

“How many days do you think it will be before the crisis is over?”

The Colonel shook his head. “Mr. Gardner, the entire British Army is prevented from driving a single vehicle down any street; I could count on two hands the amount of helicopters we’re able to get in the air. And just about every single person in the country is in need of rescue. That’s about forty-five million across the UK and Ireland, minus an uncertain number who have already perished. There is very little we can do.”

“What about aid from neighbouring countries? Or are they in the same predicament?”

“France only suffered five percent coverage during the snowfall. But with a population of around sixty million, that still amounts to a sizeable three million souls in need of rescue. All their efforts will be concentrated on saving their own, and who can blame them? As for countries further afield, forget it. If we can’t offer somewhere to land a plane, not even all the military might of the United States can do a damn thing to help.”

“Colonel, the vast majority of people in this country are still alive and well. Are you suggesting that there’s no hope—that we should simply give up?”

CHION

Darryl Sloan

Midnight Pictures

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*In memory of my mother, Eleanor Sloan,
in whose example I saw the joy of giving.*

χ ι ω ν

An ancient Greek word, written as “chion”
(pronounced *kai-on*) in the English alphabet.

It means “like snow.”

DAY 1

TUESDAY, 7 JANUARY 2003

YOU WOULD EXPECT to hear the occasional scream if you spent seven hours a day, five days a week in this place. But you'd know it was nothing serious; just a couple of hyperactive boys getting a little too zealous in their horseplay, or maybe two quarrelling girls pulling the hair out of each other. With forty-three classrooms in Clounagh Junior High School, all connected by long, thin corridors, it wasn't difficult for sound to travel. And with six hundred and fifty children, aged eleven to fourteen, in varying degrees of hyperactivity, there was a high likelihood that you would occasionally hear a scream coming from another part of the building, and it wouldn't alarm you.

But fourteen-year-old Jamie Metcalfe *was* alarmed—so alarmed that he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The other pupils in room twenty had the same reaction; despite the break-time bell having rung less than a minute ago, causing everyone to burst into chatter, all mouths abruptly stopped moving.

These were not the usual sort of screams; these conjured up pictures in Jamie's mind of a certain kind of story you would see infrequently on the TV news: the report of a maniac coming into a school wielding a gun—like the infamous Columbine incident, where two students had gunned down several persons in their high school. But this was Northern Ireland, not America, and firearms were not an easy purchase for the average citizen.

The muffled quality of the screams made it seem like whatever was happening was not taking place right outside the room, but not very far away, either. It seemed as if there were as many as five persons shrieking, their cries piercing and gravelly. At a lower volume, audible in the gaps between the screams, were terrified sobs.

The sensible thing to do was stay put, but it was only a matter of time before curiosity got the better of someone. Within a few seconds, Alex Vennard dashed for the door.

Mr. Reed, mesmerised like the rest of the class, came to his senses. "Alex, don't go out there!"

Too late. Like cattle, everyone streamed out after Alex, creating a bottleneck at the door, as pupils tried to squeeze past one another.

"Stay inside! It might not be safe!" Mr. Reed protested, but his words fell on deaf ears.

Jamie was the last pupil to exit room twenty.

The classroom was on the upper floor of the school. Panes of glass running along one side of the corridor overlooked the playground below. The pupils had formed a line along the windows, their faces gazing out and down.

"I don't get it," someone said.

"This is weird," another remarked.

"What's wrong with them?"

Jamie squeezed between two pupils and peered down, seeing just what he expected: the school playground, a carpet of pure, seamless white, shining so bright that he had to squint. The snow had fallen during period one, and had kept going for about an hour, ceasing as abruptly as it had started. It wouldn't provide much depth on the ground, but a snowball was a snowball regardless of how much work you had to do to pack it together. The pupils had watched the flakes fall beyond the classroom windows. Some of the girls had ooh-ed and ahh-ed, and everyone was looking forward to getting outdoors and pelting one another senseless.

When Jamie's eyes adjusted to the brightness, he saw the

focus of everyone's attention. From this vantage point, he could see the foyer jutting out of the building and the doors that led to the playground standing open. Seven pupils were lying in the snow just outside the doors, wearing their coats and gloves. Their teacher had obviously let them out a few minutes early—a small kindness that had backfired horribly. It was these seven who were screaming and writhing. Just inside the doors, a crowd had gathered.

“Why don't they get up?” Claire Forbes asked. “Have they been injured?”

“Injured by what?” Jamie wondered. “I was thinking it was somebody with a gun, but we didn't hear shots or anything.”

“Silencer?” Alex suggested.

“Don't be daft!” Daniel Richards said. “You've been watching too much *CSI*.”

“Have you got a better idea?”

“Look at everybody,” Claire said. “Why are they just standing there? Why doesn't somebody go out and help them?”

“They're afraid of being shot,” Alex said.

“If they were afraid of being shot, they wouldn't be standing in the doorway,” Jamie pointed out.

Beyond the windows of the foyer, he could see the crowd growing steadily. The mass suddenly surged, pushing five persons—three of them teachers—through the doors, where each one of them instantly tripped and landed in a heap on top of the other casualties. They started struggling. Oddly, they couldn't seem to stand up, although nothing appeared to have attacked them.

Jamie caught sight of something in particular about one of the pupils in the snow: a red and white striped woolly hat that he had given to someone for Christmas last month.

Mr. Reed said, “Whatever's going on, it looks serious. Now will everyone please get back into the room so that I can—*Jamie! Come back here!*”

Jamie Metcalfe kept running, shoving his way past pupils

from other classes, who had also come out for a look, having heard the screams.



Getting through the foyer was like fighting through a rock concert for a place at the front, only here the soundtrack was anything but music to Jamie's ears. He pushed and shoved until he felt himself grabbed by the back of his collar by Mr. Jefferson. The teacher spun him around and yelled, "Stay put, Metcalfe! You're going to get somebody killed!"

Despite the warning, teacher and pupil found themselves swept onward another two feet, as those behind surged forward. They were now five rows from the "stage."

Three ear-splitting cracks came from the direction of the general office. It was the familiar sound of a metre stick smacking off a wooden desk—a tactic occasionally used to get the attention of a rowdy class.

It worked. Everyone shut their mouths, quit struggling, and faced the direction of the sound.

Mr. Burns, the Vice Principal, was standing at the edge of the crowd, on a chair, towering above everyone like a giant. Over the noise of the terrified pleas outdoors, he addressed the multitude: "*Listen to me!* It's not safe to go outside! Do you hear me, you people at the back? *No more pushing!* People are going to get seriously hurt if you keep pushing!"

"What's going on?" somebody asked.

Before Mr. Burns could answer, fifty voices simultaneously erupted with other questions.

The Vice Principal waved his arms to quieten the crowd. When the subtle approach failed, he raised his metre stick and gave it another hard rap off the door frame.

Jamie's mind filled with the image of Moses confronting Pharaoh with Aaron's staff, preparing to dish out the Ten Plagues upon Egypt.

Mr. Burns said, "All I can tell you right now is that you're in

danger if you go outside. Stay inside and you're safe. Go outside and ... just *don't*. We'll tell you more when we know more."

"Is there somebody out there with a gun?"

"Who's been hurt?"

"Are you sure we're safe in here?"

"Is anybody dead?"

"Why aren't you helping them?"

"Is it terrorists?"

Those were some of the questions Jamie could pick out from the verbal onslaught.

Mr. Burns replied, "I can't tell you what I don't know. What I will tell you is that this is now a *wet break*. You all know what that means. You stay in your classrooms. No one goes outside. Every door on every side of the school will be closed and locked."

What the heck was going on here? Jamie was having visions of snipers all around the school, in the bushes behind the soccer field, in the trees adjacent to Northway, in the houses across Brownstown Road.

"Go back to class. We need to help the people trapped outside. And we can't help them until you give us some space."

How can they be trapped outside? Jamie wondered. *They're right there beside us.*

Jamie stood on his tiptoes and peered over the shoulders of the others, trying to get a glimpse of the woolly hat that he desperately hoped wasn't the same one he'd given to Tara Morton.

Once again, the crowd took aim and shot their verbal arrows at the Vice Principal.

Mr. Burns raised his stick and rapped it so hard that it broke in two. "GET OUT OF HERE!"



Jamie once again stood in the upper corridor with his classmates, peering out through the window. No amount of pleas or threats from Mr. Reed could make any of them retire

to the classroom. Defying a teacher was a hard thing to do when you were on your own, but there was a sense of security in numbers. And judging by the numbers spanning the length of the corridor, it looked as if every teacher was having the same trouble.

Below, the screaming had subsided, replaced now by whimpering. There was no sign of blood, and yet fourteen people lay on the ground like wounded soldiers, unable to rise. Jamie had ample time to determine whether the girl in the hat was Tara Morton, and there was little doubt.

Please, God, let her be all right, he prayed.

There was only one person standing in the playground doorway now: Mrs. Rice. She was crouched down, speaking and gesturing to those outside, too quiet for Jamie to hear, but likely communicating words of comfort.

She moved out of the way when Mr. Garrett appeared. He manoeuvred something big and rectangular out through the door—one of the exercise mats from the girls' gym nearby. He dropped it on the ground, letting it fall partially in the snow and partially on top of the wounded. Mr. McGirr arrived with a second mat. He walked out onto the first, then carefully let his mat drop onto the snow. When he went back inside, Mr. Garrett was ready to emerge with a third mat. After that came a fourth and a fifth.

"Look," Claire said, "they're making a circle around the people."

"What for?" Daniel wondered. "Are they afraid of getting their knees wet?"

When the circle was complete, four teachers came out onto the mats, kneeling down and touching the fallen. Their hand movements were slow and careful, like doctors performing an operation.

Something in Mr. Garrett's hand flashed in the sunlight.

"He's got a knife!" came a voice from another class along the corridor.

Mr. Garrett leaned over the girl in the woolly hat and drew

the blade along her arm, from the palm of her hand to her shoulder.

Jamie's mind reeled with confusion and horror.

He was ready to run back downstairs, but Mr. Reed stepped up behind him and held him by the shoulders. "Take it easy, Jamie," he said.

Tara raised her arm straight up into the air, like a dying girl reaching for a friend's hand while she breathed her last. But there was no blood to be seen, nor very much flesh. Her arm was still enclosed in the familiar royal blue of her school blazer. On the ground lay the tattered remains of one glove and the arm of her coat.

All along the corridor came the hiss of countless lungs exhaling with relief, none more deeply than Jamie's.

Mr. Garrett continued to slice open Tara's coat. The other three teachers were doing the same to other casualties.

"Why don't they just lift them off the ground?" Daniel wondered.

"You see this kind of thing on TV," Alex said, "doctors cutting people out of their clothes."

"I don't see any doctors down there, do you?"

"Well," Claire said, "they must know what they're doing."

"I don't think they do," Daniel said. "People get their clothes cut off when they're in hospital with broken bones or big cuts, and it's not safe to move them. Why would anyone cut the clothes off right here? Look! He's going for her skirt now!"

Mr. Garrett drew his knife up the front of Tara's skirt, as far as her waist, revealing the girl's thighs and underwear to the world.

"Who's got a camera phone?" Alex jested.

Jamie elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"Ow! Take a chill pill, Metcalfe!"

Mr. Garrett didn't stop at the waist, but kept going until he reached the chest, splitting Tara's pinafore into two neat halves. Her shirt was still intact, preserving some measure of dignity.

What kind of an injury was this, that even now Tara still could not get up?

Mr. Garrett tugged Tara's head out of her hat and then proceeded to cut into the hair around the back of her neck.

Eventually the girl put her arms around Mr. Garrett's shoulders, while another teacher took her by the ankles. Gently and carefully, they lifted her onto the mat.

Tara stood up slowly, wearing nothing but a shirt, tie, panties and socks. She appeared completely unharmed, dancing from foot to foot in order to work away the pins and needles caused by staying too long in one position, and hugging her waist in an attempt to warm herself.

Mrs. Rice arrived with a blanket. Putting it across Tara's shoulders, she ushered the girl indoors.

Only when Tara was out of sight, and Jamie's attention shifted to the clothes left behind, did he understand what was happening.

There on the ground, left in the exact posture in which Tara had lain, were the remains of her coat, blazer, pinafore, gloves and shoes.

"She was stuck," Jamie said.

"What do you mean?" Claire asked.

"Don't be daft," Daniel said.

"Look at the teachers," Jamie said. "They're on the mats. Nobody wants to touch the snow."

Jamie shifted his focus and peered at the little lines of snow resting on the window frame at his nose. He took hold of the latch and pushed.

The window opened, dislodging a few flakes of snow that fell innocently to the ground.

Alex shoved past some pupils and stood in front of the open window. The gap was about three inches—just enough space to fit a hand through.

"Alex," Mr. Reed said. "Be sensible, now."

"Come on, sir. Sticky snow?" Alex put his hand through the gap and reached down until his finger touched the little line

of white powder resting on the divider between two panes of glass.

The snow compacted under the force of his finger, as expected.

A second later, Alex's smile vanished. "Oh no."

"Quit screwing around," Daniel said.

"I'm not. I ... I can't move my finger. *I can't move my finger!*"

Something in his voice and eyes told everyone that this was not a prank. A couple of girls gasped. Others put their hands to their faces or backed away.

"Stay calm, Alex," Mr. Reed said. "Don't panic. We'll get you out of this. It's ... it's only your finger."

Alex used his free hand to help tug his trapped arm, but it was useless. The scene looked ridiculous, this boy being held to the spot by the tip of one finger, as if handcuffed. If it hadn't been for the spectacle in the playground, there would have been no shortage of laughter going around.

Mrs. Higgins, from room twenty-one, approached. "Listen, I've got a kettle in my store. We'll pour some hot water on your finger and melt the snow."

Alex nodded, relieved at the prospect. In the minutes following, while he waited for the kettle to boil, he calmed himself down. "I feel like an idiot," was his only comment.

Mrs. Higgins held the kettle over the gap in the window and began to tilt it.

"Wait a minute!" Alex said. "That's not boiling, is it? I mean, if you—"

Mrs. Higgins frowned at him and poured.

The water emitted steam as soon as it reached the cold air outside, giving the illusion that it was hotter than it actually was. The liquid splashed off Alex's hand. Mrs. Higgins held the stream long enough for some of it to go rolling down his palm and along his index finger. The water then flowed down the window pane and collected in a glassy puddle on the snow-covered sill below. None of the snow around Alex's finger had melted even slightly.

“What the—” Mrs. Higgins exclaimed. “That’s not right.”

“No!” Alex yelled, jerking his arm. “Get it off! You have to get it off!”

“Hold on, Alex,” Mr. Reed said. “We’ll figure something out, I promise.”

“Hold on? *Hold on!* Laugh it up, why don’t you?” Alex pulled harder, again and again, letting panic take hold of him. “*Get it off now!* I WANT IT OFF!”

And suddenly he was free, his momentum carrying him across the width of the corridor and slamming his shoulder roughly into the wall. He sank to his knees, raising his hand in front of his face and grinning with relief, as blood flowed freely down his index finger.

On the window frame, a little piece of bloody skin, about one centimetre in diameter, quivered in the gentle breeze like an autumn leaf.



More of the fallen were being successfully moved indoors. Items of clothing were not the only things being left behind; there were now patches of red in the white, where several persons had been unfortunate to land with a bare hand or an ankle in the snow. Tara had been one of the lucky ones.

Jamie pictured it happening: the break-time bell ringing; pupils rushing to the cloakrooms for their coats and gloves; the first foot striding out into the beautiful, dazzling, untouched snow; the other foot stepping forward. Before the pupil realises that his first foot is rooted to the ground, it’s too late; his balance is lost and his body goes flying forward, arms outstretched. Perhaps his feet leave his shoes, or he twists his ankle on the way down. A second pupil, not realising why his friend fell, immediately rushes outside to help and suffers the same fate. Several more fall victim in similar fashion before it finally dawns on someone: *Something’s wrong! Don’t go outside!*

Mr. Garrett was now examining the final person trapped by

the snow. Jamie couldn't ascertain the boy's identity from here. By his size, he looked like a first-year pupil, no older than twelve. Instead of cutting the boy's clothes, this time Mr. Garrett stood up and went indoors.

The boy was very still, lying face down.

Jamie felt a lump in his throat. Until now, nothing bad had happened. Something weird and scary was happening, but everyone was all right, weren't they? That was the main thing.

But the boy was very still.

Mr. Garrett emerged from the foyer carrying another exercise mat. This one he threw over the boy, covering him from head to toe.



Teachers found it difficult to keep classes quiet at the best of times, but since coming back into room twenty, none of the pupils uttered a word as they sat behind their desks. Ordinarily, this would have been bliss for Mr. Reed, but he looked every bit as uncomfortable as Jamie felt.

After fifteen minutes of silence, the teacher sat down on an empty desk at the front of the room and asked, "Does anyone know who the boy was?"

"Clive Stewart, I think," Jason Ross said.

Clive Stewart. It was a name Jamie had heard before, but he couldn't picture the boy's face.

"Is he dead, sir?" Kate Sheridan asked.

Mr. Reed nodded gravely.

"How do you know?" Tom Henderson asked. "You were up here with us."

Daniel scowled. "They covered him up. That's what you do when somebody dies, dummy."

Kate started crying. Her friend Ruth Conlon put an arm around her.

"Why is this happening?" Jason asked. "What do you think it is?"

"I don't know," Mr. Reed admitted. "A freak weather condition, maybe."

"It's snow, right?" Jason said. "Okay, it's *weird* snow, but it's *snow*. It'll melt."

Alex gazed at his bandaged finger.

Jamie thought about how the hot water had collected in a pool instead of seeping into the snow.

"We'll be all right, won't we?" Tom asked, his brow creased with worry.

There came a knock at the door. A second-year girl walked in and handed a note to Mr. Reed. He read it aloud. "*At the beginning of period seven, all pupils should proceed to the assembly hall for an important announcement.*"

"At last, some answers." The tension in Tom's face evaporated, his question forgotten.

Jamie stared at him for a moment, then looked from face to face. Everyone's expressions had brightened slightly.

You all think the adults are going to straighten everything out, Jamie realised. There's a dead boy in the playground. Outside, everywhere, there's something deadly that no one has ever seen before, and you think the adults are going to know how to make it all better.

Jamie wondered why he found himself standing aloof from everyone else in his thinking. What was it that made him follow a different line of reasoning than the others? How come he had so little faith in the competence of the adult world to fix any problem that threatened the well-being of the young? Was he just a pessimist by nature, or was there something more to it?

He knew the answer. It was all down to the secret he carried.



All six hundred and fifty pupils and fifty members of staff stood shoulder to shoulder in the assembly hall.

Mr. Lyons, the Principal, stood on the stage, towering several feet above the gathering. He tapped the microphone and cleared

his throat. "By now, most of you know that something very strange has happened."

"There's the understatement of the year," Daniel muttered.

"The snow that fell this morning is ... well, it's not normal snow; it's *adhesive*. Foolish as that sounds, anything that comes in contact with the snow sticks to it. The effect is quick and strong. If you've ever had your fingers stuck together with Super Glue, let me tell you, this is much worse. If any part of your body makes contact with the snow, the only way to pull you off is to ... to leave a layer of your skin behind."

Shivers ran through the crowd.

"We were able to rescue the pupils and teachers who fell down at break-time, but I should tell you, some of them needed bandages and are in quite a bit of pain right now. One pupil, Clive Stewart, we ... we couldn't save; he fell in such a way that he was unable to breathe."

Mr. Lyons hung his head for a moment, then looked up and spoke in a loud, clear tone. "We're making one simple rule, which everyone needs to obey, and it is this: *Don't go outside*. At the risk of sounding morbid, I'm going to spell it out for you: if you go outside, we will end up having to use a scalpel on your flesh to get you back inside. So if anyone is scared and has some panicky thoughts about getting home to Mum and Dad, you need to put them out of your head right now."

"What's he saying?" Claire whispered. "Are they gonna make us stay here when school's over?"

Mr. Lyons continued: "We have no way of knowing how widespread this ... phenomenon is, or how long it will last. I think it's very likely that you'll all need to remain here for a time after school finishes today."

Murmuring arose from all corners of the hall.

"I don't want to say this, but I feel I should. There's a possibility that you may need to stay here overnight."

The murmurs tripled in frequency.

"If that happens, we'll make suitable sleeping arrangements for everyone. I want you all to be aware of this possibility now,

so that no one panics if it gets dark and there's no sign of us letting you go. Right now it's *just* a possibility, a worst case scenario. Nothing more."

The worst case scenario that Jamie came up with was somewhat different. He imagined the hot sun beating down on the snow, and the carpet of white sprawled there in all its glory, day after day, never turning from solid to liquid—just as it failed to melt when touched by the hot water from Mrs. Higgins's kettle. Jamie knew he was thinking logically about the situation, but he prayed that he was wrong.

"Rest assured, we'll take care of you," Mr. Lyons said, "until things get back to normal. Above all, remember what I told you. *Don't go outside.*"



Jamie scanned the canteen from left to right until he spotted Tara Morton sitting alone at a table by the window. Holding his tray carefully in both hands, he weaved his way past swarms of pupils and took the seat opposite her.

"I nearly didn't see you," Jamie said. "It's the hair, I think."

"Don't *you* start," Tara said, cupping the sides of her head in her hands.

"I like it," Jamie said. "You suit it short at the back."

"Please," she replied sourly. "There's no need to humour me."

Jamie pulled Tara's arms down and stared at her. "Come on. You can always tell when I'm lying. Look at me. *I like your hair.*"

Tara's mouth curved into a warm smile, her eyes crinkling up with affection. She had the sort of smile that meant you couldn't help smiling back, and the sort of smile that could make you feel heartsick at the same time.

Jamie realised he was still holding onto her hands. He dared to cling a few seconds longer, then let go, partly hoping she would get the message and partly terrified she would.

Jamie tossed a chip into his mouth. "I'm sure it wasn't Garrett who did that to your ..." Jamie coughed. "I mean, I'm sure it wasn't Garrett who cut your hair that way."

"No, it was Miss Locke."

"Mean old Locke. I'd never trust her near me with a pair of scissors."

Jamie stopped with the fork halfway to his mouth and stared at Tara's chest, noticing the shirt and tie without the pinafore on top. He leaned over and peered under the table at her legs.

She was wearing tracksuit bottoms.

Tara slapped him playfully on the wrist. "Oi! Behave yourself."

"Lucky you had PE today."

"What? Did you think I was sitting here in nothing but my undies?"

Jamie shrugged.

"Aye, hard luck for you."

After a pause, Jamie said, "Earlier, at break-time ..."

Tara's face fell at the thought of what she'd been through.

"... I was watching from the corridor upstairs. I saw Mr. Garrett cutting you out of the snow."

"You know, I've never liked that teacher, but right then I could have kissed him. I'd never been so scared in my life. I thought I was going to die out there. It was the most awful feeling."

Jamie let out a deep sigh. "Welcome to the club," he said, without thinking.

Tara's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "What?"

"Nothing."

Tara stared at him, her brow furrowed with concern.

Jamie couldn't bring himself to make eye-contact.

There was a clatter of knives and forks as two girls from Tara's class sat down at the table.

"Hey, Tara," Joanne Wallace said, "let me see your mobile."

Tara moved her hand to her chest, then stopped. "I forgot."

My phone's in my coat, and my coat is ..." She pointed out of the window.

"What about you, Jamie?" Alison Gilmore asked.

"You want to see my phone?" Jamie pulled his mobile phone out of his blazer pocket.

Alison peered at the little LCD screen. It said, *NO SIGNAL*.

"What network are you on?" Alison asked.

"Vodafone." Jamie said.

She nodded. "That's it, then."

"What's it?" Tara asked.

"My phone's on O₂. Joanne's is on Orange. They're just like Jamie's. All the networks are down."

"Do you think it's something to do with the snow?"

"Heck of a coincidence if it isn't, don't you think?"



By far the most interesting place to be that afternoon was room forty—a science lab—and it was Jamie's good fortune that his class timetable landed him there for period nine.

Various experiments were taking place, one of which was to get a piece of snow under a microscope. An open window afforded Mrs. Preston the opportunity to reach a glass slide through the gap and attempt to scoop a tiny piece of snow off the sill. However, the slightest pressure made the slide stick to the snow. And when stuck, no amount of force could remove it.

Method number two proved more successful. Mrs. Preston held a second slide in mid-air, half inside and half outside. Then, using the palm of her free hand, she slapped the window hard. The glass quivered and little flakes of snow that were resting on the upper frame fell downward, a few of them landing on the slide.

"What do you think you'll find?" Jamie asked.

Mrs. Preston chuckled. "Jamie Metcalfe, it's not often that a teacher likes to admit when they don't know the answer to a

question, but I think this is one occasion when I'm more than justified in saying, *I haven't a clue.*"

Mrs. Preston put the slide onto the microscope, looked into the eye-piece, and adjusted the focus. Immediately, her jaw dropped. After observing for a few moments, she stood up straight. "How very odd."

Several voices demanded an explanation.

"Well, who'd like the first look?"

Every hand shot into the air.

Before the experiment, the class had been looking at an educational slide on the overhead projector screen: a photograph of magnified snow. There were hundreds of crystals, some in the shape of ordinary hexagons, others more intricate, but all of them designed around the number six. Jamie was in awe of the design of one crystal in particular, then his eye spotted another even more amazing. There was something wonderful about all this diverse beauty packed into such a tiny space—an unseen world too small for the naked eye.

Jamie's turn at the microscope finally came. With some trepidation, he leaned over and squinted into the eye-piece.

The crystals were neither hexagonal nor any nameable shape; they were very intricate, but malformed and chaotic in nature. Looking at them gave you a sense of something gone wrong, of nature running amok.

Jamie stepped away and allowed the next pupil to have his turn. Everyone who'd had their curiosity satisfied stood at the other side of the room, quiet and uneasy.

"Now," Mrs. Preston said, "let's try something slightly different." She placed a second glass slide on top of the first, making a sandwich out of the snow, then she peered into the eye-piece. "My, that was quick! The whole structure has changed."

When Jamie had his opportunity to look, the crystals had dissolved into something flat and featureless.

Mrs. Preston removed the slide and tossed it casually in the air, catching it on its descent, as you would a coin.

“Are you sure you should be doing that, miss?” Jamie asked.

“Well, Jamie, what does the change in structure tell you?”

“That the snow grabs you fast, before you’ve got any chance to get away.”

“Nothing else?”

Jamie didn’t know.

“It tells *me* that the snow grabs you once and *only* once. After that, it becomes hard and harmless. By then it’s too late, of course; you’re stuck. But any piece of information about the snow’s behaviour is worth noting.”

Jamie gazed out of the window at the rugby field.

The sun reflected off billions of crystals, turning the field into a carpet of dazzling white. Every one of those crystals was unnatural, though the field looked normal when gazed upon with eyes unaided.

Jamie shuddered and turned away.



Jamie’s final period of the day was in room thirty-four for English. As each pupil crossed the threshold, something made him break into a dash. When Jamie entered, he saw the reason why. Mr. Devlin had brought the TV out of the store. It was switched on and broadcasting.

“All right, everybody,” the teacher called, “get back to your seats and give everyone a chance to see.”

With a little more coaxing, the class obeyed.

On the screen, a camera peered down on snow-covered streets from a high vantage point, probably behind an office window at the BBC. The roads were devoid of activity, although choked with vehicles, all of them unmoving and immovable. The smooth snow-covered pavements were littered here and there with bumps, many taking the unmistakable shape of prostrate human beings.

Looking at this scene reminded Jamie of something from his childhood: waking up in the early hours of the morning,

before any of the neighbours had left for work, peering out of his bedroom at the street below, seeing the pure, untouched snow covering everything, feeling a sense of awe, wishing the snow could remain immaculate and yet wanting to be the first person to run out into it. But today the scene wasn't quite the same; the light was all wrong. Instead of the cold bluish hue of dawn with its long shadows, he witnessed the full glow of the afternoon sun perched overhead, banishing the dark spots and causing everything to sparkle.

The broadcast changed to a second camera. In the centre of the picture stood the tower of Big Ben, its upper section like a cake with a sugar-coated top, the clock face frozen at 9.26 a.m.

Now I know the exact time of the end of the world, Jamie thought.

In the foreground of the picture, the River Thames glided by, a mirror of the blue firmament above, oblivious to the surrounding cataclysm. The river and the sky were the only shreds of normality in sight, offering little hope.

The broadcast changed to the BBC newsroom. The familiar face of anchorman Stan Gardner was at the other end of the camera, sitting behind his desk. "I am joined now by Colonel Nathan Roberts, who is here with some advice to help us through this crisis.

"Colonel, first of all, for those people presently trapped inside their own homes, what advice can you give them?"

The camera cut to a well-built man in his forties with close-cropped hair, wearing army fatigues.

"Your first and most basic concern is water. The human body can survive for about three weeks without food, but only two to three days without water. So, take every container in the house and fill it. Be inventive: use plant pots, paint pots, even bins, as well as every mug and jug you can lay your hands on. Don't forget, your sinks and bathtub are also containers, so fill them up and leave them that way."

"I take it this is a precaution against the water supply going off?"

“Yes. The telephone networks are already down. Water and electricity, we’ve still got, but for how long no one knows.”

“On the matter of the telephone networks, do we know if this is a coincidence or sabotage?”

“It’s possible that something in the snow is causing interference with the phones. It’s also possible that there was some separate attack on the telephone networks to coincide with the snow.”

“Are you saying, then, that the snow itself is some sort of terrorist attack, rather than a weather phenomenon?”

“This is something nobody has ever seen before, and we’re working with very limited data. Personally, I think it’s way too convenient that our main means of communicating with each other—of *helping* each other—was cut off at the exact time the catastrophe hit. It bears the marks of a deliberate terrorist attack. If someone has data that can prove me wrong, I’ll listen, but until then I’m going to assume we’re at war. With whom, I don’t know.”

“Colonel, what about the many people trapped in their cars, listening in on radio? Have you any advice to offer them?”

“That depends on where the vehicle is. If it’s within a short distance of an inhabited building, I would ask those inside the dwelling to offer assistance. Pull up the carpets, cut them into strips and make a path out into the snow to the vehicle. Also use whatever books and magazines you have. If the car door can’t be opened, use something hard and heavy to smash the window. Please be careful. Anything that touches the snow will stick to it immediately, even the edge of your sleeve.”

“Let’s take a more desperate scenario, such as a car on an isolated country road. Surely there has to be something they can do?”

“There may be. If you can’t get out, you need to smash the window yourself. Lie down sideways across the front seats and use the heels of your feet on the glass. Then use the car mats to make a path; use items of clothing; tear the seat covers apart and use them, too.”

“But where would such a person go? There might not be a house for miles.”

“The aim in this situation is not to get to someone’s house; the car must *become* your house. Pop the bonnet open, then make a path to the front of your vehicle. Pull off a piece of rubber hose from your engine, open the cap on your window-wipers reservoir, use the hose as a straw, and you’ll have a supply of water for a time.”

Jamie felt a renewed sense of hope. He had been too pessimistic, too cynical. Colonel Roberts’s advice had surprised him in its ingenuity. Here was a man who could think creatively in a crisis. And if there were others like him, the country stood a fighting chance.

Colonel Roberts continued: “Be careful not to use the water in the radiator for drinking. It’s just as easy to get to, but the majority of motorists will have poured antifreeze into their radiators earlier in the winter. Antifreeze is highly poisonous. It causes irreversible kidney damage, which is often fatal. Unfortunately, some motorists may have used antifreeze in the wipers reservoir, too. So be very careful. If both water supplies are compromised, I’m afraid I’m out of ideas.”

“How many days do you think it will be before the crisis is over?”

The Colonel shook his head. “Mr. Gardner, the entire British Army is prevented from driving a single vehicle down any street; I could count on two hands the amount of helicopters we’re able to get in the air. And just about every single person in the country is in need of rescue. That’s about forty-five million across the UK and Ireland, minus an uncertain number who have already perished. There is very little we can do.”

“What about aid from neighbouring countries? Or are they in the same predicament?”

“France only suffered five percent coverage during the snowfall. But with a population of around sixty million, that still amounts to a sizeable three million souls in need of rescue. All their efforts will be concentrated on saving their own, and

who can blame them? As for countries further afield, forget it. If we can't offer somewhere to land a plane, not even all the military might of the United States can do a damn thing to help."

"Colonel, the vast majority of people in this country are still alive and well. Are you suggesting that there's no hope—that we should simply give up?"

"Not at all. What I'm saying is, we have to rescue *each other*. Rip out your carpets; sacrifice everything in your wardrobe; unscrew all the doors in your house; grab anything that you can use to make paths. Pull together and help your neighbours."

Jamie trembled with excitement at the renewed prospect of everyone—especially Tara—living through this.

"All we have to do is survive," Colonel Roberts said, "until the snow melts."

Don't you realise it won't, you fool? Jamie wondered, his heart sinking. *Or maybe you do, but you wouldn't dare say it.*



When the 2.45 p.m. bell rang throughout the school, signalling the close of another day of lessons, everyone rose from their desks, picked up their schoolbags, and headed out through the classroom doors, just like normal. But no one went home.

For the remainder of the day, all the rooms were being kept open and every pupil was given the freedom to come and go as he pleased—within reason. In the assembly hall, the teachers had rigged up a video projector and rolled out the big screen up on the stage. This was common practice in school when there was a disruption in the timetable and it was difficult to find empty rooms for classes. But no teacher ever anticipated an upset of this proportion.

It was just like being in the cinema, and it would have been fun, except the school's video library seemed to consist of *The Simpsons* and very little else. Sure enough, when Jamie got within earshot of the hall, he heard that familiar wacky theme

music. So instead of going in, he wandered around the building looking for Tara.

Pupils congregated with their friends in classrooms and corridors, chatting, or playing card games, or sharing headphones on their MP3 players. Morale was high. Way too high, Jamie reckoned, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. What good would it do to have mass panic? For most people, there was a certain novelty in experiencing a situation like this—an attitude born out of trust in the teachers.

But when you looked hard at the teachers, you could see cracks in the façade. They wore frightened expressions when they thought no one was looking. When approached by a pupil, they would smile and nod and say all the right things, pretending to keep everyone safe, but really only keeping everyone calm.

Jamie had a knot in his stomach. How long before the pupils started to understand what was really happening? And when they did, what then?

We're like birds in a cage, Jamie thought, where the owner has died and there's no one to come and feed them.



Jamie caught up with Tara in the corridor of the science department. She was dodging past other pupils, scowling when some got in her way, her arms laden with plastic containers of varying shapes and sizes. "Help me with this lot, will you?" she asked Jamie.

He took half of her load and walked along beside her. "Where are we going?"

"In here." Tara veered left, through a door marked eleven—an art room.

Jamie was taken aback. The entire room had been cleared of desks. In their place were containers of all shapes and sizes, filled to the brim with water, occupying eighty percent of the floor space.

Tara tiptoed carefully around the objects and deposited her

lot beside the sink, where she began to fill each one. Jamie followed suit.

"They're really taking this seriously," he remarked.

"Shouldn't they?"

"Yes, they definitely should. I was more worried they wouldn't. It's just ..."

"What?"

"Nothing." Jamie gazed out of the window, squinting at the dazzling white soccer field.

"Come on," Tara urged. "Say what's on your mind."

A teacher came into the room, left three plastic basins on the floor, and left.

Jamie whispered, "I wouldn't say this to everybody, but I think it's worse than everybody's letting on."

"How so?"

"I saw somebody pouring hot water on the snow. What do you think happened? What do you think *should* have happened?"

"How hot was the water?"

"Very."

"I guess it should have melted the snow."

Jamie stared at Tara.

"It didn't?" she asked.

He shook his head. "It *pooled*. It just sat on top of the snow in a puddle."

Tara's forehead wrinkled with concern. "But in a couple of days snow always—"

Jamie explained: "It's a temperature thing, right? If hot water can't melt it, what makes you think warmer weather will do any good? It's basic science. Think about it."

"When I was in the lab, the teachers were doing experiments, trying out different chemicals on the snow."

Jamie nodded. "That's good. But let's be realistic. Being a science teacher doesn't make you a scientist. Besides, this is something nobody has ever seen before. I'll bet they're just picking chemicals at random, pouring them on, and seeing if

anything happens. They don't know any more about it than you or me."

Tara sighed heavily. "If you're trying to scare me, it's working."

"I'll tell you something else. They *know* the snow's not going to melt. They *all* know. Why do you think they aren't heating up all this water here and throwing it outdoors right now? They know we're done for, and they're not admitting it, because they don't want us to panic."

"Stop it," Tara said. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You asked me to. Would you rather not know?"

"I ..." Tara put the palm of her hand on her forehead and paced back and fourth. When she stopped, she pointed her finger at Jamie, glaring hard at him. "Do you honestly believe we're done for?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, holding her gaze.

Finally, she looked away, at least partially satisfied. "You shouldn't say these things to anyone else."

Jamie nodded. "I wasn't planning to."

Tara moved closer to Jamie and peered into his face. "You're strange, you know," she accused him. "You've been strange for months."

"Thanks a lot. Strange how?"

"I don't know. Quieter. Moodier. Maybe even kinder."

"Is that bad?"

"No. Except just now, when you opened your big mouth. It scares me a bit, the way you think. It's ..." Tara struggled to find the right word. "It's *dark*."

Jamie considered telling her his secret—the thing that made him different—but shrugged instead.

"Just don't start wearing all black, okay?" Tara said, beginning to grin.

Jamie smiled back. "Can I paint my face white, though?"

"Absolutely not."

"But you were picturing it, weren't you?"

“Aye. With lots of eye-liner, spiky red hair, and black nail polish—the whole works.”

“I never knew you had those kind of fantasies about me.”

“You wish!”



The school arranged an evening meal for everyone at 6.30 p.m. in the canteen. It was now dark outdoors. The streetlights had sprung to life, just like any ordinary day, turning the snow around their bases into bright pools of amber.

Jamie and Alex sat down opposite Tara and her friends.

“So,” Alex said, leaning across the table, “has anyone been thinking about what’s causing this?”

“Causing what?” Tara asked, flapping her hand in front of her face. “Your bad breath?”

Alex sat up straight and sneered playfully. “Come on, you must have had some ideas. Want to hear mine?”

“Go on, then.”

“Well, I figure it’s one of four things. One: it’s some weird weather phenomenon. Two: it’s a terrorist attack—you know, like some kind of chemical weapon. Or three: an alien invasion.”

Tara rolled her eyes. “You’d get on well with my brother.”

Jamie asked Alex, “What’s number four?”

“Oh. Divine retribution. You know, like the Flood or the Ten Plagues. God decides he’s had enough of us wrecking his planet, so he sends this our way: the Plague of Snow.” Alex scooped a forkful of beans into his mouth and burped.

Jamie felt uncomfortable. With what he’d been facing over the past few months, an awareness of God was potent in his mind, and the idea that this was some terrible dark miracle seemed all too possible.

“So what’s your take, Jamie?” Alex asked.

“Terrorists,” Jamie said, going for the safe, sensible option.

Tara nodded. “It’s the perfect weapon. Think about it.

When's the last time you ever heard about it snowing in the Middle East? Like, *never*."

Daniel arrived. He sat down opposite Alex and stared at his plate. There was a single sausage, one mashed potato, and very few baked beans. "Somebody tell me, what's wrong with this picture?"

"They're rationing," Jamie said.

"Yeah, like in World War II," Alex added.

"If this is all we're getting tonight," Daniel said, "they can't have much food in storage."

"They're being sensible, thinking long-term," Tara explained. "I wouldn't worry about it." She shared a brief, knowing glance with Jamie.

Just then, Colin Cooper walked past their table, all ninety kilograms of him, carrying his dinner tray.

"Hey, Coop." Daniel reached out and grabbed him by the cuff of his sleeve, making him stop. "What do you think about this food situation?"

"I don't know," Colin said.

"Seems to me like we're gonna run out of food pretty soon." Daniel glared hard at the other boy, still holding on to him.

Colin was silent, visibly nervous. He was large in body and little in mind, two major drawbacks that made him an easy target for teenage predators.

"We were all wondering," Daniel said, "can we count on you to do your bit when the time comes?" He gestured at the boy's massive bulk. "I mean, there's a lot of you to go round. I reckon you could keep us going for quite a while. What do you say?"

Colin's cheeks were flushed, his eyes confused. Part of him must have known that Daniel was teasing him, but the joke was too subtle. "I'll do my best," he said.

This sent Daniel into a whirlwind of laughter. He let go of Colin and doubled up, tears streaming down his cheeks. Others who were listening to the joke joined in.

Colin swallowed hard and walked on, bearing the gaze of

about a hundred pupils, who had spun around after hearing the commotion. They might not have overheard the joke, but they knew that this boy was the butt of it.

Even Tara struggled to keep her composure.

Jamie glared at her.

When she noticed him, she tried harder. "I'm sorry, I ... It was just so ... so funny."

Jamie stood up and brought his dinner tray over to the counter.



Later that evening, Jamie lay on the floor of the assembly hall, his head resting on his schoolbag. Light flickered across his body, coming from the screen on the stage. About one hundred pupils were spread out around the hall in little groups. Jamie kept to himself.

The film was *The Prince of Egypt*, an animated adaptation of the account of Moses from the Bible, no doubt borrowed from the school's religious education department.

A few minutes into the feature, it dawned on Jamie that this was the film about the Ten Plagues of Egypt—a poor choice of entertainment, considering the circumstances.

Shame we can't just wander down the street to the video store, he thought.

Blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of all firstborn children. The ten plagues rushed past in a blur of animation.

Jamie got up and left the hall. The threat of death was all around him, and to sit and watch it unfold before his eyes was too much to bear, even if it was make-believe.

Or not. Weren't these plagues supposed to be something that really happened in ancient history? But what kind of a God did something like that—or something like *this*? He didn't understand. A day like today might provide an excuse for many to stop believing in God. But Jamie wasn't looking for excuses;

excuses could never help him. It seemed to him that there were two kinds of people in the world: those who turned *against* God in times of trouble, and those who turned *to* him.

The lights in the foyer were off, and the area was empty except for one teacher who guarded the entrance doors, making sure nobody did anything stupid. He was seated on a chair, leaning against the wall, head tilted back, mouth open, eyes closed, lost in his dreams.

Jamie tiptoed to the opposite side of the foyer, where the doors to the playground were situated.

Someone had erected a makeshift wooden partition in front of the doorway, presumably because the doors themselves were stuck fast in the open position.

He gazed out of a window. The sky was cloudless, the moon full, giving the ground an eerie blue glow. Near the doorway, the dark rectangular shape of the mats broke the uniformity, the largest encasing the body of that little first-year boy, Clive Stewart.

Jamie felt truly alone for the first time since waking up in bed this morning, which seemed an awfully long time ago. And he wanted to be alone. This was a good place to find solitude, for no one else wanted to be anywhere near a dead body—too much reality to bear. But Jamie knew that facing reality might be the only thing that could save him.

And that was the joke of the century: how to save a boy who could not be saved.

He felt heavy emotion rising up inside him, feelings he didn't even know were there until they were trickling out of him as tears on his cheeks. His chest heaved, his breath coming out of his lungs in fits and starts, as he thought of his mother and father, likely trapped in their workplaces. He wondered if he would ever see them again. Mostly though, he thought about himself, and the terrible curse he had borne for six months.

He glanced over his shoulder at the teacher, to make sure the man was still sleeping, then got down on his knees, as he did in his own bedroom each night. "Please, Lord," he

whispered, staring out through the window at the stars, “don’t let this be like what happened in Egypt. Please help us.”

He sensed a falseness in his own words, because the thing that was foremost in his mind was his own life, and he knew that he could abandon everybody here, if it meant he could survive. He sighed in frustration.

No. There was *one* he wouldn’t abandon.

“Lord, please save Tara,” he prayed. “If it’s possible for one person to get out of this, please let it be Tara.”

Jamie had read bits of the Bible, bigger portions than most people his age, and one of the things he noticed was that when people prayed, they presented reasons to God why he should answer. *Do it for your glory, Lord.* The words were on his lips, but he held back, because it felt like one of those clichés that people in church padded out their prayers with. But there *was* a reason, a *true* reason, that he could give. And maybe it would be good enough. “Please. I just love her. That’s all I can say.”

This was a sacred moment, unlike his usual praying, where he struggled to achieve a sense of honest communication with God.

Maybe God will give me this one, he thought. *Maybe because it’s not for me.* He wanted to pray for himself, too, but he’d been doing that for months and was getting nowhere.

Jamie stayed on his knees, saying nothing, letting his awareness of God calm his spirit. A few minutes later, when his knees started to ache, he got up, turned around, and let out a gasp of surprise.

There was a girl in the middle of the foyer, standing very still. Her features were mostly lost in silhouette, but Jamie knew the outline of her figure all too well. Tara’s eyes were wide and glistening with moisture as they gazed at Jamie.

“How long have you been standing there?” he asked.

“Long,” she whispered.

“Oh.”

I just love her. That’s all I can say.

Jamie felt awkward, his heart thumping in his chest.

The girl walked towards him.

“Tara, I ...”

Any further words became unnecessary when she slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest.

Jamie hesitated, then raised his arms and completed the embrace.

It took a few minutes for both of them to stop trembling.



“I’m sorry,” Tara said, lifting her head from Jamie’s chest.

“What for?”

“For laughing at that boy in the canteen.”

“Oh.”

“You know when I said you were strange?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, the way you looked at me in the canteen—that’s what I meant. You didn’t laugh like everybody else, and when you looked at me, I knew you were right. I felt ashamed.”

Jamie broke off the embrace and sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall.

Tara joined him.

Jamie said, “I’m the one who should be ashamed. I’ve called Cooper names, plenty of times. I remember once, when I was doing my paper round, I was riding past his house just as he was going in. I threw the *Belfast Telegraph* straight at him.”

“Did you hit him?”

“Right between the shoulders. When he turned around, I looked at him and said, ‘Sorry about that, Coop. You’re so *fat* I couldn’t miss.’ Then I rode away, thinking about how I’d tell my friends and how we’d laugh.”

Tara said nothing.

“The thing is, now I can remember how hurt he looked when I said what I said. I couldn’t see it then, but now I do. Today, when Daniel set him up like that, all I could think was

that we were destroying him. I don't think Colin has any friends, and he never talks to other people, did you ever notice that?"

Tara shook her head.

"Why do you think that is?"

Tara wouldn't say, but she knew. "Jamie, you're a different person now, a *better* person."

"Maybe."

"Something happened to you last summer," Tara said. "That was the start of all this. You *changed*. What happened to you, Jamie?"

He didn't respond.

"When we were in the art room, I was talking to you about being stuck in the snow, and I said it was the most awful feeling, waiting out there to die. And you said, 'Welcome to the club.'"

Jamie trembled.

"Are you *dying*, Jamie?" Tara whispered.

Jamie let out a long sigh. He thought of all the times the truth had been so close to his lips—occasions when someone had spoken harshly to him and he'd wanted to make the person feel bad; other times when he felt terribly alone and wanted someone to sympathise. But he always knew that once he spoke the words, there would be no going back, no being treated like a normal person ever again. But with things the way they were right now, none of that seemed to matter.

"Yes," he answered.

Tara put a hand across her mouth.

Jamie looked her in the eye, sensing all the questions that would come. "Cancer," he said. "Skin cancer. I don't know how long I've got to live. And my parents don't know that I know."

Tara placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry."

Her sympathy made tears brim in his eyes.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

Jamie shook his head. "Not yet. I feel fine."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? Maybe you'll be all right. Maybe—"

“Tara. It’s killing me. I might not feel it, but I *know*. I overheard Mum and Dad talking, and I remember every word.”



DONT COME ROUND. MUM MADE PLANS. SORI CANT GET OUT OF IT. CYA IN SKULE. JOE.

Jamie read the text message and tossed his phone on the bed. So much for the afternoon of multi-player *Halo* he had arranged with Joe Emerson.

He grabbed his headphones, hit play on the stereo, lay back on the bed, and relaxed with the hard rock sound of Creed coursing through his brain. Half an hour later, his bladder started calling to him, and he got up to go to the bathroom.

No sooner had he stepped into the landing than he halted and held his breath, tensing up. He was supposed to be alone in the house, but there were voices coming from the kitchen. Of course, anything could have happened in the half-hour he had just spent oblivious to the world, such as his parents arriving home. But the voices were unidentifiable, because the people were whispering, which was ominous.

“Are you sure he’s not here?” That was unmistakably Dad’s voice this time.

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. But what an odd thing for Dad to say.

“No, he’s gone to Joe’s for the afternoon,” Mum said.

Jamie crept down the stairs, carefully avoiding the fourth step from the top, the one that always creaked. He approached the kitchen door, which was ajar, and peered through the crack.

Mum and Dad were locked in an embrace, both clearly upset about something.

Mum broke off and began pacing, while Dad sat down. A framed photograph was sitting upright on the table, one that was usually displayed on top of the cabinet in the living room. In the frame was a smiling girl in her early teens, wearing a Clounagh school uniform that was slightly different from the

type girls wore today. The photo was taken in 1972, and the girl's name was Kirsty Metcalfe. She was the aunt Jamie never knew, for she disappeared without a trace almost two decades before he was born and had been presumed dead for almost as long. This was the last photo of her ever to be taken.

"It's like my family's cursed," Dad said, running his fingers over the photograph.

"That's not true," Mum said tearfully.

"Do you think we should tell him?"

"No," she replied. "It would be too much for him to bear. Let him be happy while he still can."

What was this big secret they didn't want him to know? Judging by the way Dad kept handling the photograph, it sounded like bad news about Kirsty. But how was it possible to have bad news about someone who was already dead? Maybe someone else had died. But who else was there in the family except Mum, Dad and Jamie, and they were all alive and well.

And then the answer clicked home. A few weeks ago, the three of them had gone to Portadown Health Centre together for a medical check-up. Jamie's father was in the process of taking out a new life insurance policy, one that required details of any illnesses in the family, and the medical was merely a formality to keep the legalities in order.

"There's a lump on my back," Jamie had told the doctor. "I don't know what it is."

"How long have you had it?" the physician asked, pulling up the boy's shirt.

"A couple of months, I guess." Jamie felt the man's fingers poking at the hard lump. What was the big pause all about?

Finally: "It's a sebaceous cyst. Harmless."

Sitting at the kitchen table, Dad said, "I still can't believe it. This is far too young for skin cancer."

The impact of this emotional sledgehammer almost made Jamie pass out. He let himself slide down the wall, sensing his knees buckling. His clothing made a scratching noise against the wallpaper, and the only thing that kept him from being

discovered was his inconsolable mother, who had started to weep.

“It’s all right,” Jamie heard his dad say. “We’ve got time. We’ve still got some time.”

Jamie crawled across the hall to the front door, unlatched it as quietly as he could, and slipped out into the front garden. Thankfully, no one was on the street nearby.

The doctor had lied to him, then went behind his back and told his parents the truth. And now he knew.

Jamie sat on the step and looked up at the sky, his breathing coming and going in short, sharp gasps. It was almost a surreal experience, staring up at puffy white clouds on a peaceful summer day with a heart full of panic.



One week later, Jamie and his father were spending time together at the river. Mr. Metcalfe owned a small strip of land at the bottom of Foundry Street, where the River Bann cut through Portadown on the edge of the town centre. On this spot, Mr. Metcalfe had built a boat shed and a couple of wooden jetties. Most of the area was overgrown with grass and weeds. It was like having a little slice of the countryside in town, spoiled slightly by the constant roar of high-speed traffic from the Northway carriageway. The road was twenty metres above ground level, cutting across the river on Shillington Bridge. The bridge was situated just off to Jamie’s right, held aloft by ugly steel posts rising out of the water.

Mr. Metcalfe’s boat was small—about seven metres long—with a cabin you could barely sit in without your head touching the roof. Presently, the boat was sitting much lower in the water than it should have been. There had been four days of heavy rainfall; Jamie reckoned one more might have been enough to sink her.

Jamie’s dad stood on the deck, ankle deep in water. He bent

down, scooped up another bucketful, and emptied it into the river. Then he cursed and sat down for a break.

Jamie stood on the furthest jetty, calmly chewing on a blade of grass, holding his fishing rod out over the river. The sun was beaming down and he felt good.

"I should have bought one of those pumps," Dad said, panting. "Want to take over, son?"

"No thanks," Jamie answered. "This is your baby."

Mr. Metcalfe chuckled. "Oh, I see. It's like that, is it? So, the next time your mum organises a picnic on the river, we'll count you out, will we?"

Jamie shrugged, smiling, knowing Dad would never make good on his threat. "Tell you what. I'll give you some advice, how's that?"

Dad's eyes widened. He folded his arms, amused. "Let's hear it, Einstein."

"If you want to stop this happening again, why don't you build a roof onto the jetty, one that hangs out over the river, so the rain can't fall on the boat?" Suddenly there was a tug on Jamie's rod. He diverted his attention to the river and began reeling in his line.

"It would take time," Mr. Metcalfe answered.

"So, it's not like you're going anywhere."

When Jamie looked back at his father, a sudden chill went up his spine. Dad's face was staring into space, filled with sadness. Jamie stopped winding.

It's not like you're going anywhere. Oh, but Jamie *was* going somewhere—somewhere he could never return from. The happy days of the Metcalfe family picnics on the river would soon be coming to an end. Jamie pictured his mother and father cruising down the river together without their son, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't imagine them having fun.

Dad's gaze locked on to Jamie's. There was urgency in his eyes. His lower lip trembled for a moment.

Go on. Say it. Tell me I've got cancer. I know you want to.

And I want to hear it. Tell me and then come over here and hug me. Because I'm all alone here, Dad.

The fish tugged on Jamie's line.

Mr. Metcalfe curled his mouth into a fake smile and nodded. "You know, you're right. It's a great idea."



Tara stared into space, shook her head slowly in disbelief, and started to cry.

"Hey," Jamie said, taking her by the shoulders. "I'm still here. Don't bury me till I'm dead."

Tara let out a short laugh, then composed herself. "I can't believe your parents are keeping this from you. That's awful."

"No it isn't. I know what they're thinking: *What good will it do if Jamie knows he's going to die?* They can't change it. All they can do is either tell me and make me miserable, or hide it from me and keep me happy. Or so they think."

"I'm so sorry," Tara said. "I don't know what to say."

Jamie shrugged. "It is what it is. There's nothing anyone can do about it."

"Aren't you scared?"

"Sometimes. It's like death is this big mysterious black hole that swallows you up. And even though billions and billions of people have gone through it before you, no one ever gets to come back and say, 'Hey, it's all right. There's nothing to worry about.' I mean, I believe there's a heaven, but it's still hard not to be scared. Mostly I try not to think about it. I've tried to get my head around it, but I don't think you're *supposed* to get your head around something like this."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, we're supposed to *want* to live. It's like something built into us. It's why we feel panic and get a big adrenaline rush when we're in danger. It's like your brain wants you to stay alive no matter what, and it won't even let you *think* about the idea of dying. Then, if you get a nasty disease like cancer, and

you know you're a goner—and you also know it has to eat you bit by bit, real slow—the best your brain can do for you is to make you feel frustrated and angry and scared most of the time.”

Tara leaned back on the wall and tilted her head, resting it against Jamie's arm.

“If I die here,” he said, “it would be ironic: all this time dying of cancer, only to be killed by starvation. Like all the heartache I've gone through in the past six months has been a complete waste of time.”

Tara gazed into his eyes. “It wasn't a waste of time. If we're all going to die, I'd rather be here with the new Jamie than the old one.”



At 10.00 p.m. the teachers started making sleeping arrangements. In normal school life the assembly hall doubled as the girls' gym, so it was the natural place for the girls to sleep. At the opposite end of the building was the boys' gym, which would now serve as the boys' dormitory.

The main corridor was empty. Most of the overhead lights had been switched off, encouraging the pupils to keep to the rooms.

Tara decided to accompany Jamie to the far end of the school. They walked side by side, holding hands. Little pools of light from the classroom doorways spilled out, showing the way forward and dispelling any fear of darkness. From some rooms came the sound of chatter, from others sobbing. Soft words from a consoling teacher drifted out of yet another room. Neither Jamie nor Tara looked in as they passed.

Tara said, “People are starting to miss their parents.”

Jamie nodded. “What about you?”

“My brother and my dad, yeah.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Eddie's probably okay. He's in Portadown College.”

Another big cooking pot of mass hysteria, Jamie thought. Just like this place.

"I'm more worried about my dad," Tara continued. "He's a bricklayer. Outdoor work."

"Oh."

"What about your parents?"

"Mum works in a clothes factory and Dad manages a supermarket."

"He's got it made! That's the perfect place to be holed up at a time like this. Wish I was there."

Passing room thirty-four, they both peered in, curious about the harsh, vibrating quality of the light emanating from beyond the door.

The television was on, pouring out static.

Mr. Devlin was alone in the room, sitting behind his desk with a pen and notepad. "Hi, kids," he said. "It's been like this for a few hours now."

"What channel?" Jamie asked.

"All of them."

Jamie and Tara exchanged a worried glance and left the room.

"First the phones and now the TV," Jamie said. "I wonder what'll be next. The electricity? The water?"

"Try not to think about it," Tara advised. "We'll be rescued."

Further along the corridor, outside room seven, they walked past a teacher applying a band-aid to a cut on a boy's forehead.

"Somebody's had a fight," Tara guessed.

"It'll happen again."

"What makes you say that?"

"Give it time. People are getting scared, but they still think everything's going to go back to normal. When they get through tomorrow and the next day, and nothing changes, they're going to get panicky."

As for me, Jamie thought, over the past six months, I've already done enough panicking to last me a lifetime.

Tara shivered. "Please don't talk like that."

"I'm sorry. Like you say, maybe we'll be rescued." He lacked the conviction of his words.

Jamie let go of Tara's hand and peered into the boys' gym. The whole floor space was covered in exercise mats. Fifty pupils had already retired, lying under their coats and using their schoolbags as pillows.

Jamie turned back to Tara.

She gazed up at him intently.

After a long uncomfortable silence, Jamie was about to ask her what was wrong, when Tara took a step forward, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed him briefly on the lips. Then she turned and walked away without another word.

Jamie stood there watching her until she reached the intersection of the corridor, where she turned and walked out of sight.



By 11.00 p.m. everyone was either sleeping or trying hard to do so, hindered by the occasional cough, or the howl of the wind, or their own fearful thoughts. When Jamie had settled down, there had been a chill in the air, but now there was so much collective body heat in the hall that he found he was better off without his coat on top of him.

What had happened this evening with Tara was simply the most beautiful and amazing thing. Jamie had never had a girlfriend before, and if he could have picked anyone in the world, it would have been her. But he had always been stuck in the position where she was his friend. Tara was special to him, but he could never tell whether she felt the same kind of attachment. To ask her out—to let her know how he really felt—was to invite disaster. If she hadn't been interested, her knowledge of his feelings might have made their friendship awkward and unworkable. Better to have her as a friend than not at all. But all he could think after this evening was *Wow!* Despite these dire circumstances and despite his cancer, Jamie

discovered it was still possible for his heart to throb with excitement.

So much terror and exhilaration in one day made sleeping hard to achieve, so he took his imagination to a pleasant place he had visited in his mind on many occasions: Dad's boat on the river.

Jamie imagined himself sitting on top of the cabin, the sun beating down on him, the white-painted wood of the roof warm against his body. Tiny waves lapped softly against the hull, as the boat rocked gently from side to side. Jamie was in his favourite fishing position. But in this fantasy he carried no rod. Instead, Tara was here with him, barelegged and tanned golden. She was reclining with her back against his chest. His arms were wrapped around her, his nostrils filled with her subtle scent. In this fantasy they didn't have to do or say anything. They were two people in a state of perfect contentment, bathing in the warmth of each other's affection.

With this image filling the walls of his mind, Jamie finally drifted off to sleep.

DAY 2

WEDNESDAY, 8 JANUARY 2003

JAMIE AWOKE AT 8.00 a.m. with a ray of sunlight stabbing him in the eyes. He felt stiff and sore, but at least his batteries were somewhat recharged.

The school served no breakfast in the morning, which was understandable in light of the poor excuse for a dinner everyone had received yesterday. Jamie ignored the grumbling in his belly and got on with the job of ... Well, there was nothing to do, really.

The landscape outdoors was painted in the same brilliant white as the day before. Not a drop of water or an icicle in sight. Just pure, majestic, untouched, unmelted snow.

Jamie wandered around for a while, chatting briefly with several persons and regularly strolling past the girls' gym.

The curtains on the doors were closed, making Jamie uncertain whether Tara was in there at all. He smiled to himself, as he imagined opening the door and peeking in, seeing hundreds of girls in their underwear, who would all simultaneously look across the room at him and scream.

Before long, the corridors were buzzing with activity, and morale was high. Objectively, the situation was as hopeless as the night before, but the renewed sunlight had a positive, if illusory, effect on the human spirit.

On his third circuit of the school, Jamie noticed a small crowd gathering in the library. The room was situated at the

front of the building, above the foyer. A wall of glass gazed out onto an expansive lawn. Around forty pupils were crammed against the window panes, peering at something of interest outside.

Instead of forcing his way through for a better look, Jamie dragged a table over to the window and climbed up onto it.

Others saw the logic and did likewise, and soon there was a more comfortable arrangement of spectators, in the fashion of an upper and lower gallery.

About one hundred metres distant, running parallel to the front of the school, was a new road, one made of magazines, mats, carpets, clothing, wood, doors, and just about anything flat that you might find in a house. It ran in a straight line adjacent to Brownstown Road and had little side-streets that led up to the doors of houses and stranded cars. In many places, this patchwork path was wide enough for two people to pass each other without much danger.

They're really doing it, Jamie thought, amazed. *People are getting together, helping each other survive.* And it would take very little effort to connect the path to the school building, he realised.

A man came into view at the left of Jamie's peripheral vision, emerging from a spot where some trees hid the street from view. The man took long purposeful strides, carrying a large cardboard box in his hands. Behind him, two small children popped into view, dressed in cute hats and woolly mittens, doing their best to keep up with their daddy.

There had to be food in the box, Jamie reasoned. Food from the P&G supermarket a quarter of a kilometre down the road.

The family of three encountered a young couple. After a brief exchange, they carefully shuffled past each other and went their opposite ways.

Just before the man with the box reached the edge of Jamie's line of sight, he suddenly stopped.

Two men in denim jackets stepped into view from the right. They stopped in front of the little family and spoke.

The man with the box took a step back.

Jamie's pulse began to quicken. Something was wrong.

The father put the box down, pointed his finger accusingly at the two men, then gestured towards his children.

One of the men in denim raised an arm until it was horizontal. In his hand was a dark, slim, pointed object.

A lump formed in Jamie's throat.

The family man continued to point and gesture, more frantically this time.

The other two didn't move.

Eventually, the father ceased his efforts and stood still, as if defeated. After another few moments, he looked over his shoulder and said something to his children. They immediately stepped up very close behind him. Then he bent down, lifted the box, and walked forward.

The only audible sound anyone within the school library heard from the whole tense exchange was the harsh crack of the gun going off. Even though it was muffled by the double-glazed windows, it still made everyone jump.

The father's body jerked. He dropped the box and fell to his knees, doubling over and clutching his stomach. Tins spilled from the box onto the path and snow.

The thug with the gun stepped forward, raised his leg, placed the sole of his boot on the father's shoulder, and pushed.

The man's body fell back and sideways, off the path and into the snow.

His two children were clinging to each other and screaming.

The two thugs calmly walked past them and kept going until they were out of sight.

The ownership of guns was illegal for most people in Northern Ireland, but it wasn't hard to imagine where this one had come from. Every predominantly Protestant or Roman Catholic community in the province probably had its share of citizens who were mixed up in paramilitary affairs. Brownstown

was no different. And now the thugs were beginning to crawl out of the woodwork. As if it wasn't enough for the world to suffer one terrorist attack at a time, these ruthless men had to add their sauce to the mix.

The children moved closer to their father and kneeled next to him, not knowing what to do except hug each other for comfort. The man was able to raise an arm into the air and wave a blood-soaked hand about, although he was unable to reach his children now that his body was off the path. This went on for about three minutes, until his strength gave out completely.

Jamie's heart went out to the kids. His own mental anguish of the past months seemed little compared to the sufferings these two little ones would endure, living with the vivid details of their father's gruesome death.

Within ten minutes, a young man in his twenties arrived on the scene. He saw the children, but didn't approach them. Instead, he started putting items back into the cardboard box. Once finished, he picked the box up, turned back the way he had come, and disappeared.

Jamie was abhorred, but couldn't help wondering what he would do if he were in the same situation, faced with the choice to rescue two lost children or ensure his own survival for weeks ahead.

Eventually, a middle-aged woman came along the path. She examined the body, then kneeled in front of the children. She spoke what could only be words of comfort, touching them and hugging them all the while. When she left, the children followed close behind.

A minute later, this new little family unit disappeared behind the trees where the two gunmen had vanished not long before.

Jamie kept watching for another hour, and he saw a pattern emerging. People would show up at the right and exit at the left. Some time later, those same people would head back the way they had come. Without exception, they were empty-

handed, the only variation in the pattern being the few who didn't return at all.

Jamie pictured the two gun-toting criminals holding up the supermarket, ordering everyone outside, claiming it as their own private kingdom where they could survive for months, unaided. No wonder they didn't care about the cardboard box full of food.

The middle-aged woman and her two adopted children arrived back from the supermarket, carrying nothing. The woman stopped, turned around, and got down on her haunches in front of the kids. After speaking for a minute, she kissed each of them, got up, and walked on.

The two youngsters didn't follow.

Jamie felt like he was watching a soap opera unfold on a massive cinema screen. Characters would appear, act their parts, then move off-camera while the story moved on to other lives. Later, the former characters would return for their next scene. The library windows created a barrier with the world outside that was as much psychological as physical.

Jamie dispelled the sense of detachment that clouded his mind. Those were real people out there. How could this woman abandon these helpless children a mere hour after agreeing to take care of them—after she had caressed them and whispered kind words of reassurance? And to leave them near the spot where their father lay dead in the snow was nothing short of monstrous.

The woman walked on for fifty paces then stopped at the father's body. She took off her jacket and covered the man's head and torso, then gestured for the children to come.

And off they went together.

Times like these brought out the worst in some people and the best in others.

"Look!" one of the pupils said, pointing downward.

Directly outside and below, the staff room jutted out of the main building. Just beyond this, over the edge of the roof and out on the lawn, Jamie saw the head and shoulders of Mr. Fisher

bobbing about. Within ten seconds the teacher was visible down to the waist, as he moved away from the building. And within a minute it was clear that he was making a path out into the snow.

“They’re joining the road,” someone said. “I might get to go home!”

Is it a good idea to join up with everyone else when there’s no food to be had? Jamie wondered. Is it wise to invite everyone else’s troubles onto our doorstep when people are already killing each other?

Mr. Fisher unexpectedly dropped the next mat at right angles to the others, as if he couldn’t make up his mind whether to head for the street or ... the rugby field? He deposited another at an even stranger angle.

But within twenty minutes the school lawn had its very own voice. The mats were dark green, standing out starkly against the snow and crying out to the sky: *HELP! 700 NEED FOOD.*



Later in the morning, Mr. Devlin set up the projector in the assembly hall and arranged to show a video that no one had seen before: a recording of all of yesterday’s news broadcasts. Pupils were free to come and go as they pleased.

Jamie spotted Tara near the back and sat down beside her.

On the screen, Stan Gardner announced, “The military has just flown Professor David Kane from the Ministry of Defense into the studio. He claims to be making significant progress in understanding and combating this snow phenomenon.

“Professor, what can you tell us about the nature of this, uh, plague?”

The camera switched to a thin, balding man in his fifties, wearing a white lab coat. “Let’s not refer to it as a plague. A plague is something that originates in nature, whereas I have little doubt that what we are dealing with is man-made.”

“A weapon?”

“Precisely.”

“Can this be proven?”

“Beyond reasonable doubt, yes. In helping you to understand, first I need to explain the way in which adhesive substances behave. There are two parts to every adhesive, the resin and the hardener. Nothing will happen until these two parts are mixed. When they are brought together, a chemical reaction takes place that causes the glue to harden. This, of course, is common knowledge to every carpenter and handyman. But someone will say, ‘All glues do not behave like this. Take Super Glue, for instance. I squirt it out of the tube, it hardens, and that’s all. Where are these two parts, the resin and the hardener? Super Glue is a one-part adhesive.’ Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. Rather ingeniously, we were able to make *water* the hardener. Did you know that there are microscopic traces of water adhering to even the driest of surfaces, as well as in the air we breathe? It is this tiny invisible element that gives Super Glue its strength.”

“How does this help us, Professor? We’ve already seen that water has no effect on the snow.”

“Yes, of course. In the case of this new adhesive, water is not the hardener.”

“What is?”

“Everything of a solid nature.”

“Professor, aren’t you just reiterating what’s been obvious from the beginning: put any weight on the snow and it’ll stick?”

“What you have just said is untrue.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mr. Gardner, if you placed a brick on the snow, what would happen?”

“It would stick, of course.”

“Correct. And if you let a feather drop onto the snow, what would happen to it?”

“I’m fairly sure it would stick, too.”

“Yes, it would. But what if you poured a glass of water on the snow?”

“It would ... Well, it would disperse.”

“But does the water not have weight, and will its weight not cause the necessary chemical reaction for the snow to harden?”

“I suppose that would happen.”

“No, Mr. Gardner, that is not what happens. If that were the case, all we would have to do is spray the snow with a hose, and wait a few seconds for it to harden. Instead, what we know is that water, despite its weight, will not cause the necessary reaction. You said, ‘Put any weight on the snow and it will stick.’ But that does not seem to be the case, does it?”

“Your point is well taken, Professor. Please go on.”

“The biggest hindrance in fighting against this weapon is our failure to understand it. I cannot say this more emphatically: the force exerted by an object’s weight is *not* what is causing it to adhere to the snow. The snow becomes sticky only when it comes in contact with an object whose molecules are tightly packed together: in other words, solids. The molecules of water are loosely packed. Hence, water will not cause the snow to react. This, you will agree, is a completely different issue from weight.

“What you need to understand is that the untouched snow lying on the ground is not sticky at present. The adhesive process is a hardening process, and if the snow were sticky all the time, it would be unable to stop itself from hardening and becoming safe to walk upon. The snow, for all its complexity, behaves just like an ordinary two-part adhesive. The snow itself is the resin, and it does not become sticky until it comes in contact with a hardener. In recognising this behaviour, we stand a chance at figuring out how to overcome it.”

“Are you then working on classifying which things act as hardeners?”

“The task has proven relatively simple: every solid tested thus far is a suitable hardener, and every liquid is not. And I

find this very interesting. I could almost believe that the snow was a product of nature, if not for the manner in which our most abundant resource, water, has been rendered ineffective against it. That is why I believe we are dealing with a weapon.”

“Professor, have you any idea how a weapon of this magnitude was deployed into our atmosphere?”

“I don’t think it was dispersed into the atmosphere by means of aircraft, if that’s what you’re wondering. That would have taken an incredible amount of planes and an even more incredible amount of radar stealth.”

“How do you think it was done?”

“I believe a substance was engineered that was pumped into the atmosphere prior to a forecast of snow. It then reacted with the crystals, changing them into what now lies all around us. That’s the only feasible explanation I can see.”

“There are some who would find that explanation hard to swallow, Professor: those who favour the simpler idea that this is a divine curse being visited on us for all the harm we’ve done to our planet. What would you say to them?”

“Nonsense. It’s all about chemistry. Take a look at the various marine glues: the common blue mussel, for instance, which uses the iron in seawater as the key binding agent in its glue. Since super-strong glues already exist as part of nature’s order, perhaps what we’re experiencing is not such a bizarre thing after all.”

“How close are you to finding a solution to the present crisis?”

“Well, we’re dealing with a complex resin the likes of which we’ve never seen before. With so much to learn, it’s hard to say.”

“Professor Kane, thank you for giving us your time.”



Jamie spent the rest of the morning with Tara in room seven. They chose that number chiefly because it belonged to one of the classrooms containing little in the way of entertainment, therefore it was largely unoccupied. The beating of a drum kit, played with all the skill of a chimpanzee, drifted in from the music room around the corner.

Jamie put his five playing cards on the table, face up. "Two Kings and two Jacks," he said. "Beat that."

Tara smirked and laid down her hand. There were three Twos a Four and a Seven. She put her hand over the pile of paper-clips in the middle of the table and pulled them towards her.

"Hang on a minute," Jamie complained. "My cards are far higher than yours."

"Nope. Three of a Kind always beats Two Pair. Doesn't matter if they're Kings."

"Oh ... right." He sighed in defeat.

Tara skilfully shuffled the pack and dealt five new cards for each of them. Jamie tossed a paper-clip onto the centre of the table and Tara did likewise. They placed their bets.

"Who taught you this game?" Jamie asked.

"My dad." The mention of her father brought sadness to Tara's eyes. Then a low rumbling sound from outdoors grabbed her attention, sweeping her depression aside.

Jamie and Tara stared at each other, wide-eyed and listening intently.

The noise was faint at first, then it ascended in volume until the whole room seemed to vibrate. They couldn't see what was making the noise until after it had passed right over the roof.

Jamie and Tara jumped out of their seats and dashed over to the window.

The dark insect-like shape of a helicopter roared across the rugby field, scarcely forty metres above the ground.

The combined yell of hundreds of voices, erupting in joy, swept through the school.

The helicopter paused, turned left, then tilted its nose down

and flew onward, disappearing past Jamie's field of vision. The sound did not fade away, however. It merely changed direction. Before two minutes had gone by, the craft emerged into view on Jamie's right, having completed one full circuit of the school grounds.

The helicopter rotated its body again, this time positioning its tail towards the school. Then it glided onward, away from Clounagh Junior High.

The cheering ceased.

Tara put her hands against the glass of the window. "Why did they go?"

"They had to go," Jamie said. "There's nowhere to land, remember?"

Tara nodded. "This is a good sign, though, right? They can't have missed our big help sign."

Jamie pointed out of the window. "Fort Mahon is right over there. I'll bet that's where they were heading. Maybe they'll bring us food, somehow."

Tara sighed. "I hope so."

They gazed out of the window for another few minutes, then returned to their desk.

Tara looked at her watch. "Speaking of food, what do you say we move this game up to the foyer?" she suggested. "I'm starving, and I want to be first in line when they announce lunch-time."

"You've got a bad hand, haven't you?" Jamie suspected. "Trust you to say that when I've got you on the run."

"You wish. Come on, then. Call it."

Jamie put down his cards. "I believe that's what you call a Straight, am I right?"

"Ah." Tara tossed her cards onto the table, not caring which way they landed.

"About time!"

Tara collected the cards while Jamie swept the pile of paper-clips to his edge of the table. He pointed at her vastly superior

stockpile. "And when I've got those from you, we can move on to items of clothing." He grinned.

Tara's eyes narrowed. "I'm going to love every minute of this when it backfires on you. Come on."

They had barely stepped through the door when Tara found herself flung sideways, almost knocked off her feet. The deck of cards went soaring like a flock of pigeons released from a cage.

Tara turned around to see who had bumped into her, ready to give the ungentlemanly cretin a piece of her mind.

But she bit her tongue. It was a teacher: Mr. Darrow, or possibly Mr. Cowan, or ... Well, there were five of them, all striding purposefully down the corridor like they were diplomats on important government business.

"How rude," Tara muttered. "Where's a knight in shining armour when you need one?"

"Don't look at me," Jamie said, bending down to retrieve the cards.

Tara chuffed. "Typical male."

When they had put the deck back together, Tara linked her arm in Jamie's and the two of them strolled up the corridor together.

As they went past some of their friends, Jamie could see raised eyebrows and could hear whispering voices. Someone behind them started whistling "Here Comes the Bride." Jamie knew it was Alex long before the boy reached them.

As they entered the foyer, Alex shoved himself between the couple and threw his arms around them, grinning. "So tell me, when's the big day?"

"What does it matter?" Tara replied. "You're not invited."

Alex laughed and wandered off.

Just then, something made a cracking noise—something capable of three times the volume of Mr. Burns's metre stick.

The killing Jamie had witnessed from the library had made everyone jump; this one made all twenty-five pupils in the foyer

cry out, for the bang came from a source far closer than Brownstown Road.

Five teachers had formed a line across the doorway to the canteen. They stood side by side, facing the foyer, their bodies creating a barrier to the dining hall behind them. The central teacher in the posse was Mr. Darrow. He held a revolver, aimed at the window to his right. Smoke drifted lazily out of the barrel. In the centre of the window pane was a tiny circle with cracks around its perimeter like a spider's web: a warning shot.

Jamie and Tara stood ten metres in front of Mr. Darrow. They froze on the spot, clinging to each other. The foyer was scattered with pupils, all standing still like cardboard targets on a shooting range.

Mr. Darrow was an emotionless man at the best of times, but today his expression was hard and ruthless, making him appear like a total stranger. He lowered the gun slightly, keeping it at hip level, pointed at the crowd. "Listen to me," he said calmly. "No one comes into the canteen. I'll kill the first person who tries."

Jamie heard the sound of footsteps behind him.

Mr. Garrett came into the foyer, shoving past any pupils who were standing in his way. He was staggering like a drunk, holding a red-spotted towel to the side of his head. Jamie had no illusions about the red bits being part of the towel's embroidery.

Mr. Garrett halted in front of the teachers. "Paul, stop this!" he pleaded. "What you're doing is madness!"

"I'm doing what's necessary," Mr. Darrow retorted, "to stay alive. What do you think is going to happen when the food runs out? Or maybe you're one of the idiots who needs to sit around in denial for three weeks, slowly starving to death, before you'll let yourself believe that no one is coming to rescue us. Just like no one is coming to rescue the millions of others who will sit waiting and hoping." He chuffed humourlessly. "Have you taken a look outside lately?"

Mr. Garrett held out his hand. "Please, Paul. Give me the

gun. You're a reasonable man. I know you don't want to kill anyone. Stop this now before it goes any further."

Thick beads of sweat stood out on Mr. Darrow's forehead. "Do you know what you are, Simon? Obtuse. You're *all* obtuse. How long do you think you can feed seven hundred people? One more day, maybe two? But do you know how long the food will last if there's only five? Do the math. No one's coming to rescue us, Simon. Haven't you realized that? But not all of us have to die."

"Not you, eh?" Mr. Garrett said.

"Clearly not."

Mr. Garrett edged closer. "Paul, please give me the gun."

Mr. Darrow raised the revolver to eye level and shook his head slightly. "Not one more step."

"And waste a bullet?" Mr. Garrett said. "It only holds six, and you've already used up one. What are you going to do when there's hundreds of starving children beating down your door? Obtuse? *You're* the one who's obtuse." He edged forward.

Mr. Darrow pulled the trigger.

The impact of the bullet spun Mr. Garrett around. By the time he hit the ground, he had done a complete spin and landed flat on his back. He curled up into a foetal position, clutching his arm and groaning.

By this point many of the pupils in the foyer were crying. Someone who was fortunate enough to be standing near the corridor made a dash for it and was gone without Mr. Darrow even noticing.

The teachers with Mr. Darrow were getting edgy. Mr. Traynor said, "Paul, I'm not sure this is—"

"Well, then, get over there with *them*," Mr. Darrow suggested.

At that moment the overhead lights clicked off.

Mr. Darrow glanced up briefly. Then his calm expression changed, his eyes widening and his teeth clenching in anger. He looked over his shoulder at Mr. Bradley and shouted, "Check the refrigerators!"

Mr. Bradley disappeared into the canteen and rushed back within a minute, shaking his head. "They're off. Everything's off."

Mr. Darrow's anger somehow transformed into a grin, but it was the coldest, most savage grin Jamie had ever witnessed.

"What are we going to do?" Mr. Bradley asked.

Mr. Darrow gazed past the pupils' heads at the empty doorway leading to the main corridor. "Well done!" he shouted to whomever might be hiding back there, around the corner. "I didn't think of that move. But I wonder did you think of *this* one?" He roved his weapon about the room, pausing briefly on each face. When he reached Tara, he stopped.

"You," he said. "Come over here."

Tara trembled against Jamie, her fingers digging into his waist. She shook her head, whimpering.

Jamie sensed the ground under the soles of his shoes becoming slippery. He looked down and saw a pool of yellowish liquid on the tiles, spreading outwards from where Tara stood.

"As long as I get what I want," Mr. Darrow said softly, "I won't harm you."

"Leave her alone!" Jamie pleaded. He struggled out of Tara's grip and put himself in front of her.

"You should get out of my way," Mr. Darrow warned. "Really."

Jamie focused hard on the fact that he was dying of cancer, that he had a lot less time to live than anyone else here, but his body wouldn't let him see it that way. Adrenaline flowed through his veins, urging him to do something—anything—that would protect himself from harm. But from somewhere he found the strength to resist the impulse. "Take me instead," he said.

"No," Mr. Darrow replied. "And you've got ten seconds to step away."

Jamie trembled with fear.

"Nine ... eight ..."

Oh God, please help her, he prayed.

Mr. Garrett spun himself around on the floor and looked up at the boy. "Do as he says, Jamie."

"Seven ..."

"Trust me. He won't kill her."

"Six ..."

"He only wants a hostage."

"Five ..."

"When they turn the electric back on, he'll let her go."

"Four ..."

Jamie felt as if his heart were being wrenched in two, not knowing which action would help or harm Tara's predicament.

"Three ..."

"*Jamie!*" Mr. Garrett yelled. "*He's gonna kill you and kill the next person and the next person, until we start doing what he says! Now MOVE!*"

Jamie stepped aside, feeling like he had just committed the worst kind of betrayal possible. He gazed at the floor, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"Come to me," Mr. Darrow ordered.

Tara edged forward.

"You'll be all right, Tara," Mr. Garrett assured her. "Just do what he says."

When she had reached Mr. Darrow, the teacher instructed her, "Turn around."

Tara slowly rotated her body one hundred and eighty degrees.

Jamie gazed at her distraught face. When she made eye-contact with him, he looked away, ashamed.

Mr. Darrow stepped forward, wrapped his arm around Tara's neck, and placed the barrel of the gun on her temple. He gazed across the foyer at the doorway to the main corridor and raised his voice. "*I suggest you get in here and talk to me.*"

Silence.

"*I've got four bullets left,*" Mr. Darrow explained. "*That means three people can die right now, and I'll still have one bullet left to hold the fort. So, on the count of ten. Ten ... nine ... eight ...*"

Jamie heard the tapping of shoes on the tiles behind him.

Mr. Devlin walked past him at a slow, confident pace, his arms raised in surrender.

"That's far enough," Mr. Darrow warned.

Mr. Devlin stopped about four metres in front of the gunman.

"You know what I want, Devlin. Make it happen."

"Without the refrigerators, the food will rot," Mr. Devlin explained calmly. "And without the food, we'll all die—including you."

"Would you like me to keep counting, Will?"

"Remember that game of chess we had last week, Paul? You'd taken most of my pieces, and you thought it was impossible to lose. Then I stuck my king in a tight spot, and when you moved in for the kill, you didn't notice there was nowhere I could move without sacrificing myself. It was stalemate; we both lost."

"How eloquent." Mr. Darrow tightened his hold around Tara's neck, making her squeal. "Now tell them to turn the electricity back on."

"Don't you see?" Mr. Devlin continued. "You've made your move; we've made ours. And now we've both lost; it's over ... unless we can agree to take our moves back. That's the only way forward."

Mr. Darrow laughed. "Shakespeare would be proud, Will. The pen is mightier than the sword, eh? I'll throw down my arms at your superior logic." His eyes narrowed and his cold smile vanished. "You're a fool if you think I won't kill this girl. Do you want her death on your conscience?"

Jamie couldn't see Mr. Devlin's expression, but the trembling of his body told all. "I'm giving you a chance to undo this mess. Put down the gun, *please*."

"Turn on the power."

The seconds ticked by.

Jamie began to get angry. *What are you waiting for! Tara's in danger! Give him what he wants!*

Mr. Devlin sighed in resignation. "We can't."

"Can't, can't, can't," Mr. Darrow chanted. "The word you were looking for is *won't*."

"You don't understand. We didn't turn the power off in the first place. It went off on its own."

Mr. Darrow laughed again. "I don't believe it. You're *playing* me. A girl's life is hanging in the balance, and you're playing me."

"Come on, Paul, take a look at what's happening outside. It was only a matter of time before we lost the power, and you know it."

"And it just happened to go off at this precise moment," Mr. Darrow added. "What a coincidence."

"It's true, I swear it."

"I'm done talking," Mr. Darrow decided. "Maybe you'll listen better after this." In one quick motion, he spun Tara around and placed the gun-barrel on her forehead.

"*No!*" Jamie yelled. "*Stop!*"

Mr. Garrett said she'd be all right! What have I done!

It was ironic how he could spend six agonising months waiting to die, then suddenly see Death snatch a friend right out of the blue (someone who had no idea her demise was so near until minutes ago) while he lived on.

The bang wasn't as loud this time. It struck a much deeper tone, followed by a metallic reverberation.

Mr. Darrow dropped to his knees.

Behind him stood Mr. Bradley with a frying pan in his hands, holding it as you would clutch a baseball bat, his face twisted with conflicting emotions.

The gun went off as Mr. Darrow fell forward.

For a split second, Jamie heard the bullet passing close to his ear, like the droning of a bee. A painting shattered on the wall several metres behind him.

Mr. Darrow hit the ground with a thud, face first, the weapon clattering away from him across the floor.

Tara lost the remaining strength in her legs and fell in a heap.

Jamie crossed the foyer and sat down beside her. He wondered what she thought of him now, after he had placed her at Mr. Darrow's mercy. Would she want his comfort at all?

Tara reached out and clasped Jamie around the neck. She pulled herself onto his lap, hugging him fiercely. Her whole body quivered, her lungs hurling out deep, quavering cries that made Jamie's heart ache.

Her tracksuit bottoms were damp against his trousers. But Jamie didn't care; he held on to her tightly.



Eight teachers came into the foyer and started ushering pupils back to the corridor.

The first thing Mr. Devlin did was pick up the gun, empty the chambers, and toss both weapon and bullets out into the snow.

"Why did you do that?" Mr. Garrett asked. "We might need it."

"What for?" Mr. Devlin replied, kneeling down beside the other teacher to examine the bullet wound. "So that somebody else can do the same thing?"

Jamie helped Tara off the floor and guided her over to the visitors' waiting area, where they both sat down. He kept his arm around her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, still shaking.

Jamie found a tissue in his pocket and gave it to Tara for her to wipe her eyes.

Mr. Bradley crouched and examined the still form of Mr. Darrow, while the other three co-conspirators gazed on, uncertain of their fate.

Of the remaining pupils in the foyer, all of them were looking at Tara. Between her and the others was a puddle of urine.

Tara tried to bury her face in Jamie's blazer.

Jamie stared hard at the pupils, sensing their concern, but

wondering how many of them could really keep their mouths shut about a fourteen-year-old girl peeing her pants, when time had taken the edge off the trauma and made room for humour.

The teachers urged the pupils to leave, having to speak to each one individually before any would budge.

“Looks like the bullet clipped the side of your arm and went right through,” Mr. Devlin said, raising Mr. Garrett to a sitting position. “Not too much damage. You were lucky.”

Mrs. Walker kneeled down and opened up a green box the size of a briefcase, marked *FIRST AID*.

Mr. Devlin stood up and glared at the band of teachers-turned-criminals. “I don’t know what to do with you lot. I’d lock you up if we weren’t already in a prison.”

Mr. Darrow moaned, beginning to regain consciousness.

“If you’ve any decency left in you,” Mr. Devlin said, “you’ll drag him out of here. I don’t want him waking up with the girl still here.”

The four culprits complied, clasping a limb each and carrying Mr. Darrow away like a wounded soldier on a battlefield.

“Where did the gun come from?” Jamie asked.

“It’s mine,” Mr. Garrett said. “Don’t worry. It’s legal. I’m in a gun club, that’s all. It’s just a hobby of mine.”

“Hold still,” Mrs. Walker demanded, moving a pair of tweezers towards Mr. Garrett’s arm. “I think what the young man is asking is, what is it doing in school? And I’d like to know that myself. It’s very irresponsible of you, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Hold on a minute, there’s a good explan—*ow!* Take it easy with that thing,” Mr. Garrett composed himself. “The gun has been in the school for a long time. We use it as a starting pistol on Sports Day every summer. The other three hundred and sixty four days in the year, it’s kept in a locked safe in my office. There was no danger.”

Mr. Devlin chuffed.

“I couldn’t exactly predict a day like this, could I?”

“What happened to your forehead?” Mrs. Walker asked.

“Paul wanted the key to my safe. And when I wouldn’t give it to him ...” He pointed at his forehead.

“I think we’ll get a proper starting pistol for this June,” Mr. Devlin suggested.

June: five months from now. When Jamie thought of expanses in time so large, he usually wondered if he would make it that far. Now he had to wonder if any of them would. Mr. Devlin seemed hopelessly optimistic.

Tara murmured something.

“What?”

She was no longer shaking so badly. She gazed up into Jamie’s eyes and repeated her words. “Thank you.”

Mr. Garrett pointed into the canteen at the refrigerators. “You’d better tell them to switch the electricity back on.”

Mr. Devlin replied, “When I told Darrow the power went off all by itself ... I wasn’t lying.”

More bad news, then, Jamie thought.



No one died in the shooting incident, but morale was shot to hell. As word spread about what Mr. Darrow and four other teachers had attempted, the air became pregnant with tension. A line had been crossed. No longer would any pupil put their trust in the protection of the adult world. On an ordinary day, there were some teachers who were liked and others who were disliked, but no student would have believed any teacher capable of actions that would do them real harm—until now.

Jamie sensed the quiet and wondered how long it would take to escalate to panic. Sooner than he had imagined yesterday, he reckoned.

The time was 7.25 p.m. Darkness had descended, a thicker darkness than the previous evening, for now there were no streetlights to illuminate the landscape. The sky was overcast, hiding the moon and stars, turning the snow into a dull grey mass that became invisible beyond twenty metres.

Indoors, candles had been placed at the sides of the corridors every few metres. Jamie felt like he was strolling down a dark passageway in some medieval monastery.

He stood alone in the foyer, gazing out of a window at the black outlines of the houses across the street. He imagined the population tearing apart the insides of their homes, making more and more of those paths. Neighbour working with neighbour, sharing their possessions and looking out for each other. Was it impossible for such a thing to happen? Even in light of the seizure of the supermarket, was it conceivable that there was more generosity to go around than greed? More courage than cowardice?

Then Jamie considered the fertile soil now covered with this white disease. He wondered how long it would be before anyone could plant anything again. Could they ever? No crops meant no food. Every way he looked at the situation, he kept coming back to the same hopeless conclusion: *We're all going to starve to death.*

Right now, his belly was full. The teachers had set up a makeshift barbeque in the canteen, making a fire from wood stored in the technology department. They cooked all the remaining food while it was still fresh and allowed everyone to have a decent feed. The pupils had dined without much cheer, knowing well it could be their last meal.

Jamie heard a low rumble and felt the building vibrating beneath his feet. He dashed across the foyer and tore the partition away from the doorway leading to the playground.

The sound gained in clarity and volume. This was not the same whipping sound as the blades of the earlier helicopter, but a deeper, slower *whupp-whupp-whupp*.

Jamie stepped outside onto a mat and looked skyward, his heart beating fast.

An immense black shape floated into view about fifty metres above the school. It was long and fat, with two sets of rotor blades—one at each end. A little red light winked on and off at

the edge of the craft. This was one of those massive cargo-carrying helicopters.

Now there was another shape, rectangular and much smaller, descending from the craft. It rotated in the air, twisting this way and that, dangling from a rope that was invisible in the darkness.

Jamie took a step back, suddenly remembering from television what happens at ground level when helicopters come close: they create a lot of wind. Jamie looked at the snow, imagining it swirling into the air and being flung straight at him. But it was still. The chopper pilot obviously knew what he was doing.

The main corridor on the upper level of the school—where Jamie had stood yesterday morning watching the screaming pupils—could be seen from the foyer. Hundreds of dark shapes were pressed against the windows, peering out.

In front of the crowd, just centimetres in front of Jamie's face, a tiny spec of white floated to the ground. He took a step back, retreating to the safety of indoors. Surely he'd witnessed nothing more than a snowflake falling from the edge of the roof, dislodged by the vibrating of the building.

He caught sight of another spec, and yet another, further away. *Not this*, he prayed. *Not now, when we're so close to getting help.*

Flake after flake fell from the sky, building in intensity.

The helicopter's blades screeched—a sound like the cry of an elephant speared to death by a hunter. Then the noise of their spinning ceased.

The massive black hulk hung motionless in the sky for a moment, then drifted down, seeming to Jamie as if it were falling in slow motion, but in reality the descent only took a few seconds.

The rectangular box hit the playground first and smashed to pieces. The snow grabbed some of the debris instantly, before it could bounce anywhere. The rest of it—mostly items of food—flew off in all directions.

Then the helicopter struck the ground, first crumpling in on itself with a rasp of metal against metal, then transforming into a blinding fireball. The floor shook violently.

Jamie felt the heat of the blast on his face, and dived for cover behind the glass, not a moment too soon.

Countless thousands of snowflakes soared through the doorway and struck the windows on the opposite side of the foyer. The snow should have been vaporised into steam before it lifted from the ground, but instead, the shockwave from the helicopter sent flakes flying across the playground like a swarm of deadly insects.

For a moment, the room glowed bright orange, then it darkened drastically, leaving only a few random points of flickering light on the walls. It was a strange kind of illumination, like the sun struggling to shine through the branches of a tree. When Jamie got up and stepped back from the glass, he saw the cause.

All of the windows on the playground side of the foyer were now covered in snow. There were only tiny patches here and there where none of the flakes had collided.

Jamie cautiously stepped into the heat of the doorway and looked out.

The fire was about thirty metres in diameter, the flames licking up into the sky. There was no way that anyone or anything could have survived.

He turned his attention to the surface of the playground. The snow may have lifted from the ground, but not all of it had—only the top layer. The ground was still covered in white.

Snow continued to drift down from the sky, flake after flake landing on the ground and on the exercise mats. The same thing would be happening on the network of paths that had been created on Brownstown Road and further afield.

In this heat, any remaining doubt Jamie had about the snow's resistance to high temperatures vanished. He watched and waited.

Others came into the foyer to stare outside in silent gloom.

Within fifteen minutes, the exercise mats had disappeared, covered in white. Jamie didn't have to see the streets to imagine what they looked like now, with everyone's work undone and the materials they used gone forever.



It was much colder tonight. The storage heaters, which had been taken for granted, were no longer functioning.

With his blazer for a pillow and his coat for a blanket, Jamie lay in his spot in the middle of the gym. Over three hundred other boys were packed in tightly. The area was more cramped than it had been the previous night, because no one wanted to be too close to the west wall, which was entirely made of glass. The teachers had placed spare mats upright against the window panes in an effort to keep out the cold.

Looking above the mats, Jamie could see the stars, clear and bright, the sight of them interrupted every few seconds by his own breath in front of his face. *No clouds*, he thought. *That's a good sign. Maybe it won't snow again.*

But what did that matter? It wasn't as if he could just walk out of here. Every dwelling was in the same predicament. Even if you could somehow find enough flat materials to make a pathway hundreds of kilometres long, to the southern coast of Ireland, there was only a slim chance that the weather was any better. You would have to travel much further south than that: to France. If he had been the pilot of one of those helicopters, he would have filled the tank to full capacity, pointed the compass due south, and never looked back. To hell with orders. To hell with saving a country that couldn't be saved.

I sound like Mr. Darrow, Jamie realised, to his dismay. The only redeeming element in his fantasy was that he didn't picture himself alone; Tara was beside him in the co-pilot seat. It was as much about saving her as saving himself.

The thought of her dying made Jamie's stomach tie itself in

knots. *If there's one person who can get out of this, Lord,* he prayed, *I want it to be her.*

Where was a miracle when you needed one? Jamie recalled stories of prophets dying at the hands of evil kings, just because they dared to speak out for God. He remembered cities destroyed by fire from heaven because of their sin. And then there was that calamity of calamities, where the whole earth was covered by water and only one family survived. The world was a fallen place; it was not heaven and was not supposed to be. And when Jamie considered the brutal content of many Bible stories, was there really any surprise in what was happening today?

His thoughts drifted to his mother and father. He had no way of knowing whether they were alive or dead. Either way, it seemed impossible that they were doing anything other than waiting to die, like everybody else.

Jamie's mind kept veering back to the notion of escape. But all this did was fill him with frustration and prevent sleep from claiming its nocturnal right.

Eventually, he rolled over onto his side and focused his mind's eye on his usual fantasy of Tara.

He barely had time to picture her legs stretched out across the roof of the cabin before he sat bolt upright, his mind ensnared by an idea.

No. It'll never work. You'd be mad to even try.

He remained in a sitting position, his thoughts racing. Within seconds he hit a snag in his scheme, then another, and another. But when he thought about the first problem long and hard, a solution presented itself. Likewise with the second. However, by that point he had highlighted five more difficulties. It was like having a jigsaw puzzle in his mind. One by one the pieces fell into place, and in the end Jamie was surprised to discover there were no pieces missing.

When he decided to move, it was not to recline on his mat and go to sleep, but to put his coat on, lift his schoolbag, and slip quietly out of the gym.

There were a lot of items he had to steal.

DAY 3

THURSDAY, 9 JANUARY 2003

TARA HAD NEVER experienced hunger like this before. It was like having a goblin take residence in her stomach, gnawing at her insides. She sat in her usual spot in the canteen, impatiently drumming her fork. Three of her friends occupied the same table, Jamie absent. The room was filled with the chatter of hundreds of pupils.

Daniel and Alex entered the canteen, holding Colin Cooper by the arms.

The overweight boy struggled in vain, the soles of his shoes slipping on the tiles, as his two abductors pulled him onward.

“Come on, Cooper,” Daniel urged. “You know what you have to do. It’s your duty.”

“No!” Colin yelled. “Leave me alone!” His cheeks were stained with tears, his eyes wide with terror. “Somebody help me!”

The crowd of pupils erupted in cheers, drumming their fists on the tables. Tara found herself joining in.

Daniel and Alex got Colin as far as the counter. In front of them, one of the kitchen staff stood next to a huge steaming cauldron, stirring it with a ladle. Her expression was mean and intimidating.

“I don’t want to die!” Colin cried.

“You said you’d help us,” Alex reminded him. “Are you going back on your word?”

“I ... wait!”

The boys dragged Colin another few metres.

“We need you, Cooper,” Daniel explained. “Don’t you understand? There’s no food left. Would you rather we ate Skeletor over there?” He pointed at Roger Anderson, a gaunt boy with prominent facial bones—hence his unfortunate nickname.

Colin howled in despair. “Please! I don’t want to be eaten!”

“Sorry, Coop,” Alex said, “but you’re our only hope.”

The two boys rotated Colin’s body so that he faced the cauldron.

The cook removed the ladle and stepped back.

Daniel and Alex put their hands on Colin’s shoulders and shoved.

Colin’s waist hit the edge of the cauldron and his momentum carried his upper half forward into a dive. His shriek was cut short as his head hit the liquid, replaced by the hiss of boiling water as it found something to cook. The rest of his body flopped into the cauldron with a big splash. Nothing remained but two feet, kicking about frantically in a cloud of steam.

The crowd applauded.

Daniel and Alex gave each other a high-five.

Tara was excited at the prospect of the meal ahead.

She felt someone tugging at her arm.

“*Tara.*” A familiar voice.

Turning, she saw Jamie leaning over her, his face as pale as a ghost.

“*Come on, now,*” he whispered. “*I need you to—*”



“—wake up.”

Tara’s vision reassembled itself. She was lying on her back, looking up at the ceiling of the girls’ gym. Jamie’s face peered over her, as pale as it had been in her dream, but only due to the dawn light.

As her mind cleared, she recalled the nightmare. Viewing it from the perspective of reality brought tears to her eyes, not because of what the boys had done to Colin, but because of the way she had rejoiced in them doing it.

Jamie looked concerned.

She sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck, trembling. “What’s wrong?”

“I had a bad dream. Just let me hang on to you for a minute, okay?”

She sensed Jamie relaxing and welcomed his arms around her waist. As she was holding him, she noticed something wrong with her schoolbag. It was so full that it was almost bursting at the seams. But full of what?

She reached over and lifted the flap. Inside were four large rectangular items, each marked *A4 / 80 gm / 500 sheets*.

What were four reams of printer paper doing in her schoolbag, and who had put them there?

Jamie’s bag was on his back. Tara let her hands roam and discovered his bag bulging like hers. She felt the outline of a large plastic bottle, too. “Jamie? What’s going on?”

“Shh. Keep your voice down. You’ll wake the others.”

“What are you doing?” Tara whispered.

“Escaping. I want you to come with me.”

Tara looked at the paper. “You’re going to make a path, is that it?”

Jamie nodded. “Will you come? There isn’t much time.”

Tara shook her head vigorously in an effort to take in what was happening so suddenly. Her heart pounded at the thought of him leaving. “Jamie, where can you go? Everywhere’s—”

“Covered in snow, I know. But there’s a place—a place we can be safe.”

“Where?”

Jamie sighed. “I don’t want to tell you. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I can already see you don’t want to come, and if I

tell you . . .” He dared not say the rest: *If I tell you, it might scare you into staying put.*

“You’re right, I don’t want to come. I think you’re crazy.”

“I’m telling you, this is going to work. We can get to safety.”

“But you can’t tell me where it is?”

“No. I’m asking you to trust me.”

“Just you and me, is that the idea?”

“Yes.”

“What about everybody else, then? Do we just leave them to die?”

Jamie took Tara’s hands in his and gazed at her, his eyes blazing. “You have to listen to me, now. There is no food here and there isn’t going to *be* any more. Everyone here is going to starve to death, very slowly.”

Tara trembled. She tried to pull away and cover her ears, but he held her hands tight.

“Remember those pictures of Africa on TV? All those starving kids with their ribs sticking out? That’s what it’s gonna be like here in a while.”

“*Stop it.*”

“Do you still think we’re going to be rescued? Do you think they’ll risk sending another helicopter, after what happened to the last one? And even if they did, what good is one more food package? The snow isn’t melting, and it’s never going to melt. You call *me* crazy? Crazy is staying here.”

“I don’t know.”

Jamie’s eyes pleaded with her. “I can’t do this without you.”

Tara looked at her schoolbag. “You need someone to carry the extra paper?”

Jamie managed a smile. “That’s not what I meant.”

Tara made a decision. She didn’t know if it was a rational one based on Jamie’s predictions or an irrational one inspired by the clarity of her nightmare. But she did trust this boy. She had eavesdropped on him praying about her—they were the sweetest words she had ever heard—and she knew that he would never let her come to harm. “All right, I’ll come,” she said.



The landscape was bathed in a soft, dull light—a reflection of the cloudless sky. The first rays of the sun hadn't yet peered over the horizon, but the blackness of the night was getting bluer by the minute, the stars fading out one by one, weakest first.

Jamie, standing in the foyer, tore open the first ream of paper.

The main entrance door was glued open by the snow. Since the electricity had gone off, no teacher was brave enough to stand guard here where the cold weather had a strong bite.

Jamie bent down and dropped the first sheet of paper on the snow outside.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Tara asked. "Seems awfully thin to be walking on."

"Well, the snow doesn't melt," Jamie said, raising one foot off the floor, "so I figure it won't melt through." He took a deep breath and placed his foot squarely in the middle of the sheet.

The paper crumpled slightly, as the weight of Jamie's body compressed the snow underneath.

He lifted his foot again, and nothing prevented him from doing so.

In the centre of the sheet was a shoe-shaped flat area.

Jamie placed his foot down again, flattening another part of the sheet. And again he was able to retreat safely. There were no tears in the paper and there was no sign of moisture seeping through. For once, the abnormality of the snow was providing a small advantage.

Tara counted the amount of reams: four in each of the two schoolbags plus four more that they would carry between them.

Five hundred sheets multiplied by twelve reams equals six thousand, Tara thought. Let's say we use three sheets of paper for every metre we walk. That's six thousand divided by three: two thousand metres, or two kilometres.

It wasn't far. Where could Jamie be taking her? It had to be somewhere in town. One of the shopping centres, perhaps? That made sense, but why keep it a secret? Was he afraid of what she would think of the journey and whatever perils they might have to navigate?

"Come on," Jamie said. He had four sheets of paper on the ground now and was standing outside.

Tara glanced back at the gym, thinking of all those sleeping girls. "I don't understand. Why can't we tell the others what we're doing and let them follow us?"

"Where we're going, there isn't room," Jamie answered.

Seven hundred extra people in a shopping centre could turn nasty, Tara reasoned. Still, it seemed cruel.

"Besides," Jamie added, "if the teachers find out what we're up to, they might not let us go at all. Did you think of that?"

She stepped into the doorway. All that white, and knowing what it was capable of, filled Tara with a sense of fear bordering on vertigo. She looked down at the paper, noticing that the pages weren't only sitting on top of the snow; she could see the outline of one of the exercise mats, completely covered.

"It might snow again," Tara said.

"It might," Jamie agreed, and pointed up, "but it's a clear sky. That's a good sign, and I'm willing to chance it."

She hesitated.

"Look, Tara, I can't give you any guarantees here. I just know this is our best shot and it's our *only* shot. So come on."

Fifteen minutes ago I was asleep, Tara thought. *Maybe I still am. That would be nice.*

She could feel the cold breeze in her bones. Her teeth chattered, making her tighten the scarf around her neck. She had stolen it, and the coat and gloves, from the cloakroom, and had no idea to whom the items belonged.

Harder on her conscience than stealing was the sense that she was betraying everyone, somehow. At least she wasn't hurting anyone, like Mr. Darrow had done. And Jamie was making a

path. Others could follow when they woke up, despite what he said.

She picked up her schoolbag and placed it around her shoulders, groaning under the weight. Then she lifted the additional reams of paper in her hands. After one deep, shuddering breath, she stepped carefully outside.



Walking was treacherous. The immense weight in her schoolbag threatened to give her a lower back injury and affected her steps, making it hard to judge exactly where her foot would land. One mistake, and she would be going the rest of the way in her socks. Two mistakes, and she would have to travel barefoot. Three, and she was going nowhere.

Jamie walked in front, his body continually bobbing up and down as he laid sheet after sheet of paper on the ground in front of him. After five hundred steps, he tore open another ream. They had only journeyed as far as the entrance gates of the school grounds.

Tara cautiously turned her body to face the building. The car park was immediately in front of her, each vehicle capped with snow. Beyond this lay the perfectly flat expanse of the lawn, interspersed with trees, their leafless branches reaching out in all directions, one side brown, the other white. The building, rectangular and functional in design, almost looked normal from Tara's perspective, its vertical walls untouched by the falling snow.

It was now that the emotions hit Tara. *This might be the last time I ever see this place*, she thought. Saying goodbye to school forever was probably a playful fantasy for most pupils, but the reality was somewhat different. Of course, it was not the building she would miss, but the people: her friends, especially, and even some of the teachers. Her only relief was in this fragile little path, an umbilical cord connecting her to the beating heart of the school—at least until it snowed.

When she turned around, Jamie had taken another twenty paces, veering left on Brownstown Road. It wasn't hard for her to keep up.

The houses across the street were silent now, and no path but Jamie's cut through the snow. The people could not be dead—not yet—but they had evidently used up all their materials and were now sitting indoors, succumbing to despair.

Nearby, a white shape protruded from the flat ground. At first Tara thought it must be a pile of rubbish, or possibly food, but when she got closer, it was clearly the shape of a dog lying on its side.

This was not the first of such shapes. Jamie and Tara soon encountered others that were people—large and small; adults, some accompanying young children not yet of school age. One particularly horrifying sight was a pram, standing upright, the infant unmoving within his white cage.

All of the cars on Brownstown Road were empty, lying with their doors open or their windows smashed. The occupants had obviously been rescued by the owners of the nearby houses during the path-making phase.

About one hundred metres further, Jamie cut right, crossing the street and heading downhill along a slip-road onto Northway, a major carriageway connecting the neighbouring cities of Armagh and Craigavon. Northway was a high-speed road with few dwellings constructed nearby and therefore little aid for trapped motorists.

They passed a car with a man inside. The seat was reclined, and the driver lay there with his head back and his mouth open. Tara thought he might be dead, then noticed him twitching slightly, as if in the grip of a bad dream.

"Can't we help him?" she asked Jamie.

"Look up and down the road, Tara."

Nothing else needed to be said. The long, busy carriageway stretched out in both directions, and it was impossible to count the number of cars that confronted Jamie and Tara.

The occupants of some vehicles stared out at the two

travellers, as if struck dumb. Others shouted and screamed. Those who hadn't opened their doors were easier to bear, their cries muffled by the barrier of glass. Worst of all were the ones who begged. Angry threats were no problem to walk past, but pleas for help brought tears to Tara's eyes every time.

After a while, the travellers reached a gap in the traffic, which allowed Tara to get herself under control again. "Why don't you make the path closer to the cars?" she asked. "I know we can't stop to help, but maybe some of them can help themselves if we—"

"No."

Jamie's reaction alarmed her. She gripped the back of his coat in her fingers, making him stop.

He turned around to face her. "What?"

"I don't understand you. Do you want these people to die?"

"It's like I told you: this is for you and me. Nobody else can come."

Just where are you taking me, Jamie? She was about to quiz him further when she noticed him gazing over her shoulder at something in the distance.

Tara turned around.

The sun was now peering over the horizon, its rays banishing the gloom and giving the snow back its true glory. About a quarter of a kilometre away, standing out stark against the white, was a little dark spot about the size of a man. The shape undulated, like limbs in motion.

Tara watched the figure for several minutes. The size increased as the person came closer, clearly walking in Jamie's footsteps.

"It's Mr. Devlin!" Tara exclaimed, turning to face Jamie.

Jamie was already thirty paces from her, the pages laid down quickly and carelessly in the snow.

"What are you doing, Jamie? It's only Mr. Devlin."

"Come on, Tara!" Jamie urged, dropping extra sheets of paper in his frantic fumbling.

Tara walked up behind him at a leisurely pace. "This is stupid. There's no way you can outrun him like this."

"I'm not trying to. Just another few steps."

Jamie finally stopped working and turned around. "When I tell you to crouch down, I want you to do it, okay?"

"Jamie, you're scaring me."

"Just do what I say."

The two stood their ground, Tara in front of Jamie, watching Mr. Devlin approach.

When the teacher was twenty paces away, Jamie said, "That's far enough, sir."

Mr. Devlin ignored the warning.

"Down!" Jamie yelled.

Instead, Tara spun around in time to see Jamie raise his last ream of paper above his head. *He's going to knock Mr. Devlin into the snow*, she realised. *He's going to kill him!*

Jamie glared at Tara, his expression full of disappointment and anger.

After the closeness they had shared, she could never have imagined feeling afraid of him like this.

He hurled the ream of paper into the air.

Tara tensed, waiting for the sound of it thumping into the teacher.

Instead, she heard a faint rustle from somewhere above.

Turning, she saw flakes of snow drifting to the ground. A third snowfall; of all the rotten luck. A useless sense of panic gripped her. It would take at least fifteen minutes to get back to the school, but the three of them would be glued here in less than fifteen seconds. There was no place to go; they were doomed.

Remarkably, none of the snowflakes fell on Tara. Gazing up, she saw the reason.

There was a tree planted nearby, its branches reaching out across the road. The rustling she had heard was the sound of branches vibrating as the ream of paper struck them. It now clung to the tree like some ridiculous piece of rectangular fruit. There was no snow falling from the heavens after all; it merely

fell from the tree, dislodged by the impact. Fortunately, the tree was not directly overhead, and so the travellers were safe.

Jamie had missed Mr. Devlin. Nevertheless, his actions made the teacher stop, not out of fear, but out of necessity, because the sheets of paper between them were now covered in dangerous white spots.

"That was foolish," Mr. Devlin said. "What are you doing out here?"

"None of your business," Jamie replied.

The teacher turned his attention to Tara. "Where are you going?"

"I ... don't know," she replied.

Mr. Devlin sighed. "This is exactly the kind of thing we warned you about: wandering off into the snow, trying to get to your parents. Panicking."

"That's not what's going on here," Jamie said.

"Then what *is* going on here, eh? Where are you headed? What do you think is out there waiting for you?"

Tara couldn't see Jamie, since he stood behind her, so she couldn't interpret what his silence meant. But it frightened her. She had put all her trust in him; now he had tried to kill Mr. Devlin and was acting like he didn't know where he was going. Maybe he'd gone insane. It wasn't impossible in the middle of a disaster like this.

She edged away from him, as far as her feet would take her without touching any of the snow-stained paper. Then she turned to face him. "I want to go back."

Fear filled Jamie's face. "No ... Please, Tara."

"*You tried to kill him!*" Tara exploded, tears running down her face.

Jamie looked hurt. "Is that what you think? Tara, I threw the paper into the tree."

"You told me to duck."

"I was worried I might hit you."

"You wanted a clear shot, more like!"

Mr. Devlin said, "Let her come back with me, Jamie."

Jamie's face turned hostile. "Shut up! We've got a plan. You don't know where we're going, but I do."

"I'll tell you where you're going," Mr. Devlin said. "Nowhere. A quarter of a mile down the road, you'll see the back doors of High Street Mall. How long do you think the food in there's going to last, with a whole town clamouring for it? Or maybe you're hoping to get to the train station. You think anything can run on those tracks in this weather?"

"That's not where we're going," Jamie said.

"Where, then? Because there's nothing else out there, Jamie. How long do you think you can keep walking? You'll be lucky to make it as far as Seagoe Cemetery. Do you know what you'll find between here and there? Nothing!"

Tara had sat in the passenger seat of her father's car and travelled this road countless times. It was just as Mr. Devlin had said: there was the mall, the station, the cemetery, and nothing else but road.

She turned away from Jamie and started peeling the wrapper off one of the reams of paper in her hands, intending to bridge the gap between herself and the teacher.

Jamie spun her around and snatched the ream away. "Take off your bag."

She did as he asked, afraid that he might push her into the snow and take it anyway.

Jamie's schoolbag was now depleted of paper, allowing him to secure Tara's to his back in addition to his own.

"Jamie," Mr. Devlin pleaded, "this is madness. Give her some paper. Let her come back to the school."

"Please, Jamie," Tara said. "Let me go back."

Jamie breathed hard, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, a tortured expression on his face. "No," he said, gritting his teeth, "you're coming with me. You agreed." Then he turned away and resumed his path-making.

A sense of isolation engulfed Tara. She was trapped here, with a mad boy on one side and an uncrossable gulf on the other.

Mr. Devlin took off his coat and dropped it on the ground in front of him. He stepped onto it, then started to unbutton his shirt. "I don't think I can reach you," he said. "Tara, use your coat."

Tara tugged at her zipper. She looked up, hoping that no further snow would become dislodged. And then it occurred to her: when she had seen Mr. Devlin approaching, Jamie wouldn't stop putting down paper, even though he knew it was futile; he had kept going, only allowing himself to stop when ...

When he put the tree between us and Mr. Devlin, Tara realised. Jamie never meant to kill him at all. I was wrong.

She felt frantic and emotionally drained. Jamie wasn't a murderer at heart, and that was a relief, but the things Mr. Devlin had said still made a lot of sense. What should she do?

"What's wrong?" the teacher asked.

"Sir," Tara said, "what's going to happen if I go back with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's the plan? How are we going to survive? Everyone knows you gave us the last of the food yesterday. So, if I come back with you, I want to know how you're going to look after us all."

Mr. Devlin just stood there, saying nothing.

"That's what I thought. I'm sorry, sir." She turned her back on him.

Jamie stood twenty paces away, at the end of the path, watching her.

She walked up to him. "There's no going back now, so you might as well tell me where we're going."

He took off Tara's schoolbag and trusted her enough to keep it. But his trust only went so far, for he turned around and resumed his work without another word.

Fair enough, Tara thought. I'm not entirely sure I can trust you, either.

She glanced back and saw Mr. Devlin standing there all alone.

The next time she looked, he was walking back the way he had come.



The road curved uphill. At the crest, Jamie and Tara walked through a junction and past a set of traffic lights that were mindlessly telling traffic when to stop and go. Some electricity was still running, it appeared.

Around the next bend, four cars had halted close to each other. The doors were open and all the occupants were standing outside on a carpet made of newspapers, mats and clothing. There were four men and two women. They stared at the approaching children, their mouths agape.

Jamie halted twenty metres from the group and turned to Tara. "Whatever happens, don't let them take your bag. Don't even let them look inside it."

"Why would—"

"If we lose this paper, we're dead. You understand?"

Tara nodded.

As the two travellers neared, the group put their hands together in applause, whistling and cheering.

"Hey, kids," one of the men said, "where'd you come from?"

"Look, they're using paper," another said.

"That's the Clounagh uniform," one of the women said.

"They walked the whole way from the school."

"What's the plan, kids? Where are you headed?"

Jamie placed the next sheet of paper at right angles to the previous. Within half a minute, it was clear he was making a path that would steer him around the group instead of through.

The joy on the adults' faces evaporated.

"Hey! What's this all about?" one objected.

"We need help," another said. "We're stranded here, for goodness sake!"

Once again, Tara couldn't understand why Jamie was

adamant about no one being able to follow them through the snow.

One of the men drew a penknife from his pocket and ducked into his car. A tearing sound came from within.

The man emerged from the vehicle with two long strips of fabric from the seats. He placed them on the snow, making a bridge between his island and Jamie's path.

Jamie was too busy bending over and laying down paper to notice. By now, he had made a semicircle around the group.

Tara tapped him on the shoulder.

Jamie turned around in time to see the man hopping onto one of his pages ten metres back.

"Look at the schoolbag," a woman said. "They've got lots of paper."

The man stepped towards Tara, glancing at his feet as he walked.

Tara felt Jamie's hand probing deep inside her schoolbag, past the paper and right to the bottom. He withdrew it a few seconds later. "Stop," Jamie ordered. "I won't say it again."

The man continued advancing, his expression confident and ruthless.

Something bright green and round sailed past Tara's ear and struck the man in the eye.

The impact knocked him off balance, forcing him to engage in a crazy dance on one leg with his arms flailing about, before he finally brought his shoe down ... into the snow. He breathed hard, clutching his chest, shocked by how close he had come to a sticky end.

Lying on the snow nearby was an apple.

"There's more where that came from," Jamie said.

The man looked down at his immovable shoe, then up at Jamie. "You could have killed me."

"You would have killed *us*," Jamie countered.

"That's ridiculous. Don't you see we need your help?"

"You would have taken our paper. That's as good as killing us."

"All right. I would have taken the paper. But you could have come with us."

"And where would you go?"

"The town centre; the shops. Isn't that where you're going?"

Jamie said nothing.

"Kid, if you have a plan, how about cutting us in on it?"

"Don't follow us," Jamie ordered. "If you do ... I'll stop you." He turned away and bent over to lay down another sheet of paper.

"If you leave us here, that makes you a murderer. Do you hear me, kid?"

Tara gazed at the back of Jamie's head as it bobbed up and down. This boy whom she was growing to love, how could he be so ruthless, so heartless?

"You're a stone cold killer!" the man continued. "We'll die out here because of you!"

Jamie stood up straight and spun around, his cheeks stained with tears. *"I left seven hundred people to die! What makes you so special!"*

He stood trembling in front of Tara, his chest heaving. When he made eye-contact with her, his eyes filled up with fresh tears.

Tara's wariness transformed into sympathy. She reached out and put her arms on his shoulders. It was impossible to hug him, with her feet planted in the one spot, so she touched his face with her hand instead. "You're not a murderer," Tara said. "It's not your fault that it snowed."

Jamie gazed into her eyes for a long time, his chest slowing down, his eyes filling up with resolve. "Let's go."



Through another set of lights and around an S-shaped bend in the road, they could now see a massive car park to the right, about one hundred square metres in size. Because yesterday's first snow had fallen during morning-time, the place was only one quarter full. Every car was empty, as were all the cars on the

carriageway. Some vehicles had multi-coloured paths trailing away from them, each one joining a network that led to the entrance doors of High Street Mall at the far side of the car park. The people indoors had evidently used materials from within the shopping complex to rescue those trapped outdoors. The paths were visible even now, which meant that the people had gone about the rescue operation—or a later phase of it—after the second snowfall.

Over the course of the journey, Jamie and Tara had endured the constant pleas for help from nearby cars. Now they could recover, if only for a short while, from the emotional onslaught. The only voices within earshot were those of the people in the mall, and they were not the usual angry or panic-stricken cries, but shouts of invitation. The people stood in the wide entrance doorway of the shopping complex, waving and calling.

Jamie showed no interest.

“We could make it over there,” Tara suggested. “We have enough paper.”

Jamie shook his head. “That place is a prison.”

On the left side of the carriageway, they passed the train station, a featureless building with no windows. Railway tracks ran parallel to the road.

As Jamie and Tara neared the next set of traffic lights, they saw a vehicle that was slightly taller than the others, situated several car-lengths ahead: a blue van. As they got closer, the side of the vehicle came into view.

It was not quite a van, but a minibus. Printed along its length was a familiar red and yellow crest and the words *Clounagh Junior High School*.

Jamie and Tara halted.

The windows of the bus were steamed up, but Tara could see movement behind every pane.

“They must have been heading out on a school trip when it happened,” Jamie said.

“I wonder who the driver is. Can you think what teacher we haven’t seen since the start of this?”

"I've no idea," Jamie said.

Tara found comfort in the thought of a busload of school pupils right beside them, but in reality these pupils were probably more terrified than she was. "What do we do?" she asked Jamie.

"There's nothing we can do for them. We keep going."

"But they're our friends."

Jamie turned to face her. "I *know*. But don't forget what almost happened back there."

"Jamie, we have to help them."

"It's not that I don't want to. It's just that ..."

"What?"

Beyond one of the windows, a sleeve rubbed the moisture from the glass and a face peered out. Immediately there was a commotion from one end of the minibus to the other.

"Damn," Jamie said. "We've been spotted."

The driver's door swung open and Mr. Norden leaned out, grinning from ear to ear. "I don't believe it! How did you ..."
His eyes followed the trail of pages behind Jamie and Tara.
"That's incredible!"

Inside the main body of the bus, hands rubbed frantically against the windows, then little faces peered through.

Mr. Norden momentarily put his head back into the cabin and said to the pupils in the rear, "Listen, everybody. We can get back to the school!"

Cheers erupted from within.

"You came to get us," Mr. Norden marvelled.

Tara replied, "Actually, we didn't know you were—"

Jamie spoke up, silencing her. "We sure did, sir! Come on, let's get you people out of there." He put another sheet of paper on the ground.

"You're Jamie Metcalfe, right?" the teacher said. "And Tara ..."

"Morton," the girl finished.

Mr. Norden nodded. "I must say, I'm a bit surprised they

sent you kids out here. What about the teachers? They can't all be cowards."

"We've got smaller feet," Jamie explained. "We can walk on the paper easier than you."

"I see. How are things back there?"

Jamie opened his mouth to speak, but Tara got in first. "Bad."

Jamie glared at her.

"There's no food left," she continued.

Mr. Norden's face fell. "Then ... what are we going to do?"

"If you want my advice," Jamie said, "forget about going back to school. Head for the town centre. The shops are full of stuff that people have used to make paths. And there's sure to be plenty of food going round."

Mr. Norden nodded. "Makes sense ... How bad is it at Clounagh?"

"The army tried to bring us food by helicopter," Jamie explained, "but it crashed."

"And Mr. Darrow tried to take over the canteen with a gun," Tara added.

Mr. Norden smiled. "You're kidding."

Tara's and Jamie's expressions were like stone.

The teacher swallowed hard. "That's bad, all right."

Jamie continued making his path until he reached the door of the minibus.

"I'll take the paper," Mr. Norden said.

Jamie trembled.

"What's wrong?"

Reluctantly, Jamie handed the remains of the ream to the teacher—about fifty sheets. "That's it. That's all of it."

"Cutting it a bit fine, weren't you?" The teacher turned to Tara. "What about the bag?"

"Just some food," Jamie lied. "In case we got stuck out here."

"I thought you said there was no food left."

"Well ... for seven hundred there isn't."

Mr. Norden chewed his lip. "We're all pretty starving here. Do you mind if I—"

"We should move quickly," Jamie suggested. "It snowed twice already, and if it snows again, we won't be able to make a new path."

Mr. Norden took a moment to consider. "You're right. My stomach can wait." He looked over his shoulder and called out. "Everybody, get your stuff together. We're moving out."

"Have you decided where you're going?" Jamie asked. "Back to school or into town?"

"Town sounds like the safest bet."

The town centre lay on the far side of High Street Mall, out of sight. Tara pictured what must already be taking place: a network of paths from door to door and street to street. Shops, having stocks of all kinds of goods, would not run out of items with which to make paths, as other buildings had. Even after the second snowfall, they would have recovered. Now there would be easy access to supermarkets, butchers, bakeries. It sounded wonderful.

"When you get as far as the mall, you'll see paths all over the car park. The people indoors rescued everybody nearby, so you can use their paths to reach the building."

Mr. Norden raised an eyebrow. "You say that as if you're not coming."

Jamie blinked rapidly. "What I mean is *you're* in the lead ... since you've got the paper."

Mr. Norden studied the boy carefully.

"Tara and me will follow at the back. We can make sure nobody has an accident and gets left behind."

Mr. Norden nodded. "All right, let's do this."



The last of the children stepped cautiously out of the minibus and joined the queue along the path. Eighteen trembling first-year pupils, aged eleven to twelve, stood roughly a metre apart, with one sheet of paper on the ground between each.

Mr. Norden, out of sight at the front, called out, "Let's go! Slow and careful, now!"

The queue began to advance.

Jamie stood his ground.

Tara looked at him. "We're not going to follow, are we?"

Jamie shook his head.

The final pupil was a girl. Although Tara was only two school years ahead of her, the girl seemed very small and fragile in comparison. Ten metres away, she turned around, aware of no one following.

Jamie tensed. "It's all right. You go on. We've got things to do here."

The girl waved. "Thank you for saving us," she said, and then carefully rotated her body back around.

"Do you think they'll survive?" Tara whispered.

"I don't know."

"It's a good idea, heading for town."

Jamie nodded. "It is. But mine's better."

The convoy of pupils was now forty metres distant. Mr. Norden was completely out of sight and would be oblivious to the two older pupils staying put. Even if he caught sight of their absence along the way, it would be impossible for him to do anything about it.

"That was some serious quick thinking," Tara said.

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. "I didn't know I had it in me."

Tara bounced her schoolbag slightly on her back. "This is getting light."

"It's not far now. Come on."



On Tara's left, beyond the edge of the road, a train with six passenger carriages had come to a halt. Faces stared out of the windows at the two passers by. Some of the passengers shouted; some slammed their fists on the windows; others simply stared, having given in to despair.

Tara tore her eyes away and put her hands over her ears as she stepped onward.

Attached to a railing at the side of the road, a sign said, *SHILLINGTON BRIDGE*. This was the only indication that the carriageway had turned into a bridge, for it merely continued in a straight line with no ascent. However, off to the left and right, the landscape went rapidly downhill. The northern edge of the town centre could be seen, looking very still and tranquil, with the occasional spot of activity close to buildings.

Jamie took a moment to stretch his back, then turned around to face Tara. "Okay, give me the next one."

Tara took off her schoolbag, lifted out a ream of paper, and handed it to Jamie. When she swung the bag across her shoulders again, she did it effortlessly, using one hand, because the bag now contained practically no weight. "You do realise that this is the last one?"

Jamie turned away without comment and started putting sheets down.

Five hundred pages left, Tara mused. That's about two hundred metres, if we're lucky. Not much longer than the school's hockey pitch. Where the heck can we get to in two hundred metres?

The road was straight and level as far as the eye could see. And there really was nothing to see—just streets to the left and right, twenty metres below. Not a building anywhere close; not a single sign of shelter. Just one long, smooth line of white, interrupted here and there with cars.

Watching the ream in Jamie's hand deplete, Tara became anxious. "Jamie!"

"Not now," he replied.

Maybe he really has gone mad, she thought. "Jamie, where are we going?"

"Almost there," he replied.

"Almost *where?* There's nothing *here*, Jamie!" She stood still, her heart racing.

Jamie moved on, slowly bobbing up and down.

I'm stuck out here with a maniac who thinks he's going to save me, Tara thought, panicking. *I shouldn't be here. I only went with him because I had a stupid nightmare. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*

She turned around and gazed at the path. *I should have gone back with Mr. Devlin or Mr. Norden. I had two chances, and I blew it. But maybe I can still—*

She tensed. Jamie had crept up behind her and curled his fingers around her arms.

"Jamie, please. Let me go back."

"But we're here," he said.

Tara trembled, tears welling up in her eyes. He wasn't going to let her go. If only she had started walking instead of standing here cursing herself. "Please, Jamie. I know you mean well, but you don't know what you're doing. We need to go back."

Jamie carefully turned Tara's body around to face him. "You want to go back? Haven't you listened to anything I've said?"

"I believed in you, Jamie. I thought you were taking us somewhere safe. But *look around*. There's nothing *here*. What are we *doing* here, Jamie?"

Jamie smiled. "You don't see it yet." He let go of her, turned around, and walked to the last page of the path, thirty metres away. "You can see better from here."

It was even worse than Tara had thought; Jamie was having hallucinations. He looked ridiculous standing there in that empty white space, facing her with his arms outstretched, like an imitation of Christ crucified.

Now's your chance, Tara thought. And yet she hesitated. "See what?" she asked.

"The road out of here, of course," Jamie answered, glancing to the left and right.

"Jamie, this road's going nowhere, and neither are we."

Jamie let his arms fall to his sides and sighed in exasperation. “Will you just open your eyes? Look!” He pointed at the edge of the road and jabbed his index finger in a downward motion.

Tara let her eyes drift to the railing at the side of the road then down to the streets below. What she saw made her gasp in surprise. She had passed over it hundreds of times by car, so often that she’d forgotten it existed.

There was indeed a road—of sorts. It ran underneath the carriageway, forming a crossroads with it. Unlike other roads, not a single flake of snow rested on this one. It stood out from the monochrome landscape like a giant glittering snake, winding across the ground. There was nothing remarkable or magical about this particular road, except that it was made of water. Jamie and Tara were standing on the bridge above the River Bann.

Tara thought she might faint because of the acrobatics her emotions had to perform. One part of her was calming down, realising that Jamie was sane, while another part of her was getting more and more excited, as she worked out the implications of the river.

Jamie’s intention had never been to find a safe place. There were no safe places. His plan was to get them both as far away from here as possible.

Tara walked up to Jamie, her head full of questions.

He answered a couple of them before she asked, by simply pointing.

Moored at the edge of the river, about a hundred metres from the bridge, were four small boats. Three of them were coated in snow, as expected, but the fourth was moored underneath an overhanging shelter.

“I think you understand now why I couldn’t let everyone else come,” Jamie said.

The boat was fairly small, only seven metres long, with a cabin.

“It’s my dad’s. He got tired of bailing it out every time it

rained, so he built a shelter. He could never have known it was going to save my life one day ... and yours.”

“Where will we go?”

“Open your schoolbag.”

Jamie took out a map and unfolded it. There were drawing-pin holes in the corners, and someone had sketched a hump-backed serpentine creature in the middle of Lough Neagh—presumably the Lough Neagh Monster.

Tara said, “This was on the wall of the geography room.”

Jamie smiled. “Yeah, I was pretty busy before I woke you this morning.” He traced a finger south-east along the River Bann, starting at Portadown. “If we head that way, it’s no good; the river just stops. But look at this.” He traced his finger north. The River Bann spilled into the south side of Lough Neagh, then started again at the northwest corner, finally reaching the sea beside the town of Castlerock. “We need to go south, but north is the only way we can reach the sea, so it will have to do for now.”

“Why south?”

“Didn’t you learn anything in geography?” he teased. “The further south you go, the warmer it gets and—”

“And the less likely it is to snow,” she finished.

“France is where we’re going.”

“We’ll need water.”

“I’ve put empty bottles in our bags,” Jamie said. “We can fill them in the river.”

“You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?”

Jamie looked anxious. “I won’t lie to you: I don’t know. I hope so, but I really don’t know. If you want to go back at this point, I ... I won’t stop you. But I really think this is our best shot.”

Tara recalled the first television broadcast about the snow: the video footage of the River Thames standing out starkly against the white city of London. The solution to the problem of how to get unstuck had been staring her in the face for the past two days.

She said, "I just have one question: how do we get to the boat?"

"That's the hard part. We swim." He unzipped his coat.

"What if I told you I *can't* swim?"

Jamie's eyes widened.

"Just kidding."



Tara finished stuffing Jamie's coat and shoes into her schoolbag.

Meanwhile, Jamie used the remaining paper to cover the railing at the side of the road, which would allow him to climb over and stand at the edge of the bridge. He threw one leg over.

"What about the rest?" Tara said.

"Eh?"

"Do you honestly think it's going to be any warmer in the water with your clothes on?"

Jamie looked down at the river and frowned.

"Or maybe you'd like to get hypothermia when you're rowing down the river in wet clothes."

"Well, I hadn't—"

Tara smiled. "Besides, you've seen me in my undies. It's only fair."

Jamie started unbuttoning his shirt. "Three days ago, if someone had told me I'd be stripping in front of you, I would never have believed them."

Jamie handed his blazer, shirt and tie to Tara.

Tara kept smiling until Jamie turned around, when she noticed a small hard lump on his back, standing out among the rest of his gooseflesh. She had almost forgotten about the cancer, but the sight of it knocked all the joviality out of her. It was such a small and insignificant-looking thing; hard to believe it was going to kill him.

Tara bundled Jamie's trousers and socks into her schoolbag.

Jamie stepped over the railing, unclothed except for his

underpants. He stood there shivering for several minutes, his breath forming a cloud in front of his face, as he prepared his mind for the ordeal to come.

Tara thought he was never going to do it when, without warning, he took one small hop forward and dropped out of sight.

Two seconds later, Tara heard the splash. She stepped to the railing, cursing how slowly and carefully she had to move, and peered over the edge.

There was nothing below but an ever-widening circle of ripples in the dark water.

It occurred to her: the snow that had landed on the river would now be lying on the riverbed, unwilling to melt into the water around it. And if Jamie's body had plunged too deep, the snow would be waiting down there to grasp him while he drowned.

Tara gripped the railing tight, counting the seconds and fighting back tears.

Four ... five ... six ...

Jamie's head burst through the surface, while Tara's heart flooded with relief. He sucked in a huge breath of air.

"Jamie, are you all right?"

There was no reply. Tara could see Jamie's teeth chattering so intensely that he didn't look capable of speech.

Jamie allowed himself only five seconds to recover, then began to swim towards his father's boat shelter, thrashing at the water with his arms.

The hull of the boat loomed half a metre above the surface of the water. With his last stroke, Jamie reached out and grabbed the edge, then used his momentum to project his body upwards. The boat rocked back and forth, threatening to throw him off, but he held on tight, squirming over the rim.

Finally, he flopped onto the wooden deck like a fisherman's catch. There he immediately curled up into a foetal position, rubbing his arms and legs in an attempt to expel the cold.

"Jamie!" Tara called. "Are you all right? Please answer me!"

Apparently, he didn't have the strength to reply. He didn't even have the strength to sit up. All he could do was lift one shivering arm into the air, make a fist, and extend his thumb.



The two schoolbags landed with a soft thump on the wooden boards.

Jamie had untied the boat from the jetty and rowed it to the bridge. Meanwhile, Tara had taken off her clothes and tossed them down to him.

He started to unfasten the straps in his schoolbag, eager to get dressed.

"Hey!" Tara called. "That can wait. I'm freezing." The real reason for her impatience was that she didn't want to spend too much time thinking about what she had to do next—in case she lost her nerve.

"Not as freezing as me," Jamie called back, as he put his legs into his trousers.

The boat drifted a few metres, giving Tara the opportunity she needed. Scared to jump, and even more scared to hesitate, she stepped off.

There was one moment, just after Tara's body hit the water, when she thought she was fine. But part of her knew it was like the moment when you put your foot into a bath that's too hot—the short delay caused by the time it takes for the nerves in your foot to transmit their signals to your brain. Hot or cold, the message was simply pain. And it wasn't just Tara's foot in trouble this time, it was every nerve-ending in her body.

Submerged and still sinking, she screamed at the shock of the icy cold liquid embracing her and expelled most of the air in her lungs. Forcing her eyes open, she could see the surface glittering above her, far away and getting further.

She clawed at the water with her hands and feet, fighting the momentum of her descent, wondering how close she was to the snow-coated riverbed.

Tara quickly got her terror under control, positioned her legs straight down, and kicked with her feet.

She heard her name being called—Jamie’s voice, muffled and distant. The waves above grew larger, sparkling in the sun, while the edges of her vision dimmed, her brain starving of oxygen. The temptation to inhale water was almost overpowering.

Finally, her head broke the surface and she sucked in a lungful of air.

Half of her field of vision was filled with the sky, the other half with the underside of the bridge. Stars were buzzing all around like fireflies.

Being in the freezing water felt like having a swarm of deadly insects gnawing at her all over her body. She could sense her life ebbing away.

And then Jamie’s face, very close, peered down from above. “Give me your hand!”

Tara raised one arm and felt Jamie’s strong hand grasp her around the wrist. She gripped his in return and felt her body gliding upwards out of the river.



They got dressed quickly, in too much agony to feel the remotest sense of embarrassment about themselves or to express the slightest fascination with each other.

Once fully clothed, Tara reached out for Jamie and clung to him, needing to share his body heat and just plain needing a hug.

They embraced each other for five minutes. Tara could have held on for a lot longer, but Jamie pulled away from her and grabbed the oars.

The boat had drifted within five metres of some snow-capped reeds at the water’s edge.

Jamie rowed back out to the middle of the river, then pulled

hard on one oar to rotate the boat. "Grab the outboard," he said.

"Say what?"

"The engine. Take the stick."

"But it's off."

"Doesn't matter. There's a rudder in the water; you can help keep the boat straight."

This was the first opportunity Tara had ever had to look at a boat's outboard engine up close. It seemed simple enough. A metal fuel tank with a section going down into the water—presumably there was a propeller and rudder on the end of that. On the tank itself was a stick for steering, a lever for speed, and a keyhole for ...

"You've got the key, right?"

"Wrong."

"So are we gonna row the whole way to France, is that the plan?"

Jamie pulled on the oars. "There's some paper-clips in my bag."

"Instead of a key? Will that work?"

"I don't know."

Tara lifted Jamie's bag and put her hand inside, retrieving a little box no larger than a matchbox. On the front, the words *NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM ROOM 25* had been taped on.

"Tap the tank, will you?" Jamie asked. "All over it."

Tara rapped her knuckles on the dome in several places. Close to the top, it emitted a hollow ring. Lower down there were no reverberations.

"Sounds like we've got about two thirds of a tank," Jamie said.

"How far will that get us?"

"I've no idea."

"Did you know how much fuel was in the tank before we got here?"

"No."

Tara glared at him. "So it might have been empty?"

He had a look of serenity on his face as he rowed, like this was an enjoyable outing on a summer's day. "I took it on faith."

"Faith! You know, you're not the only person in the world who prays. What about all the other people? The ones you keep saying are going to die. Is their faith going to save them, too?"

Jamie looked hurt, and Tara immediately regretted her words. She was angry because he wasn't just playing with his own life; every decision he made affected her survival, too.

"It didn't seem like I had a choice," Jamie said. "I had to either take you with me or leave you to die."

Tara looked into Jamie's eyes and found it was impossible to stay mad at him for very long.

"What would you rather be doing?" he asked. "Sitting back in school with all the others, starving to death—maybe turning on each other? Or would you rather be doing something to save yourself?"

She sighed in resignation. "Doing something to save myself."

Jamie nodded. "All right, then. See what you can do with the lock on that engine."



Using two bent paper-clips, Tara fiddled with the lock for half an hour, until her fingers got so numb that she had to stop. "Want to swap places?" she asked.

"Have you ever rowed before?"

"Who do you think *you* are—Arnold Schwarzenegger? You're gonna have to let me take over sometime. Might as well be now."

Jamie let go of the oars and stood up, rubbing his aching shoulders, and they traded seats.

Rowing came naturally to Tara, although she found herself getting tired within ten minutes. Nevertheless, she persevered,

taking long, slow strokes, always careful to keep the oars tilted at just the right angle for maximum force in the water.

It felt good to be outdoors, able to move around with freedom—even in the confines of this small boat—not having to worry about where you stepped and what you touched. The wintry landscape on both sides of the river consisted of fields and trees—countryside, naturally devoid of any human presence. And so, it was easy to pretend there was nothing amiss on this disastrous day. It was a pleasant change from the journey by road, with all of the cries for help assailing Tara's and Jamie's ears.

As they rounded the next bend in the river, Tara spotted another boat.

"Jamie, look!"

It was smaller than their own and had no cabin. Mounted on the back was an outboard engine, beside which lay a shape—possibly a man—unmoving. The boat was at the river's edge, held tight by the white reeds.

"Hey, mister!" Tara called. "Are you—"

Jamie and Tara both let out a gasp as their boat came up level with the other.

The man was about forty years old and lay slumped against the side of the hull, his neck craned at an awkward angle. His jaw hung loose and his eyes were open, staring into space. In the centre of his forehead was a single black dot with a trickle of blood running down from it.

Tara put a hand across her mouth to stifle a scream. "Why would someone do that?"

"Look at the engine," Jamie said.

The petrol cap on the tank was sitting upright and open. This poor man likely had the same intentions as Jamie and Tara. He had probably moved heaven and earth to get this far on his journey, only to be shot dead by somebody with a gun.

"They killed him for his fuel," Jamie said.

"Who?"

"Another boat."

Tara nodded. There could be no other explanation.

Jamie scanned up and down the river. There was no sign of anyone. "We need to get this engine running *now*. I don't want to be caught here like a sitting duck if the guy with the gun shows up again."



After half an hour of futile fiddling, Jamie turned around to Tara and held up the paper-clips. "They keep bending. This is hopeless!" He threw them onto the deck and put his head in his hands.

The first cracks were showing in Jamie's cool, collected exterior. It made Tara anxious to see him like this. She realised, for the first time, just how much faith she had been putting in him up to this point, and she couldn't help wondering if it were misplaced. "Calm down," she said soothingly. "Nothing bad has happened to us yet. Maybe that guy was killed yesterday and the other boat is long gone."

Jamie didn't look up.

Tara couldn't help wondering if he was more frustrated over his failure to start the engine than over his worries about a gun-wielding sailor. For if the lock couldn't be picked, they were in real trouble.

"There has to be a way." Jamie stood up and walked past Tara, stepping over one of the oars. He ducked down and went into the cabin.

Tara kept rowing, listening to Jamie rummaging around and cursing to himself. She kept herself calm by imagining a man with a gun tucked down the back of his jeans piloting a big boat south through the sea, far away from the River Bann. It was a best case scenario, and it could well be true. If the man had collected enough fuel to get out of here, why would he come back?

But what if Jamie couldn't start the boat? What if they had to row the whole way to France? Was such a thing possible?

Would they have the strength? Would they run out of drinking water before reaching their destination? Would the winds carry them out to the Atlantic Ocean?

A few minutes later, Tara heard Jamie emerge from the cabin behind her. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Let me take over."

Tara got up and sat down at the stern.

Before lifting the oars, Jamie dropped a length of rubber hose, about a metre long, and a wrench, onto the deck. "We have to go back to the other boat."



Death was horrifying enough to look at from ten metres away, but much worse from one metre. Jamie drew his boat alongside the dead man's and secured it with a length of rope.

Tara had watched enough TV to learn a few things about death that they didn't teach you in Biology class—like the way that dead bodies, given time, smelt awful. This one, however, didn't. Maybe the cold weather was keeping the odour at bay, or maybe the guy wasn't long dead—which meant the killer might not be far away.

Jamie stepped onto the other boat, walked to the stern, and rapped his knuckles on the petrol tank. He nodded to himself knowingly, as a hollow ring reverberated back to him. Without delay, he started using his wrench on four big bolts that held the engine to the hull. He pocketed each in turn. Then he heaved the engine up out of the water and into the boat, groaning with the strain. For one heart-stopping moment, Tara thought he was going to accidentally drop the whole thing into the river.

The next stage was to drag the engine along the deck and topple it across to his own boat, which proved slightly easier with Tara on the receiving end.

After that, it was a matter of unfastening his own engine and fitting the dead man's engine in its place. It was an awkward and time-consuming job, but they got it done.

Their own engine was now resting against the side of the boat at a forty-five degree angle, with its propeller on the deck.

“Put one end of the hose into our tank,” Jamie said.

Tara fetched the hose from the deck, unscrewed the lid on the petrol tank, and fed the length of rubber inside.

Jamie took the other end of the hose and sucked on it like it was a straw. He spat petrol out of his mouth and quickly shoved the hose into the tank of the stolen engine.

Tara heard the splashing of the petrol filling the tank.

“Put the hose right to the bottom,” Jamie said, “so we get every last drop.” He sat down on the deck, one arm thrown around the engine. The dead man’s key was at eye-level. Jamie reached up and tapped it with his finger.

A tiny plastic key-ring of Bart Simpson flashing his buttocks swung like a pendulum.

Jamie smiled at Tara. “Well, that’s one way to get around a lock, isn’t it?”



“The moment of truth,” Jamie said, and turned the key.

The engine sputtered to life and rose to a healthy purr.

Jamie and Tara cheered and hugged each other.

While Jamie untied the boat, Tara sat down beside the engine and grasped the stick.

“I take it you’re driving?” Jamie asked.

“If you say so, captain.”

“And are you aware that left means right, and right means left?”

“Eh?”

“It’s not a steering wheel. To go right you have to move the stick—”

“I get it.” Tara moved the stick to the right, then quickly changed her mind and swung it hard to the left.

Jamie rolled his eyes. “If you do that when we’re moving,

I'll end up in the river. Just don't make any sudden movements, okay?"

Tara saluted. "Aye-aye, captain."



After travelling two kilometres, Jamie switched off the engine. The more distance they covered, the more assured Tara felt that they wouldn't encounter the enemy boat, but it was important to conserve fuel.

Logically, if the enemy's purpose was to steal fuel from other boats, then he would be unlikely to waste it by travelling up and down the same stretch of river in the off chance of discovering someone like Jamie.

The landscape drifted by, now misty as well as white, like a Christmas postcard. It was easy to forget the hostile nature of the snow.

Jamie sat facing Tara, pulling the oars, his eyes fixed on the engine.

"What are you thinking?" Tara asked.

"I'm wondering how much petrol we used."

"How far do you think the tank will get us?"

Jamie chuckled. "This is where I wish I'd paid more attention to Dad when he took us out."

"How long until we reach the sea?"

"I've no idea; we never went to the sea. This is a river boat."

Tara tensed. "So ... "

"Relax. There's hardly any wind. If things stay like this, we'll be fine."

"And if a storm breaks out at sea, we're done for, yeah?"

Jamie shrugged.

Tara nodded. "There's that *faith* thing of yours again."

"Look, I've worked it out. As soon as we hit the coast, we head east, then south along the Irish Sea, hugging the coast until we make it to Wexford, which is right at the bottom of Ireland. We'll use the engine when the going's tough, and we'll

refuel from other boats docked at harbours. For all we know, it might not even have snowed in Wexford.”

“And if it has?”

“Then it’s a quick hop across the sea to the southwest corner of England. If the weather holds, we can keep going south. If it looks too rough, we can go east for a while, along the south coast of England, where we’ll hop to France, straight across the Channel at the shortest point.”

“I like your word for it.”

“What word?”

“Hop.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re heading for the middle of the Atlantic. France means safety, and however long it takes to get there, we’ll just have to go hungry and ration the water.”

“Remember, the guy on TV said that ...” Tara’s eyes went vacant.

“What?”

“Shh! Listen.”

Tara could hear a faint sound rising out of the silence all around. The ridiculous image of a motorcycle floated into her mind, because the noise was high-pitched and bee-like, similar to a bike tearing along a street.

Jamie and Tara stood up and peered over the cabin, since the sound was coming from ahead.

A tiny dark object, tall and thin, emerged from the mist about a hundred metres ahead. For a moment, Tara thought her eyes were deceiving her, because the thing even *looked* like a motorcycle.

Jamie turned the key in the engine. It coughed to life and settled into a low purr.

A second similar shape joined the first, some metres behind it.

Jamie reached for the throttle, then reconsidered. “We’d never make it; they’re too fast.”

“Maybe it’s not who we think,” Tara suggested.

“Get in the cabin,” Jamie said.

"It's possible they're friendly."

Jamie's eyes blazed. "*Get in the cabin.*"

Tara ducked down and entered the cabin, closing the door behind her. The noise of the engines was muffled, but no less threatening in its approach.

The high-pitched buzzing went down an octave.

They're stopping.

Through a porthole, Tara saw two Jet Skis pull up alongside the boat, like colossal insects homing in on their prey. The riders were men, one wrapped up in a parka like an Eskimo, the other in a black leather jacket. A length of rope was in tow behind each vehicle, but Tara couldn't see what was attached to the end of either one.

The Jet Skis drifted out of her line of vision, so she moved to the door, being careful not to shift any of the tools Jamie had left scattered over the deck. She tugged on the door gently, opening it just a crack.

Jamie was lying down against the side of the boat, hiding. In his panic, he had left the engine turned on, spoiling the illusion of an empty boat.

"Gotcha!" the man in leather said, peering down on Jamie from above. He had parked the Jet Ski right beside the boat, affording him a full view of its interior. "Is it my turn to hide now?" He laughed long and hard.

Tara didn't find the joke funny. Even less funny was the pistol that the man waved about casually.

"Who's in the boat?" the other man, the one in the parka, said.

"Some kid," Mr. Leather replied. Then, to Jamie: "On your feet!"

Jamie stood up cautiously.

"What are you doing, kid? Get your hands up where I can see them!"

Jamie lifted his trembling hands above his head.

Mr. Leather lightly touched the throttle on his Jet Ski and

let the craft drift downstream about ten metres, all the while keeping his gun trained on Jamie.

Tara saw Jamie look down at something in the water beside the boat.

“Lift it out,” the man said.

Jamie didn’t move.

“You better do what he says,” Mr. Parka warned.

Tara opened the door another few millimetres, but couldn’t determine where the man was. He sounded several metres away.

“You told me to keep my hands up,” Jamie said.

“Don’t fence with me, kid,” Mr. Leather said. “If you got this far along the river, then you’ve already seen what I’m capable of.”

Tara watched Jamie get down on his knees, lean over the edge of the boat, and take hold of something in the water. In a few seconds, he had heaved a clear plastic barrel into the boat, two thirds filled with a colourless liquid. A rope had been attached to one end. Clearly, the men were scavenging for fuel and towing it along behind them.

And they’ll kill to get it, Tara thought. She glanced around the cabin frantically: nothing but boxes and tools. She lifted a hammer and imagined herself springing from the cabin, hurling the tool through the air, watching it soar end over end until it smashes into the man’s skull and knocks him off the Jet Ski.

But there were two men, and maybe two guns.

Tara went back to the crack in the door, in time to see a length of hose slap Jamie on the side of the head then fall to his feet, evidently thrown by Mr. Parka.

Tara now had a clear idea of the locations of both men. Mr. Parka was some metres off to the side, while Mr. Leather was about ten metres beyond the stern.

“Take the cap off the engine,” Mr. Leather said.

“If you take our petrol, we’ll never make it,” Jamie said.

“Make it to where?” Mr. Parka asked.

“France.”

Both men laughed.

He's all alone out there without a plan, and there's nothing I can do, Tara thought. The fear she felt was paralysing. In her mind's eye, she pictured Jamie lying on the deck, blood streaming down his face, his eyes wide and still. She imagined the boat drifting on the waves, its engine empty, the men having left with their plunder. And Tara sits all alone in the cabin, hugging her knees to her chest, waiting with her dead boyfriend until Death returns for her.

This all-too-possible future was so much more terrifying than her present circumstances that it broke her paralysis. She tugged the door, inching it further open.

There was an overhanging roof just outside the cabin door, shrouding it in shadow. That, combined with the mist and the distance of Mr. Leather, might just give Tara enough cover. She crawled out on her belly.

"You think you can make it across the sea in this piece of driftwood?" Mr. Parka said. "You don't even have a *sail*."

"We have an engine," Jamie said. "We have fuel. Listen to me: if we combined our—"

"I do believe the kid wants to be friends," Mr. Leather said. "Man, that's sweet."

Tara crawled towards the rear of the boat, keeping close to the side, moving as quickly as she dared. She slithered under the seat and reached Jamie, who was standing by the engine.

"Pick up the hose," Mr. Parka ordered.

Jamie kneeled down and glared at Tara, his eyes pleading with her to stop.

"What are you doing down there, kid?"

Jamie stood up, hose in hand.

Tara snaked forward the remaining few inches, until her head touched the back of the boat, then she lay on her back, looking up at the throttle lever.

Maybe this is a mistake. Maybe Jamie knows what he's doing.

"Open the cap," Mr. Parka said. "Keep both your hands where I can see them."

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Jamie said. “We can share the boat. You can come with us.”

They’re not listening, Jamie, Tara thought.

“Got other plans, kid,” Mr. Leather said. “We’re gonna hole up until this thing blows over. That’s the only sane thing to—”

Mr. Parka suddenly interrupted his comrade, addressing Jamie. “*What did you just say, boy?*”

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Leather asked.

“‘Us.’ The kid said, ‘You can come with *us*.’ He’s got somebody else in there with him ... in the *cabin*.”

Tara had been discovered. There was no longer any decision to make. It didn’t matter about the gun pointed at Jamie’s head. The fuel was their lifeline, and without it, time itself would murder them. She reached up, turned the throttle hard, and grabbed the stick.

Unfortunately, the boat did not behave like a car. A propeller churning through water doesn’t create anything close to the same friction as tyres screaming into life on the hard surface of a road. The outboard engine roared, and the boat crept forward with all the urgency of a car pulling out of a driveway.

With a bit of luck, Mr. Leather might have been aiming his pistol at the cabin door when Tara reached for the throttle. That would buy her maybe two seconds.

A gunshot rang out.

Jamie hit the deck.

In her fright, Tara almost let go of the stick. Then she saw his angry face next to hers, very much alive.

“You maniac!” Jamie said.

Tara could have wept for joy.

The boat picked up speed.

Mr. Leather called out, “Where are you gonna run, you idiots!”

The rope holding the barrel suddenly went taut, causing the barrel to slide along the deck and slam into the back corner

of the hull, where it stuck fast as if held by some kind of artificial gravity.

The boat gave a sudden jerk, its progress impeded by the rope that anchored it to the stationary Jet Ski some metres behind.

Then came two sounds in quick succession. The first was Mr. Leather letting out a brief curse in a distinctly surprised tone. The second was a splash.

Tara's mind filled with the image of the rope jerking the Jet Ski into motion and of the man falling off the seat into the water.

The boat started gaining momentum again.

Tara got to her knees and peered over the back of the boat.

The Jet Ski was keeping pace, skipping along the waves created by their engine, looking as if it were ridden by the Invisible Man.

In the river, quickly receding from view, Mr. Leather's arms were waving about in the air above his head, his fists clenched, his mouth uttering obscenities.

Jamie put his hand over Tara's and yanked the stick.

Tara looked over her shoulder and saw the riverbank dangerously close. In her excitement, she had forgotten all about steering.

The boat curved back to the centre of the river. The Jet Ski, travelling in its wake, barely managed to avoid the snow-capped reeds at the water's edge.

The last thing Jamie and Tara saw before the mist carried Mr. Leather out of sight was Mr. Parka swinging his Jet Ski around in an arc to rescue his comrade.



"They're going to catch up, aren't they?" Tara said.

"Without a doubt." Jamie replied.

"I think he lost the gun when he fell. That's something, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Maybe if we let the Jet Ski and the barrel go, they'll leave us alone ... since they don't have a gun any more."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

Tara shook her head.

"We need a plan," Jamie said.

"How about we ditch the boat and take the Jet Ski?"

Jamie smiled. "All the way to France on a *Jet Ski*? A minute ago you were worried about whether we'd make it in a *boat*."

"Maybe we'll find another boat along the way. We could try another one of your famous leaps of faith."

From bank to bank the river had thinned considerably; it was now no wider than twenty metres. The boat rounded a sharp bend with trees on either side. The trees might put them out of the enemy's line of sight for now, but there was nowhere to truly hide.

"Where's a fork in the river when you need one?" Tara said.

Jamie gazed at the river behind them.

"What are you thinking?" Tara asked.

"Let go of the throttle," he said.

Tara looked alarmed.

"I'm serious," Jamie said.

The boat slowed to a stop. With the engine now at its quietest, Tara could hear the buzz of the approaching Jet Ski.

Jamie hauled in some of the rope from the barrel and wound it around a little ring on the edge of the boat. "All right, now turn us around."

"We're going *back*?" Tara stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Trust me."

Well, I can't say he hasn't earned it. She turned the stick and twisted the throttle.



The timing had to be perfect for this to work, but the only calculation they could perform was an educated guess based on how loud the Jet Ski's engine sounded. Tara said a silent prayer, picked her moment, and sent the boat full speed ahead.

The trick was to keep as close as possible to the riverbank on the way up to the bend. The trees would hopefully prevent the enemy from seeing their position until it was too late.

The bend approached, twenty metres ahead ...

Fifteen ...

Ten ...

Tara's pulse rocketed as she caught sight of a blur of motion beyond the leafless, spidery framework of the trees.

Jamie was seated on the stolen Jet Ski, keeping pace with the boat ten metres behind. He had his own moment to pick, too, and it was now. He turned the handlebars, twisted the throttle to maximum, and tore diagonally across the river. The ripples created by the boat sent the Jet Ski skipping like a kangaroo, each bounce threatening to throw Jamie off his vehicle. But he held on tight and kept his course.

A teenage boy, stripped down to his underpants, zooming across the two men's field of view, must have been the last thing Mr. Leather and Mr. Parka expected to see when they rounded the corner.

Any curiosity they may have felt was knocked out of them when Jamie's Jet Ski jerked to a halt in seemingly impossible fashion, catapulting the boy out of his seat and into the river. It was too late for the men to notice the rope (which connected the boat on one side of the river to the Jet Ski on the other) springing up out of the water, straight and taut, right in front of them.

The bullet-shaped front of the Jet Ski and the elastic nature of the impact made the rope slide upwards along the nose of the vehicle. It struck the rider—Mr. Parka—on the chest. Like arrows from a bow, the two men shot backwards out of their seats and hit the water, while the Jet Ski carried on without them.

Jamie hadn't even attempted to stay astride his vehicle. Ending up in the water was an acceptable, even advantageous, part of the plan. If Mr. Leather and Mr. Parka had any remaining curiosity about why their target had decided to strip off for the occasion, their question was answered when they saw him swimming for *their* Jet Ski instead of his own.

Mr. Leather and Mr. Parka tried to swim after the boy, cursing him with every breath they could spare. But two men, badly winded and fully clothed, were no match for a lithe teenager.

Jamie climbed up onto their Jet Ski, twisted the throttle, and swung the vehicle around. He sped past the men, keeping a wide berth.

Mr. Leather swam a few strokes and tried to grab hold of the rope behind the Jet Ski as it went past. He succeeded in giving himself nothing but a friction burn.

Jamie's original Jet Ski was moving on without a rider. Tara had kept the boat in motion, and since the rope was still connected, the Jet Ski remained in tow.

The two men could only watch in horror, pleading for mercy, as their only means of staying alive cruised away from them.



One kilometre along the river, with the boat now stationary, Jamie and Tara stood on the deck and took stock. They had two Jet Skis, each with a tank three quarters full, plus two barrels of petrol, one of which—Mr. Parka's—was almost full to the brim. It was fantastic luck.

Everything was wonderful except the feeling Tara had in the pit of her stomach. "This isn't like what we did when we left the people at the cars," she said. "These men are going to die for sure; we're leaving them in freezing cold water with nowhere to go."

"I know. But there's nothing we can do."

“Do we have to take both the Jet Skis? Maybe we could—”

“No, Tara.”

“They were pleading for their lives, Jamie.”

“I *know*.” Jamie’s chest rose and fell. “But what do you think will happen if we give them back one of the Jet Skis? Do you think all those cries for help are gonna stop them coming after us?”

“Maybe if we took most of their fuel out of the tank.”

“So they can *sit* and freeze to death instead of *swim* and freeze to death?”

Tara fumed. “I’m just trying to get out of this without *murdering* anyone!”

“You weren’t the one with a gun pointed at your head!” Jamie said.

Tara glared at him. “You’ve got a very short memory,” she said, recalling the incident with Mr. Darrow.

Jamie’s anger withered. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Look, I don’t *want* to leave them to die. But from the moment they pointed that gun at me, they showed their true colours. They’ve made it impossible for us to help them, and they’ve only got themselves to blame.”

“So this is self-defence?”

“That’s *exactly* what it is. If I thought there was half a chance those men would leave us alone, I’d give them back their rides and their fuel without a second thought. But I don’t think that, and I don’t think you do, either.”

Tara stood at the stern and gazed along the river. The boat was facing inland. “We have to go past them again, you know.”

“I know. I’m going to tie the other Jet Ski to the boat. You take up the slack on that one. Keep it real close to the boat, so the men won’t get a chance to grab hold on the way past.”

Tara tugged the rope and began winding it around her arm.

“Tara.” Jamie waited until she looked squarely at him. “Whatever happens, we *won’t* be stopping.”



The boat took longer to pick up speed now that two other vehicles were in tow. But water caused little friction, and before Jamie and Tara had gone four hundred metres, they were cruising at a steady thirty knots, the cold wind biting at their faces and irritating their eyes.

Eventually, the men materialised out of the mist ahead, two bobbing heads in the middle of the river. You could almost believe they were a couple of seals, until they raised their arms.

Tara couldn't watch. Crouching on the deck, she put her hands over her ears. This action, coupled with the roar of the boat's engine, couldn't even drown out the gut-wrenching scream of one man's terror. "*Come baaaaaaa ...*" The plea was out of earshot before it could be finished.

Tara looked towards the rear and saw the men swimming for the boat, their arms punching violently at the water. Then the mist swallowed them, and they were gone.

She wondered how long a man could survive in water this cold. Recalling what it felt like when she jumped from the bridge, she thought, *Not long*.



The plan was to row the rest of the way to the coast, then use all of the fuel, including what they would extract from the Jet Skis, to carry them through the open sea. But it proved impossible to retrieve the fuel from the Jet Skis' tanks, because the boat's tank occupied a more elevated position. And rowing quickly became exhausting with the other vehicles in tow. To make the best of the situation, they tied one of the Jet Skis to the bow and towed the boat.

This proved especially useful when the River Bann opened up into the choppy waters of Lough Neagh, the largest freshwater lake in Europe, fifteen kilometres from north to south.

In the middle of the lake, Jamie stopped his Jet Ski and returned to the boat.

Tara stood on the deck and turned around a full three hundred and sixty degrees. She couldn't see any land, although that was partly due to the mist. "It almost feels like we're at sea."

Jamie picked up his schoolbag, put his hand inside, and pulled out an empty plastic bottle. "We need to fill every container we've got with fresh water. Even that old toolbox. I'll see what else is in the cabin."

Tara looked at the map. "We've ages to go yet before we reach the sea."

"Aye, but the Bann stinks. I don't want to get sick."

"Fair enough."

They continued across the lough and found the spot on the northwest corner where it narrowed into Brockish Bay. The bay itself came to a point at the village of Toomebridge, transforming into a thin channel that was the continuation of the River Bann.

The next few hours were uneventful.

When Jamie's Jet Ski used up the last of its fuel, he cast it adrift, then fastened the second Jet Ski to the front of the boat in its place.

Several hours later, when the second Jet Ski coughed its last, Tara felt relieved. She didn't like being alone in the boat while Jamie rode the other vehicle. This day was the strangest and most frightening day of her life, and she couldn't stand solitude with this deadly whiteness surrounding her.

Jamie pulled on the rope, bringing the lifeless Jet Ski towards the boat. He climbed onto the bow and started untying the knot.

"How close are we to the coast?" Tara asked.

"I don't think it's far. Check the map. See if you can work it out."

Tara fished the map out of Jamie's schoolbag. Something else fell out onto the deck, an envelope bearing the logo of

Craigavon Area Hospital and the words *STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL*. The address on the envelope was Jamie's, but the addressee was Mr. Peter H. Metcalfe, presumably Jamie's father.

Was this something about Jamie's cancer? Turning the envelope in her hands, Tara saw that Jamie had not opened it. The postmark was stamped *3 January*—six days ago. She heard Jamie crawling across the roof of the cabin and quickly put the envelope back into the bag, while Jamie jumped down onto the deck.

They consulted the map together, but with no distinctive features on the landscape, it was impossible to work out their location.

"What's the matter?" Jamie asked.

"Nothing."

"You're shaking."

"It's *cold*, you dummy."



They sat facing each other, Tara holding the oars and Jamie steering the rudder. With the Jet Skis gone and the open sea not far ahead, the sensible decision was to conserve fuel by rowing while the water was calm enough to allow it.

As they approached a bend, Jamie said, "I think that's Castlerock on the left. If it is, we're coming up on the coast."

Tara knew they were approaching the sea before he opened his mouth; she could faintly hear the sound of waves crashing and feel the boat bobbing about.

She let go of the oars, stood up, and turned around, looking over the roof of the cabin.

Ahead, the sides of the river curved away and became the coastline. At the mouth of the river, concrete piers extended into the water, housing boats of various sizes, from small yachts to huge fishing trawlers. There was no sign of life; the only movement was the gentle sway of the boats, the only sound

the creaking of wood. Snow, of course, had made its home on the sails and decks.

“That idea you had in the beginning,” Tara said, “about getting fuel from other boats before we started across the sea ...”

Jamie nodded. “It would have been pretty hard to do.”

“We got lucky back there.”

The boat continued to drift past the harbour, pulled by the tide.

Jamie grinned. “Well, that depends on whether you believe in luck.”

Tara shrugged. “I don’t know what I believe.”

“Think about it. Before we left school this morning, I tried to prepare for every problem I thought we’d have. What I never imagined was that a teacher would try to follow us, that people in cars would threaten us, that we’d have to deal with the school minibus, that I wouldn’t be able to start the boat’s engine, that we’d have to fight against two guys with a gun. But somehow we came out on top every time, and now we’re sitting here, ready to head across the sea with more fuel than I could have dreamt of.”

Tara made no reply. Everything Jamie said was true, but there was a lot more he wasn’t saying. *You’ve still got cancer*, she thought, not daring to speak the words. *You’re still going to die, Jamie. So is my dad and my brother, and everyone we know back home. Why am I so special that God would help me and leave everyone else to die?*

The boat lurched, travelling over a larger wave. The harbour began to recede behind them. Although the sea ahead was relatively calm, the great expanse had never seemed more threatening, considering the journey they were about to undertake in such a tiny craft.

Jamie had faith, but Tara was more inclined to believe that a string of good luck couldn’t last; you might roll a few sixes on the dice, but the other numbers would come up sooner or later.

“Do you really think everything we’ve been through is down to chance?” Jamie went on.

Tara opened her mouth to answer, when the boat almost threw her out of her seat, jerking to a halt with a loud clunk.

Jamie and Tara stared at each other in wide-eyed horror. The boat had hit something. They had become careless, drifting out to sea and assuming there would be nothing in their way.

Jamie got up and looked along the starboard side of the boat, while Tara went to the port side.

What she saw filled her with panic.

Glued to the side of the hull was a tall pyramid-like framework of rusted metal, with a bright red ball on top and a circular floating base.

The boat had collided with a buoy.



To the eye, the problem seemed small: nothing but little pieces of snow joining the thin metal rods to the wood of the boat’s hull.

“Can we drive with this thing hanging on, do you think?” Tara asked.

Jamie was seated at the stern, with his head hanging down and his hands pressed to his temples. He looked up with angry, tear-stained eyes. “No. We can’t.”

“We can *try*.”

Jamie stood up, furious. “No! We can’t! That’s a *buoy*, Tara. It’s anchored to the bottom of the sea. What do you think keeps it from floating off to Africa?”

“I’m only trying to help!”

Jamie glared at Tara for several seconds, then his expression softened. He sat down again. “I don’t see how we’re going to get out of this, Tara.”

Tara went into the cabin and looked at the tools scattered on the floor. She picked up a chisel and emerged.

“Be careful,” Jamie said, watching Tara edge her way along the port side of the boat.

The roof of the cabin had hand-holds. She gripped one, crouched, and reached down with her free hand, extending the chisel.

All she got was one poke at the spot where boat and buoy met. No matter how hard Tara pulled, the chisel wouldn't come loose. For a few seconds she had the ability to wiggle it from left to right, and then even that motion stopped. The chisel was fused to the spot, just as if it had been welded.

Tara jumped back onto the deck. “I want to try the engine; see if we can pull free.”

“If you do that,” Jamie said, “you risk putting a hole in the side of the boat. I don't need to tell you what'll happen then.”

“If we don't try, we're dead anyway, right? That's what you said when you wanted me to leave school with you; that's what you've been saying all along.”

Jamie nodded. “All right.”

Tara started the engine.

Jamie leaned over the edge of the boat, watching the hull. “Very, very gently, give it some gas.”

Tara turned the throttle slightly.

The engine thrummed, and the boat started moving forward. Tara felt a brief moment of elation until she realised the boat was merely circling around the buoy.

“A little more,” Jamie called.

Tara pushed the throttle further.

“Whoa! Stop!”

Tara twisted the throttle back to zero.

Jamie turned around and sat down on the deck. “It's no good. The wood's splintering.”

The metal was stronger than the wood, and the snow was stronger than both. The boat would pull itself apart before the snow would let it get away.

“What can we do?” Tara asked. “There has to be something else.”

"There's nothing, Tara. We're all done." Jamie looked at the floor and wept. "Why would you do this? Why would you bring us the whole way here, just to do *this*?"

It took a moment for Tara to realise he was talking to God. She had no idea what to say to him. She wanted to comfort him somehow, but what comfort could a girl give when she didn't really share his faith or understand it? She sat down beside him, put her head on his shoulder, and held his trembling hand.

Something tiny and cold fell from the sky and landed on her cheek.

Jamie felt it, too. He jumped to his feet and looked at the sky.

Dark grey clouds were converging overhead.

"We have to get inside quick," Jamie said.

"Wait." Tara held her hands out, palms up. Another spot landed on her thumb. She rubbed it with her index finger. "It's all right; it's only rain."

"At least *something's* normal," Jamie said.



Heavy rain pounded on the roof of the cabin and ran down the portholes in rivulets, obscuring the world outside. It had been going strong for half an hour without any sign of abating.

Jamie and Tara sat in the corner, huddled together for warmth.

"The rain won't make any difference, will it?" Tara said.

Jamie shook his head. "Liquids don't do anything."

She wanted to keep talking—to do something to fight back the awful feeling of despair—but could think of nothing positive to say. Instead, she climbed onto his lap, leaned forward, and put her lips against his.

He responded, drawing his arms around her and holding her tight, making her feel safe, despite everything. "I'm sorry I shouted at you," he said.

"Shh. Just keep kissing me."

After a few minutes, Jamie pulled away. "I wish I hadn't brought you here," he said. "I wish we'd stayed in school."

Tara shook her head. "No, you were right all along. This was the only thing to do."

Jamie sighed. "With the whole sea in front of me, I had to hit a stupid buoy. We could have been—"

Tara put her mouth over his to shut him up.



At some point in the day, Tara fell asleep. When she awoke, it was dark and the rain had ceased. She was lying on her side, curled in a foetal position. She could feel the heat of Jamie's body against her back and his arm around her waist. Her fingers and toes felt numb.

Tara turned to face Jamie. She couldn't see much more than a dim outline, but she could tell he was wide awake by the way his eyes reflected the moonlight.

"You want to hear something weird?" Jamie said. "I think I've had more happiness today than in the whole of the last six months put together."

"Since you found out about the cancer?"

Jamie nodded. "Today was special."

Tara chuffed. "Jamie, today was the worst day of my life."

Jamie sighed. "It's hard to explain, but today I felt like I was seeing clearly for the first time ever. All I cared about was getting you to safety. I didn't care about myself; it didn't matter about the cancer. When it seemed like we were going to make it, I was just so glad you were going to live."

Tara choked back tears.

"What's the matter?"

"You don't understand, Jamie." She put the ball of her fist against his chest and punched him lightly. "Never mind me. I need *you* to live, and it's killing me that I can't do anything to stop what's happening to you."

"I sometimes think about all the stuff I'll never get to do

because of the cancer, but you know what? It doesn't matter. You could spend your whole life having all kinds of fun, but you'd still die in the end, and none of it would mean a damn thing. But if you cared enough about someone else to do something for them, without thinking about what you could get out of it for yourself, that would mean something. If you made a difference in someone else's life—even a small difference—it would stay, even if you die."

"That's pretty profound," Tara said. "Seriously."

"That's why saving you made everything better—until I couldn't save you."

"Almost everything I've ever done has been for *me*," Tara admitted.

"Same here. Everybody's like that, I think. It's like we all have the ability to live really meaningful lives, but nobody ever chooses it. You know that Bible verse, *It is more blessed to give than to receive*? I never realised how powerful it was until today."

Tara sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "It's a cruel joke, though."

"What is?"

"The fact that you have to be dying of cancer before you can learn this stuff."

Jamie shook his head and looked up at the porthole. "The cancer doesn't matter any more, not now."

Tara sighed. "No, I don't suppose it does."

DAY 4

FRIDAY, 10 JANUARY 2003

A SHAFT OF pale dawn light filtered through the porthole and shone across the cabin.

Tara's stomach growled with hunger. Her throat was dry and her lips chapped. She removed Jamie's arm from around her waist, taking care not to wake him, and opened one of the bottles.

They weren't going to die from dehydration, at least not yet. Of course, there was still starvation, frostbite and pneumonia to consider. One way or another, Jamie and Tara were going to perish in the confines of this boat. Not only would they endure their own suffering, but they would be forced to watch each other going through the same process.

As soon as Tara opened the door, the cold weather slapped her across the face and wormed its way underneath her clothing.

It was another white day, just like the last. Not a soul in sight, nor even a single bird. The mist was gone this morning. She could now see a lighthouse, less than half a kilometre to the west. But it offered no hope. If anyone was manning it, Tara would have seen the beacon last night. Even with the electricity supply cut off, a lighthouse would have its own back-up generator for emergencies. No one was there. And besides, how could Jamie and Tara get to the building? Even if they survived the swim, there were the snow-covered rocks to scale before they could get anywhere near the entrance.

Tara closed the door behind her and walked across the deck. Before she got halfway to the stern, her foot slipped, and she fell backwards, landing painfully on her tailbone. Biting back the urge to yell, she rolled over onto her side and groaned. All things considered, it was better than falling into the water or cracking her head against the side of the boat.

The texture of the boards felt abrasive and ice-cold against her hands. There was a thin coating of ice all over the deck, where the previous day's rain had frozen during the night. A row of icicles hung from the seat in front of her. She broke one off and looked closely at it.

Water and ice and snow were all made of the same stuff, yet somehow the terrorists had managed to isolate one of those forms and turn it into a deadly weapon. They had even managed to prevent water's natural form from being used to combat the snow; no matter how much water you poured over the stuff, the snow wouldn't try to grip it. Like the scientist on TV explained, the snow had been designed to react only to *solids*. And water was, of course, our most abundant *liquid*.

But what about a liquid that *becomes* a solid?

Tara sat bolt upright and glared at the icicle in her fingers. *Water at sub-zero temperatures turns into ice*, she mused.

She gazed at the floor.

The ice particles glittered back at her in the sunlight—*solid* ice particles.

The snow was still clinging to the buoy, although it was now covered in tiny pock marks from the rain. Nothing unexpected in that.

Tara lifted a tool from the floor, took careful aim, and threw it at the big round ball on top of the buoy.

It collided with the snow-capped upper half, bounced off, and went spinning into the sea.

Tara gasped, scarcely able to believe her eyes. The memory of Jamie tossing a heavy ream of paper into the flimsy branches of a tree was still vivid.

Maybe I missed, Tara thought. Maybe I wasn't looking hard enough and I only hit the red bit.

She gripped the handles on top of the cabin and crept along the side of the boat. When she got near the buoy, she reached out with one finger.

"What are you doing!" Jamie had emerged from the cabin and was looking at her with horror.

"It's all right, Jamie." She placed her finger-tip on the snow-coated metal frame.

"Tara, no! You ..." Jamie's mouth hung limp, as he watched Tara draw her finger along the surface of the snow.

It was hard like stone.

She retracted her hand, unharmed.

"Ice!" Tara said.

Jamie stared at her, dumbfounded, while she climbed back onto the deck.

She jumped up and down excitedly in front of Jamie. "There's ice everywhere, on top of the snow! From the rain!"

Jamie's eyes widened, his expression blossoming with hope, as the implications dawned on him.

They gazed across the water at the still, silent landscape, which looked every bit as white and deadly as it had yesterday.

"It can't be that simple," Jamie said.

Tara recalled the experiments in the science lab—how the snow had looked under a microscope, teeming with chaos, and then how it had looked after another slide had been placed on top: smooth and dead. The snow's adhesive quality was something that only activated when it came in contact with solid matter. After it had gripped its prey, it quickly solidified, much like regular glue, having done all the damage it needed to.

The trap had been sprung, the prey had been ensnared, and all the snow had in its grasp—all it ever *would* have in its grasp—was ice.



Jamie switched on the engine.

“What are you doing! You said we’d sink!”

“We will. But we don’t have far to go. I think we can make it.”

“You *think*?”

“We have to get to land, Tara. If we have to swim, we’ll swim, but we don’t have to do it from right here.”

Jamie gunned the engine, and the boat started circling the buoy, gradually picking up speed.

Tara crouched, holding onto the seat for balance.

For a minute, she felt like she was on a merry-go-round. Then she heard several loud cracks on the side of the boat, as the wood of the hull splintered and shattered. The sickening circular course of the boat changed to a wider arc, and the buoy receded from view.

Jamie quickly pointed the boat inland, keeping the throttle at maximum speed.

The boat bounced dangerously across the waves.

Tara felt cold liquid invading her shoes and socks: water was seeping up through the boards in the deck.

The huge masts of the other vessels loomed overhead as Jamie’s little boat neared the harbour. The concrete piers were built two metres above sea-level. It seemed like every spot was taken, but on the end of the nearest jetty, right underneath a life buoy, there was a ladder leading down into the water.

As the water-level came up over Tara’s ankles, Jamie released the throttle, letting the boat drift towards the pier. He approached at a perpendicular angle, letting the side of the boat scrape along the concrete, creating friction and bringing the craft to a halt.

Jamie reached for the ladder ... and hesitated.

It was covered in snow.

Tara felt the water creeping up her legs. It had almost reached her knees now.

There was no point in waiting, even if she was wrong in her deductions. Tara held her breath as Jamie look hold of the first

rung. She didn't let it out for a few seconds, until she saw his hand release the rung and grab another.

Something brushed against Tara's leg, startling her. It was Jamie's schoolbag, which had floated out of the cabin. Remembering the letter, she reached down, plucked it out, and slipped it into her pocket, then took hold of the ladder.

Jamie reached the top and turned around to help her up.



Running her hand over the ground was like touching a pebble-dashed wall. The snow was hard like rock, cold to the touch, and flat except for billions of little pock marks caused by the rain. Walking on it felt no different than walking on Tarmac. And with the threat now over, you could almost believe you were walking on a normal landscape—except when you looked behind and saw no footprints in the snow.

Of course, the snow could fall again, but the clear blue sky indicated otherwise. Snow was a rare occurrence in Ireland; it usually only fell a couple of times a year, and yesterday's snow could easily be the last they would see until next winter. Whether the next snowfall would be safe or deadly, who knew? But either way, the world had been given time to prepare.

Jamie and Tara left the dock and headed inland. The first major road they encountered was the A2 motorway. People trapped in cars stared at the two passers by in disbelief, then tentatively emerged from their vehicles and shouted for joy. Knowledge of what was happening spread out quickly in all directions, like a viral outbreak—one that brought life instead of death. The same discovery would undoubtedly germinate in other parts of the country, as others would make the same deductions as Tara. Soon everyone would know it was safe to go outdoors.

By the time Jamie and Tara had walked three more kilometers, they encountered a group of men digging up a garden with pick-axes. About four metres of earth had already been

uncovered. Jagged sheets of snow, all shapes and sizes, were being loaded into a wheelbarrow and deposited at the side of the house.

For the first time, Tara realised that the snow was going to have a devastating impact on the country's economy. Every sheep and cow was dead, every field of crops ruined. There would be hard times ahead. But with the help of the rest of the world, the people here would survive.

Jamie and Tara walked on, hand in hand, following the signposts that would eventually lead them to Portadown, after a great many kilometres. Their legs cried out for rest every bit as much as their bellies for food.

On the smaller roads, a car would pass them by every now and then—drivers fortunate enough to own a garage, no doubt. The two hitch-hikers stuck their thumbs out each time, but it did little good, even when a driver was kind enough to stop. Before they had gone two kilometres, there was inevitably too much stuck traffic blocking the road.

Jamie found the answer to their predicament while staring into the window of a shop called Wheelies.

Behind the glass was a shiny red Suzuki moped.

"We can't," Tara said. "*Thou shalt not steal*, remember? You should know better."

"Yesterday, I killed some people, and today you're worried about me *stealing*."

"Hey, I was sort of teasing."

"I know."

Tara could tell there was something inside him that was hurting. "Hey," she said, putting her hand on his cheek and turning his face towards her. "Everything you did yesterday, you did to save my life. And I'm never going to forget that."

Jamie's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Tell you what: I'm about ready to collapse. There's no way we'll make it the whole way home on foot, and we've got nothing to eat and nowhere to stay." Tara gestured at the shop window. "Why don't you save my life one last time?"



So much had happened since they left school yesterday that it felt like weeks since Tara had last seen its walls.

Jamie rode the moped through the gates and up the driveway, with Tara seated behind him.

There were eight extra cars in the car park. You could pick out the new arrivals easily because they were the only vehicles not covered in snow: parents' cars, no doubt. And who could tell how many parents had also arrived on foot, desperate to see their loves ones?

Several figures stepped out through the front doors of the school, a mixture of parents in plain clothes, teachers in suits, and pupils in uniform. They gazed across the car park at the approaching vehicle, some raising their hands and waving.

Tara trembled with longing, aware that her father and brother might be in the building, waiting. But another deeper longing caused her to tap Jamie on the top of his crash helmet, indicating that she wanted him to stop the bike immediately. She needed to talk to him before he brought the moped right up to the doors—before each of their families swept them apart.

Jamie and Tara took off their helmets and dismounted.

"I'm glad I was wrong," Jamie said.

"About what?"

"About everyone dying." He laughed. "We never should have left. Everything we've put ourselves through since the moment we left those doors has been completely pointless."

"No, it hasn't."

"What do you mean? We're back where we started, aren't we?"

"Are we?" Tara's eyes began to water. "Because it doesn't feel like we're back where we started at all."

Jamie's face fell. "What's wrong?"

The journey home on the moped had taken three hours. Tara's arms had been wrapped around Jamie's waist, her heart filled with sadness, while the world sped past in a blur of white.

Now she trembled, struggling to find the right words for what she needed to say.

Jamie put his hands gently on her shoulders and spoke softly. "Whatever it is, just tell me."

"Remember you said you felt happier than you'd ever been since you found out about the cancer, because you were helping me?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's different for me. I know what's happening to you, and I know there's nothing I can do to stop it. You did everything in your power to save me, but I'm powerless to save *you*. How can *I* be happy, Jamie? How can I ever be happy again?" She broke down.

Jamie took her hand. "We've still got some time. Isn't that enough?"

We've still got some time. The words were an echo of what Jamie's father had said to his mother, when Jamie had eavesdropped on them.

"No! It's not enough! It's not *fair*!" She grabbed him around the waist.

They held each other until Tara's sobbing subsided.

"Come on," Jamie said. "Our families might be waiting in there."

"Wait." Tara reached into her pocket and brought out the envelope. "You left this on the boat," she said, holding it out to him.

The colour drained from Jamie's face. He stared at it as if watching a scorpion getting ready to strike.

"The postmark's a week old. Why haven't you opened it?"

"Because I didn't want to think about it."

"It could be something important."

Jamie chuffed. "Like the cure for cancer, maybe?"

Tara frowned. "Like *treatment*."

"What good is treatment, when I already know it's terminal?"

"Take it, Jamie."

Jamie lifted his hand without objection, and Tara placed the envelope onto his palm.

“Will you promise me you’ll open it?” she asked.

But he was already sliding his finger under the lip, making a tear across the top of the envelope. He lifted out a single sheet of paper, unfolded it, and read.

Tara saw a bizarre transformation take place on Jamie’s face, as one emotion after another assaulted him. She recognised anxiety, followed by confusion, then shock, then joy, and finally horror. He collapsed to his knees, his body unable to take the pressure. Tears spilled down his cheeks. He tried to say something, but could hardly breathe, let alone speak.

Tara got down on her knees and held him by the shoulders. “Jamie, what is it!”

He stared back at her with desperation in his eyes, as if he were drowning. “He said, ‘This is f-f-far too ...’”

“Jamie, you’re not making any sense.”

“My dad ... I got it all wrong ... He said ‘this,’ and I thought ...”

There was nothing to do but snatch the paper out of Jamie’s hand and read it for herself.

Dear Mr. Metcalfe

*We are pleased to schedule your first session of
radiotherapy treatment for Monday, 5 February
2003, at 10.30 a.m.*

The text went on, but Tara didn’t get that far before she became totally confused, mirroring Jamie’s initial puzzlement. The envelope was addressed to Jamie’s father, Peter Metcalfe. There was no mention of Jamie at all. And radiotherapy was for cancer patients. What could this mean, except that Mr. Metcalfe had cancer, too?

Tara recalled the night in school when Jamie had shared the details of the conversation he had overheard between his mother

and father. She played the words over in her mind, but couldn't be sure she was remembering them accurately. "Tell me what they said, Jamie: your parents, the day you overheard them talking about the cancer. Tell me *exactly* what they said."

Jamie gulped hard and took a deep breath. "Dad said, 'Do you think we should tell him?'"

Tell Jamie what? Bad news, no doubt, but what bad news exactly? The words were indefinite, stating nothing.

"And Mum said, 'No. It's too much for him to bear. Let him be happy while he still can.'"

Tara trembled. More vague words. They appeared to mean *Let him be happy while he's still alive*, but couldn't they also be interpreted as *Let him be happy while he's still got a father?*

"Go on," Tara urged. "I know there's more."

"Dad said, 'I still can't believe it. This is far too young for ...'" Jamie broke down again.

"Skin cancer," Tara finished. "That's what he said, isn't it? Not 'This is far too young for a *boy* to get skin cancer,' just 'This is far too young for skin cancer.'"

Fourteen was too young to die, all right, but what about forty, or forty-five, or whatever number of years Mr. Metcalfe had lived? Was a man ready to accept death when middle-aged, or could he still consider himself *far too young*?

But what about the lump on Jamie's back? A sebaceous cyst, the doctor had called it. Completely harmless, he said.

Mr. and Mrs. Metcalfe hadn't said a single word to indicate that Jamie was the one diagnosed with cancer. Jamie had misinterpreted the whole thing, all because he had a cyst on his back.

Now Tara understood the transformation on Jamie's face, because it was happening to her own.

Jamie would live and his father would die. How does a boy cope with that kind of a revelation? By coming unglued, it seemed. As for Tara, who didn't even know what Mr. Metcalfe looked like, she couldn't share Jamie's pain, nor could she withhold the tidal wave of joy that was flooding her heart.

Tara threw her arms around Jamie and held him close. His anguish flowed from his soul onto her shoulder, while she shed tears of joy onto his.

Because the boy she loved was going to live.

THE END