in her arms, a small doll.

'Little girls,' said Joe. 'It's a grave for little girls.'

Tom looked up to find that Joe was right – almost. A single word was carved on the headstone. *Lucy*. There could have been more, but any carving below it had been covered in ivy. 'Just one little girl,' he said. 'Lucy.'

Tom reached up and pulled away the ivy that grew over the headstone until he could see dates. Lucy had died ten years ago. She'd been just two years old. *Beloved child of Jennifer and Michael Pickup*, the inscription said. There was nothing else.

'Just Lucy,' Tom repeated. 'Come on, let's go.'

Tom set off back, making his way carefully through long grass, avoiding nettles, pushing aside brambles. Behind him, he could hear the rustling of grass being disturbed and knew Joe was following. As he climbed the hill, the walls of the abbey ruin came into view.

'Tom,' said Joe, in a voice that just didn't sound right.

Tom stopped walking. He could hear grass moving directly behind him but he didn't turn round. He just stayed there, staring at the ruined church tower but not really seeing it, wondering instead why he was suddenly so scared of turning round to face his brother.

He turned. He was surrounded by tall stones. Nothing else. Tom discovered his fists were clenched tight. This really wasn't funny. Then the bushes a few yards away started moving again and there was Joe, jogging through the grass, red in the face and panting, as if he'd been struggling to keep up. He came closer, reached his brother and stopped.

'What?' Joe said.

'I think someone's following us,' whispered Tom.

Joe didn't ask who, or where, or how Tom knew, he just stared

back at him. Tom reached out and took his brother's arm. They were going home and they were doing it now.

Except, no, perhaps they weren't. On the wall that separated the older part of the church grounds from the graveyard that stretched down the hill, six boys were standing in a line like skittles, watching. Tom could feel his heartbeat starting to speed up. Six boys on the wall; and possibly another one very close by.

The biggest boy was holding a thick, forked twig. Tom didn't see the missile that came hurtling towards him but he felt the air whistle past his face. Another boy, wearing a distinctive claret and blue football shirt, was taking aim. With quicker reflexes than his older brother, Joe threw himself behind a large headstone. Tom followed just as the second shot went wide.

'Who are they?' whispered Joe as another stone went flying overhead.

'They're boys from school,' Tom replied. 'Two of them are in my class.'

'What do they want?' Joe's pale face had gone whiter than normal.

'I don't know,' said Tom, although he did. One of them wanted to get his own back. The others were just helping out. A rock hit the edge of the headstone and Tom saw dust fly off it. 'The one in the Burnley shirt is Jake Knowles,' he admitted.

'The one you had that fight with?' said Joe. 'When you got sent to the headmaster's office? The one whose dad wanted to get you kicked out of school?'

Tom crouched and leaned forward, hoping the long grass would hide his head as he looked out. Another boy from Tom's class, Billy Aspin, was pointing at a clump of brambles near the little girl's grave that Joe had just found. Tom turned back to Joe. 'They're not looking,' he said. 'We have to move quick. Follow me.'

Joe was right behind as Tom shot forward, heading for a great, upright tomb, one of the largest on the hill. They made it. Stones came whistling through the air but Tom and Joe were safe behind the huge stone structure, which had iron railings around the outside. There was an iron gate too and, beyond it, a wooden door that led inside. A family mausoleum, their father had said, probably

quite large inside, tunnelled into the hillside, with lots of ledges for generations of coffins to be placed on.

'They've split up,' came a shout from the wall. 'You two, come with me!'

Tom and Joe looked at each other. If they'd split up, why were they still close enough for Tom to feel Joe's breath on his face?

'They're knob-heads,' said Joe.

Tom leaned out from behind the crypt. Three of the boys were walking along the wall towards Lucy Pickup's grave. The other three were still staring in their direction.

'What's that noise?' said Joe.

'Wind?' suggested Tom, without bothering to listen. It was a pretty safe guess.

'It's not wind. It's music.'

Joe was right. Definitely music, low, with a steady rhythm, a man's deep voice singing. The knob-heads had heard it too. One of them jumped down and ran towards the road. Then the rest followed. The music was getting louder and Tom could hear a car engine.

It was John Lee Hooker. His dad had several of his CDs and played them – very loud – when their mother was out. Someone was driving up the hill, playing John Lee Hooker on his car stereo, and this was the time to move. Tom stepped sideways, away from the shelter of the mausoleum.

Only Jake Knowles was still in sight. He looked round and saw Tom, who didn't hide this time. Both boys knew the game was up. Except . . .

'He's got your baseball bat,' said Joe, who'd followed Tom into the open. 'What's he doing?'

Jake had got Tom's bat and his ball too, a large, very heavy red ball that Tom had been warned on pain of a prolonged and tortuous death (which was how his mum talked when she was serious) not to play with anywhere near buildings, especially buildings with windows and was she making herself clear? Tom and Joe had been practising catches earlier by the church. They'd left both bat and ball near the wall and now Knowles had them.

'He's nicking them,' said Joe. 'We can call the police.'

'I don't think so,' said Tom, as Jake turned away and faced the church. Tom watched Jake toss the ball gently into the air. Then he

swung the bat hard. The ball sailed into the air and through the huge stained-glass window at the side of the church. A blue pane shattered as the car engine switched off, the music died and Jake fled after his friends.

‘Why did he do that?’ said Joe. ‘He broke a window. He’ll get murdered.’

‘No, he won’t,’ said Tom. ‘We will.’

Joe stared at his brother for a second, then he got it. He may have been only six and annoying as hell, but he was no knob-head.

‘That’s not fair.’ Joe’s little face had screwed up in outrage. ‘We’ll tell.’

‘They won’t believe us,’ said Tom. Six weeks in his new school: three detentions, two trips to the headmaster’s office, any number of serious bollockings from his class teacher and no one ever believed him. Why would they, when Jake Knowles had half the class on his side, jumping up and down in their seats they were so eager to back him up. Even the ones who didn’t seem to be Jake’s mates were too scared of him and his gang to say anything. Six weeks of getting the blame for everything Jake Knowles started. Maybe he was the knob-head.

He took hold of Joe’s hand and the boys ran as fast as they could through the long grass. Tom climbed the wall, looked all round the churchyard, and then bent down to pull up Joe. Jake and the other boys were nowhere in sight but there were a hundred hiding places around the ruins of the old church.

An old sports car was parked just by the church gate, pale blue with lots of silver trim. The soft roof had been folded back over the boot. A man was leaning across the passenger seat and fumbling in the glove compartment. He found what he was looking for and straightened up. He looked about Tom’s dad’s age, around thirty-four or thirty-five, taller than Tom’s dad, but thinner.

Beckoning Joe to follow, Tom picked up the baseball bat (no point leaving evidence in plain sight) and ran until they could scramble into their favourite hiding place. They’d discovered it shortly after moving in: a huge rectangular stone table of a grave, supported on four stone pillars. The grass around it grew long, and once the boys had crawled underneath they were completely hidden from view.

The sports-car driver opened the car door and climbed out. As he turned towards the church, the boys could see that his hair was the same colour as their mother's (strawberry blonde, not ginger), and curly like their mum's, but his was cut short. He was wearing knee-length shorts, a white T-shirt and red Crocs. He walked across the road and into the churchyard. Once inside, he stopped on the path and looked behind him, then span slowly on the spot, taking in the cobbled streets, the terraced houses, both churches, the moors behind and beyond.

'He's not been here before,' whispered Joe.

Tom nodded. The stranger walked past the boys and reached the main door of the church. He took a key from his pocket. A second later the door swung open and he walked inside. Just as Jake Knowles appeared at the entrance to the churchyard. Tom stood up and looked round. Billy Aspin was behind them. As they watched, the other members of the gang appeared from behind gravestones, clambering over the wall. The brothers were surrounded.