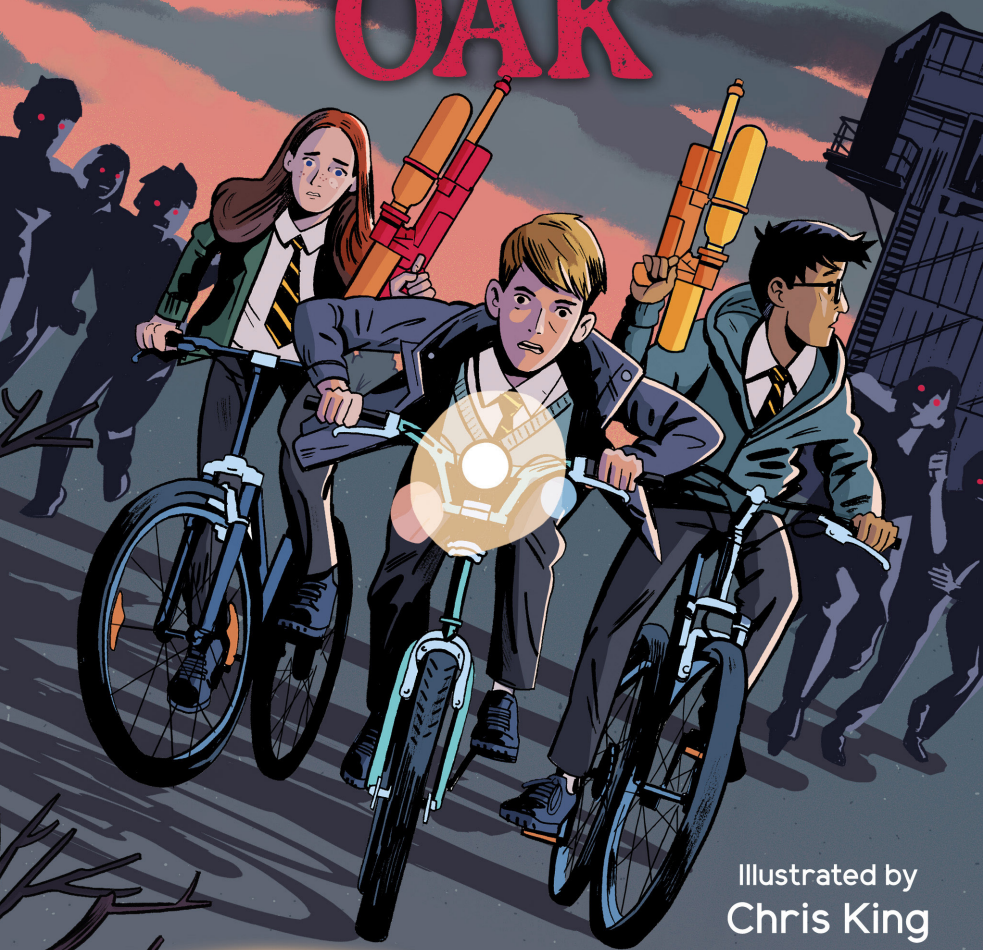


DAN SMITH

THE INVASION OF CROOKED OAK



Illustrated by
Chris King

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CROOKED
OAK

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Awesome reader, this is for you

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CHAPTER 1

Something Strange

Pete Brundle and his best friend Krish were looking at their phones in the dinner hall, ignoring the commotion around them. They weren't supposed to use phones at school, but there was another weird story on their favourite website, The Mystery Shed. The story was about a town in Australia that had been over-run by spiders. There was even a video, so it was too good to miss.

“That’s awesome,” Pete said. “I wish something like that would happen in Crooked Oak. This village is so boring. Nothing ever—”

BAM!

Someone slammed into them, and Krish's new phone went flying. It hit the floor with a *CRACK!* and spun under the nearest table.

Krish dropped down and scooted after it. Pete turned to see their friend Nancy Finney standing behind him. She was the smartest kid in Year Eight. Short and skinny with hair the colour of autumn leaves, Nancy had pale blue eyes and a spattering of freckles on her cheeks.

"What did you do that for?" Pete said, frowning.

"Sorry," Nancy said. "That big idiot pushed me."

"Who are you calling an idiot?" Tyson Bridges said. He was in the year above them and twice as big as everyone else in school.

"I'm calling *you* an idiot," Nancy said, looking up at him. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Tyson balled his meaty hands into fists. “You’re that kid whose mum works at the fracking site, aren’t you?” he said. “On Carpenter’s Field. It’s out of bounds now, and we can’t play there any more. My dad says your mum’s a traitor for working there and that everyone in the village hates her.”

“Leave Nancy alone,” Pete told Tyson, and stood up. “The fracking site has been closed down now, haven’t you heard? And you *do* know her dad’s the Head Teacher?”

“So?” Tyson glared at Pete. “One more reason to hate her.”

“Well ...” Pete tilted his head. “He’s right over there.”

Tyson narrowed his eyes at Mr Finney standing by the dinner-hall entrance. Tyson’s hands relaxed and he leaned close to Nancy as he said, “I’ll be watching you.”

Tyson stalked away, and Nancy went to collect her dinner.

“Thanks for sticking up for me,” she said as she came back to the table and sat down on the opposite bench.

“No problemo,” Pete replied. He brushed a strand of blond hair away from his forehead, then shovelled half a roast potato into his mouth.

Krish was checking his phone, muttering that his mum would kill him if it was broken.

“Do you guys want to hear something really weird?” Nancy said.

“Like what?” Krish asked, and glanced up at her.

Nancy sighed and put her hand to her mouth as if she didn’t want to say it. “It’s my

mum and dad,” she began. “I mean ... there’s something strange about them.”

“Strange?” Krish pushed his glasses up his nose, making his dark brown eyes look enormous. This was his serious mode.

“Yeah, they’ve changed,” Nancy went on. “It’s like they’re not really my parents.”

“In what way?” Krish asked, looking interested.

“Well, you know when someone’s mouth smiles but their eyes don’t? They’re like that. No emotion.” Nancy stared at the lunch congealing on her plate. “This probably sounds stupid, but when I told Mum I got an A in my Maths test yesterday, she hardly said a word. Normally she makes a big fuss.”

“Is that it?” Krish asked. He sounded unimpressed, and Pete knew why. Krish got a B in that test, and he hated being the *second*

smartest kid in their class. His mum and dad expected him to be top in everything, no excuses. Krish said he had a “Tiger Mum, Indian Style”, and he was right – Pete had met her.

“No, that’s not it,” Nancy said. “Mum and Dad have started keeping the curtains closed all the time, even when it’s sunny outside. And they keep going out at strange times during the night.”

“Doesn’t sound *that* weird,” Krish said. “My mum keeps the blinds closed all day. She says it stops the photos on the wall from fading.”

Pete nudged Krish to shut up, then gave Nancy a supportive look. “When did it start?” Pete asked her.

Nancy thought for a moment. “A few days ago, maybe? Not long after the fracking site was shut down.” Her face lit up as if she’d suddenly remembered something. “Yeah,” Nancy added. “Dad took Mum down there to

pick up some files, and they were acting weird when they got back.”

Their Geography teacher had given them a lesson about Hydraulic Fracturing, or “fracking” as everyone was calling it, when the site at Carpenter’s Field had first opened. Mr Craven had explained how the people from the gas company would drill into the ground, pump in water, sand and chemicals, then suck it all back out again. That would release gas to power central heating systems and cookers and other things.

But everyone in the village had been furious about the idea. They’d said fracking could cause small earthquakes. They’d also said that the chemicals used were highly poisonous and could get into the drinking water. It had been all anyone in Crooked Oak had talked about for months. Loads of protests had taken place outside Carpenter’s Field. People with banners, shouting and getting angry.

Pete wasn't listening to Nancy any more. He was thinking about how he and Krish and Nancy used to spend time building camps in the woods around Carpenter's Field – before it'd been fenced off. But now that the fracking site had suddenly been shut down, Pete wondered if they'd get the field back soon. No one really seemed to know what was going on with it.

"I used to love playing in Carpenter's Field," Pete said. "Remember how we used to catch those tiny fish in the beck?"

"Sticklebacks," Nancy said. "I remember. And my mum wasn't doing the drilling – she just worked at the fracking site because she needed a job. She was in the *office*. And anyway—"

"It's all right," Pete said. "We know it's not your fault."

"I wish everyone else did," Nancy said as she pushed a piece of soggy broccoli around her



plate. "People like Tyson Bridges keep saying my mum's a traitor."

"Ignore them," Pete told her.

They sat in silence for a while, picking at their food, until Nancy said, "So what do you think? About my mum and dad?"

Krish shrugged. "Doesn't sound that weird to me."

But Pete wasn't so sure. He'd always liked Mr Finney, but when Pete looked back now and saw the Head Teacher staring right at them, he couldn't help feeling creeped out.

There was a strange, dead look in Mr Finney's eyes.