LARK

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This book has dyslexia-friendly features



To Mairi Kidd, who mothered my boys



Prologue

"I don't bloody like it."

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

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

"But it is bloody cold," Kenny said.

"I know."

"And we're bloody lost."

"I bloody know."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah."

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

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

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

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

"Go on then," I said.

"What?"

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

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

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

"You told them where I hid the turkey."

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

Kenny nodded. He could see the logic in that.

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

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

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

"Not really," I replied.

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

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

"I'm not sure it is, Kenny," I said, spluttering.

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

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

"You, you're a daft sod," I said.

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

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

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

"We better get off this hill, Kenny," I said. "Or we'll catch our bloody deaths."