GLASGOW BOYS

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Content Warning

This novel discusses trauma and abuse. However, it never explicitly realises or relives these moments for the characters. When they are described it is through the characters' own words. Other sensitive topics that are depicted include anxiety attacks and substance abuse on the page, as well as an attempted suicide off-page. These topics are handled carefully and responsibly, however please be aware if these topics are personally challenging.

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For Caitlin

When they turn to each other in the middle of the night, they whisper to keep quiet. They twist on to their sides and face one another at either end of the room, muffling their words into the pillows. They put a hand on the wooden dresser that sits between their beds. The room is small enough that this is the only thing that separates them. It's their way of touching each other without having to touch each other. It's their way of saying *I had a nightmare* and *are you there* and *I am here*. And it's their way.

Chapter One

BANJO

Banjo kicks the wall and spins to fall against it. *Fifteen minutes*. Basically on time. And why send him into the hall? What's the punishment – missing class? Some genius.

He's given detention for after school. Banjo would rather have it on Christmas Day.

After that, he manages to get into a fight. It happens like this: Banjo feels a dampness on his leg and stops walking. He pats the back of his knees and finds them wet.

'Whit,' he states, right in the middle of the corridor. People look. Banjo looks back. Nobody's exactly holding a bottle of water. He turns around. There's a wet trail behind him.

He feels the bottom of his rucksack. It's his bottle.

'Aw, yer *kidden*'!' Banjo rips off his bag and crouches down. Everything's soaked. Jotters, textbooks, PE kit. All of it. Banjo slaps it on to the floor, but the need to punch something burns inside his hands. He takes a breath, gathers it all up, and stands.

'Urgh!' Banjo stomps a foot.

Everyone within a mile radius jumps.

The short story is that his new school is the same as any other small-time school in East Kilbride, way off the coast of Glasgow. Way off the coast of anything. Same grey corridors. Same smell of dried sweat. Same washed-out sense of despair. He gives it a month, maybe two, then he'll be out. Not because he's such the troublemaker, but because Banjo has some wild kind of karma. It's his first day here. He needs some form of a *fucking break*.

He's not got a locker yet, so Banjo goes into the courtyard with his stuff in his arms and thinks about what to do with his dripping bag.

He spots a group of guys milling about. They look about his age. That's not the reason Banjo notices, though.

He notices because one of the guys drops his crisp packet. Just takes it out his pocket and drops it on the ground as if the world is his own individual bin. The guy grins with all his teeth, like he doesn't even care about the dying oceans. The prick is blond, tall, and probably popular in that smug-shitebag sort of way. He's even got a bit of a tan despite Scotland's version of sunshine, whereas Banjo's a pasty, red-topped milk carton.

Unfortunately Banjo walks over. First mistake.

'Hoi.' His voice is curt.

They all turn.

'Ye gonnae pick 'at up?'

The prick blinks. 'Sorry, *what*?'

'Ye no' gonnae pick up yer litter?'

Prick looks to where Banjo points and back up. 'What's it to you?'

Anger rises, clenching his gut in a hot clammy fist. 'Can ye no' pick it up?' Banjo manages. 'Bin's, like, two seconds away.'

Prick grins. 'Seriously, you part of the environmental committee or something? You go about asking people to *pick up litter*?'

The other guys laugh.

Banjo's nails bite into his palms. It dulls the rising hysteria. 'I saw ye drop it,' he grits out, forcing his vowels. 'Can ye no' be a prick and jus' pick it up.'

'Where'd you get that accent? The *bowels* ay' Glesga?' He pitches his voice high and nasal, even though Banjo's is deep. There are shouts of laughter now. Banjo feels his face flood with heat. As if East Kilbride is in any way *posh*. Might not be the city centre, sure, but it's the Central Belt of fucking Scotland.

'Oh aye.' Banjo flashes his teeth in a grin. 'Pure pick'd it oot fae they gutter.'

He can see he's losing Prick just by the way his ear tips forward to catch Banjo's words.

'Bin.' Banjo speaks clear, pointing to the litter.

'Ahh, I get it now,' Prick says, widening his eyes like it's all some big revelation. 'You're working on commission?'

A few of his friends snicker. Irritation prickles across Banjo's skin, sweaty and stifling.

He speaks slow and steady: 'Pick. Up. Your. *Fucken*. Litter.'

'You kiss your mother with that mouth?' Prick raises his eyebrows. 'I'm doing charity here. If I didn't litter, I'd put janitors out a job.'

Something wild explodes across Banjo's body. It's a rupturing of all his organs so strong and sudden it goes black. The world, his vision. All of it. When Banjo returns to himself he's got Prick's face pressed against the pavement, a fist in his hair, knee on his back, screaming: *'Pick it up, ye wee prick!'*

He doesn't feel the hands on him, the people pulling him off; doesn't hear the shouts, the taunts, until a no-nonsense grip on his arm cuts off his blood pressure.

Banjo's wrenched upwards.

'What in God's name do you think you're doing?'

Banjo stares at the face of the headmistress, hair scraped back into an unforgiving bun. Her eyes bulge like a dead fish at the supermarket. That's all Banjo can see when he looks at her. Fish.

'He just went crazy!' Prick scrambles to his feet. There's dirt smeared across his cheek, his hair tufted to one side. 'I didn't do anything!'

Banjo rips the litter off the ground and chucks it at his face. 'If ye fucken tae God *picked it up*!'

He's yanked backwards by the arm so hard he might dislocate an elbow.

'Both of you, my office,' Headmistress says. 'Now.'

She stares at them. Her white face is now red, which somehow makes her pastiness worse, odd splotches appearing here and there.

'I want an explanation, and a reason why I shouldn't suspend you both.'

‘Me!’ Prick glances around like this is the end of a five-part drama.

‘I’m sure there’s no reason why he had you pinned to the ground.’

‘Right, he didn’t have me *pinned*—’

‘Kyle,’ Headmistress interrupts, ‘this isn’t the first time you’ve been here. I told you next time would be your last.’

‘Okay, what the—’ Kyle laughs.

‘He didnae start it,’ Banjo cuts in before Kyle bursts a blood vessel. Because it’s true. Banjo’s no coward.

‘Finally!’ Kyle throws a hand to the sky.

‘Enough.’ She looks at Banjo. ‘Can you tell me what happened?’

‘Wouldnae pick up his litter.’ Banjo lifts a shoulder.

‘Yeah, you’ve saved the planet, well fucking done—’ Kyle claps his hands.

‘Very thin ice!’ Headmistress booms. ‘None of that language or you’re both expelled.’

With that information, they both shut up.

‘Are you telling me you started this over litter?’ Headmistress stares.

Kyle is silent. Banjo nods.

Headmistress sighs. ‘Banjo, I’m aware things might be difficult at home.’

Kyle gives him the side-eye. Banjo’s whole body burns with shame.

‘But that’s no reason to be picking fights. It’s your first day here.’

Banjo's jaw is glued shut.

'Right, please leave my office while I call your parents.'

'Whit?' Banjo sits up fast.

'Go wait in the reception.'

They leave.

'Who they callin'?'

'Fuck off.' Kyle pushes him.

'Aye?' Banjo spins around, rises to his tiptoes right into Kyle's space. 'Wannae try it?'

'I'm not scared of someone who looks like a wee first-year—'

'First-year?' Banjo barks. He's fucking seventeen. He's almost finished school. A new, bitter anger takes shape; Kyle's clearly taking a dig at his height.

'Boys!' Headmistress calls after them.

They both sit outside the office. The walls are a weird scrambled-egg colour, and the harsh flickering of the artificial yellow lights makes it worse. The seats are brittle plastic, fraying apart at the sides and melted in the middle by the heat of everyone's arse cheeks.

Once Banjo's heart slows down, the anger drains like someone's flushed the toilet in his stomach. The bruise blooming on Kyle's cheek doesn't make it any better.

The only thing that makes it worse is Kyle's mum coming in.

'Fed up with this, Kyle,' she hisses, trying to be quiet. Banjo keeps his gaze low as though he's the one being scolded.

'It wasn't me!' Kyle hisses back. Banjo feels like mouldy cheese forgotten in the cupboard.

Kyle stands and they start walking out.

'He might *look* small, but he—'

The door swings shut.

Banjo blows out a breath, falls forward and rests his elbows on his knees. He stares down at his hands. They're throbbing, knuckles red and swollen. The skin isn't broken. Banjo flexes them, and a familiar tight pain rushes up.

He closes his eyes.

Someone stands over him, smelling of antiseptic, a bit sweaty, warm, alive. Ready to patch him back up. Never rough, even when Banjo did this to himself.

Banjo sometimes thinks that's why he does this in the first place.

Paula's not been too impressed with Banjo, obviously. Despite the fact Banjo knows this placement is temporary and he really has fuck all to prove, he still hates the little disappointed, pursed-mouth looks he gets. Truth be told, Paula's been a bit better than most: doesn't bring it up, doesn't want to discuss it, just lets it be. He can still tell she's not overjoyed she's been handed him. He's not even sure how much they get to pick – any child in need goes, it seems.

He waits outside when she texts him: *on way*. He'll miss the detention he got this morning by being sent home now. That probably means something. Fuck if Banjo knows. He scuffs his trainers to try and keep the heat inside. It's just turned September, and the bitter chill stings his nose, the crisp autumn night invading every one of his senses.

He's quiet during the car drive home. Paula too.

Banjo puts his head against the glass and his breath fogs up the window. He wipes it with his sleeve.

'Jus' goin' a run,' he tells Paula when they arrive at her house.

'Back for dinner,' she instructs, as if Banjo even eats with them instead of taking his plate up to their son's old room. The guy's not dead – he's just thirty.

'Yeah,' Banjo says. Then he runs.

Banjo pushes himself further than usual. The air has gone harsh and the wind whips against him. He gets lost and has to circle around before he finds a familiar street.

He misses dinner. It's waiting for him on a plate.

'Put it in the microwave if you need to!' Paula calls from the living room.

'Help yourself to the extra!' her husband, Henry, adds.

'Thanks,' Banjo calls, but avoids the open living room and trudges upstairs. They're so nice it scares him. It makes him soft, want to be soft, but he'll never survive if he is.

He washes his dishes, though. He's not a slob.

His knuckles are still throbbing. At night, Banjo focuses on the pain to try and distract him from the supermassive black hole in his chest, but it doesn't work. The hole sucks him in as it always does.

Thing is, Banjo's been wrung through the care system since he was ten. He used to know how to shove things down and lock them away. But now he carries it everywhere: this rancid regret that bloats inside his gut and swells it raw. He lets the

tears stream backwards into his ears to itch his jaw. He lets all the crying happen inside his mouth and releases it in slow, even breaths, the way he's used to.

Sometimes he thinks he's finally getting over all the mess that happened three years ago, and then it slams into him as if it's been no time at all.