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Opening extract from

Hangman

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1

It was a Saturday morning when Toby first heard the news. He'd just come in from football and was soaking wet, because it had rained all the way home. His mother was on the phone. 'Danny's coming to Lindley,' she mouthed. Then she covered the mouthpiece and said it aloud, thinking he hadn't understood first time, because he hadn't replied. He just carried on taking off his boots. He felt as if she'd just pointed to a fifty kilo weight and said, 'Pick that up, dear.' Suddenly the warm basement kitchen was less welcoming. The pan on the bright red stove hissed.

His mother said, ''Bye' – presumably to Danny's mother – and put down the phone, as Toby put a towel over his head and rubbed his wet hair.

'The pressure at Park House was too much for him,' his mum went on, ladling soup into yellow bowls. 'Poor Danny, he couldn't cope.' Smoke, the cat, rubbed against her trouser legs as she sat down at the pine table.

Park House was a private school where Danny had gone two years ago – when he was nine – to Toby's intense relief. For weeks his parents had agonised about moving him from All Saints Primary where both boys went. They'd involved Toby's mum and dad in their discussions. Then finally, they'd decided on Park House. Toby had laughed when Danny showed him the

prospectus. The teachers looked like something out of the Beano. Danny loved it though, right from the start: the masters in Batman gowns – it was a boys only school – the purple-striped uniform with a daft cap, all the daft rules about stupid things. Danny had loved it all.

'Toby!' called his mum as he headed for the door.

'I'm not hungry! I'm going to get changed!'

Danny coming to Lindley High was bad news. Danny coming to Lindley was dire.

'Hang on! You must be hungry. Take this upstairs if you like.' She put the soup and some bread on a tray, while he waited.

'Elsa said he's starting on Monday, and would you look out for him.'

Worse and worse.

Too soon. Too late. Typically Danny. They were nearly two weeks into the term already. Starting a school mid-term was bad for anyone. For someone like Danny it could be fatal.

'He's going to be in 7Y.'

Toby breathed more freely. He was in 7X. The forms didn't mix that much.

'Elsa said she tried to get him in 7X, but there are over thirty already or something. An imbalance. Anyway, she's asked Nick Tate's mother if Danny can go with him on his first day. Nick's in 7Y and the Tates live in the same road.'

Even better. Nick Tate was one of those well-respected types. He played in all the school teams, was on the school council. Teachers loved him. If Nick took

Danny under his wing he might be okay. If... Not many people took to Danny. That was the trouble.

'Elsa says she hopes you won't mind, about her asking Nick I mean.'

Toby nearly laughed at that. Elsa Lamb was stupid. He was amazed that she was his mum's best friend. They were complete opposites in looks and character. Gilly Peters had dark curly hair and was on the cuddly side; Elsa was pale and spiky and Elsa went *on*.

'She said you're the main reason Danny wants to go to Lindley. You were such a help to him at All Saints. Well, at least you'll see each other in the playground.'

Not if I can help it.

Toby took the tray from her. It was definitely time to go upstairs. Any second now his head would be a red blob as skin and freckles merged with his hair. He could feel himself getting hotter as memories of the playground came flooding back.

Of Danny's ineptness at football, for instance, so no one wanted to play with him.

Of Danny's ineptness at any ball game.

Of Danny playing hopscotch with the girls.

Of Danny in PE asking to be his partner. He never asked anyone else.

Of feeling bad because you refused.

Of feeling bad because you agreed. There was no winning with Danny.

Why? *Why* did he have to come to Lindley?

As Toby climbed the upper staircase he could see his attic

bedroom through the open door; and a dusty box of Lego under his bunk bed. It reminded him that he and Danny had got on well once, when they were little. Their families had been friends so they'd grown up together. They used to dig in the garden side by side, and ride their little bikes, stuff like that – and go swimming. Their families had met at Sunday morning swimming lessons and used to have brunch together afterwards. Danny had been okay at swimming. Their families matched in a way. They both lived in big Victorian houses on the outskirts of Allton – though quite far apart – and they had similar interests. And Danny and Toby both had younger sisters who were friends too. It was only when they started school that Toby noticed that Danny was different. Then it became all too obvious and he wondered why he hadn't noticed before. Danny didn't look like other kids looked, though it was hard to say what the difference was, and he didn't like what other kids liked – pop music for instance. He loved Classic FM. Well, so did Toby sometimes, at home with his family. But he didn't talk about it and Danny did. That was another thing – he didn't know when to keep quiet. When the others talked about pop music, he'd say, 'It's not really to my taste.' He didn't even *talk* like anyone else.

Toby climbed to the top of his bunk-bed, got a book from under his pillow and tried to forget Danny. But memories kept coming back, how once he'd gone on for weeks about Beethoven. He got crazes. Not that he was any good at music. He couldn't even keep time. In class if they were clapping to music, or beating time with

percussion instruments, they'd come to the end. Silence. Then – CRASH! – Danny, after everyone else had finished! That summed it up in a way. Everyone used to laugh, till the teacher stopped them because Danny got so upset. Toby had got upset too – for Danny. *That's* what he didn't want to start again either. He pulled the duvet over his head. He couldn't bear that again.

He wouldn't bear it.

Far below a doorbell rang. Must be Polly back from dancing classes. With Jess, Danny's little sister, probably. Polly and Jess were best friends when they weren't worst enemies. They were both bossy. Jess was a right little Hitler in fact, not a bit like Danny. Danny was stupidly obedient. If you told him to put his head in the fire he'd do it. Toby got out of bed and closed his bedroom door. He needed to be on his own.

'You *what*?'

On the other side of Allton, Nick Tate couldn't believe what his mother was saying. He'd just come in from football too, but was already sitting at the table in clean jeans and sweat shirt. Nick was captain of Lindley's junior team and their best player.

His mother ran her fingers through her hair and sounded exasperated.

'It's just for his first day, Nick. Finish laying the table will you, please.'

'Too right it is! I'll go on my bike.' Nick stomped off to the cutlery drawer and met his father coming from his study.

'What's this?' Alec Tate arranged his long legs round the chrome table legs and put a book by his plate. It was called *The Criminal Gene – Fact or Fiction?*

Beth Tate sighed as she put salad and quiche in front of them both.

'I've agreed to give Danny Lamb a lift to school on Monday. The boy's new. The family live up the road. His mother asked me, and Nick objects.'

'Why, Nick?' His father peered over his half-glasses.

'Because he's a prat.'

'Do you know him?'

'I've seen him. He's got girlie hair and he wears a stupid uniform.'

'Do you know him?'

'No.'

'Well, you're *pre-judging* the situation, aren't you? That's what prejudice is, Nick.'

Alec Tate was a police officer who never let you forget it, but he liked to think he was ultra-reasonable.

'Wait till you've met the boy before you make up your mind about him. Agreed?'

'Agreed.' There was no point in arguing.

'End of subject then. And don't give your mother hassle, right? What's this?' He poked the quiche with his fork.

Beth Tate looked as if she was going to say something, but decided against it and sat down.

His father patted Nick's close-cropped head. 'Would you say my hair was "girlie", Nick?'

Nick laughed. His dad had about three long strands

and a lot of bare skull, which was usually hidden under his inspector's hat.

Later, when his parents were out at an art exhibition, Nick rang his mate, Callum Nolan.

'Problem! My mum's said I'd show this weird kid round school on Monday. Danny Lamb. You don't know him – he went to a different primary – but you may have seen him. He lives in our road, the old part not our modern bit. It's not fair. She never even asked!'

Callum said he'd come round pronto. A few minutes later he was ringing the bell of the Tates' detached modern house, but Nick was already opening the door.

Toby had a shower and tried not to think about Danny. He kept telling himself – *he's not my responsibility. He isn't.* It wasn't as if Danny was thick. Nor was he one of those super-clever kids you heard about. He definitely wasn't a genius, though he was a bit of a swot in some ways. He'd got a bit behind in the Juniors though, mostly because there was a lot of free choice. He was hopeless at choosing; could never make up his mind whether to do his project or read a book or something else. So he'd just stand there dithering, till Toby decided for both of them. He didn't want that again either. He *wasn't* going to do that again.

While looking for something to wear, Toby found a photo of the Lambs and the Peters on holiday in Derbyshire, all with their arms round each other's shoulders. The two families sometimes went on walking holidays together. That one had been good. He and

Danny found some fossils for the museum they'd begun when they were little. When they were digging in the garden Danny used to wash the bits of pot or bone that they found. Then he'd label them and keep them tidy on a shelf in his room. That was another weird thing. He was very tidy and got stressed if things got moved from where he'd put them. Danny loved historical things, probably because his dad was into history. When the families were out walking they'd often end up in a graveyard, with Martin Lamb giving them a lecture on some bod buried there. He knew Latin and could translate the epitaphs on some of the older tombs. Occasionally it was interesting but Toby usually wandered off after a bit with Polly and Jess. But Danny loved listening to his dad. In fact he asked to learn Latin and even bought himself a Latin dictionary, with some money his granny sent him, so he could translate the epitaphs himself. And that was okay, Toby thought – it's a free country – *as long as he kept quiet about it* at school. But Danny didn't, of course. No wonder people thought he was weird.

That last holiday had been particularly good, Toby now realised, because he knew Danny wasn't coming back to All Saints in the September. Knowing that had been a big relief. Not having to defend Danny. Not having to befriend Danny. It would give him a chance to make other friends.

So he'd been pleased when Danny had been happy at Park House. He didn't mind seeing him occasionally, when the families met for Sunday lunch for instance.

But now what?

On Monday morning, when his mum gave him his packed lunch, she said, 'You will look out for Danny, won't you, Toby? You will be friendly?'

She was surprised that Toby hadn't rung Danny.

Toby was surprised that Danny hadn't rung him.

He'd thought it all out – I won't be *not* nice to him. I won't be *un*friendly. But I'm not going to be his best friend. He'd started to make new friends at Lindley, though he hadn't got a best mate yet. He'd had to make new friends, because he'd been put in 7X, when most kids he knew from All Saints had been put in 7Y. It wasn't streaming – or so the school said – but the Y class did seem to have most of the brains. So he'd felt a bit put out then – as if he wasn't bright enough for 7Y. Now, for the first time, he was pleased about it. If Danny was in a different class it shouldn't be too difficult to avoid him.

He saw the Tates' red Volvo go past as he turned into Lindley Road, walking carefully because the chestnut leaves underfoot were slippery, though it had stopped raining. There was a bit of a breeze and the sun was out. He caught a glimpse of Danny on the back seat of the Volvo and hoped Danny hadn't seen him.

2

Danny had seen him. It was the one good thing about the journey. His spirits rose when he recognised Toby among a group of Lindley pupils walking beneath the chestnut trees. All the pupils looked alike in their black blazers and grey trousers or skirts, but Toby's hair – the colour of the conkers on the ground – made him stand out. Nick Tate, in the front of the car by his mother, wasn't being at all friendly. Nor was the other boy, Callum Nolan, who was on the back seat with Danny. Neither of them had said anything, for the whole of the journey, but they were passing messages with their eyes. He could see them because Nick had pulled down the passenger seat mirror. Nick had blue eyes and Callum had grey eyes and their eyebrows went up and down.

Mrs Tate said, 'How are you feeling, Danny?'

And he said, 'A bit nervous.' Then wished he hadn't said it.

Callum sighed ever so loudly and Nick's eyebrows went up.

Mrs Tate didn't seem to notice how unfriendly they were. She said briskly, 'Oh, you'll be okay, won't he, lads? Lindley's a nice school. Friendly. I see a lot of schools and I can tell you, Lindley's one of the best.'

She explained that she was the school welfare officer,

so she knew all the schools in the area. Some of them were quite rough, she said, but Lindley had a good reputation. She looked like an officer with her grey suit and white shirt.

Danny couldn't help feeling nervous. He desperately wanted everything to go well on his first day, but hadn't known what lessons to prepare for. Should he have brought a PE kit? Should he have brought a lab coat like at Park House? Were calculators allowed? He still didn't know why things had gone wrong at Park House. For two years he'd loved it. Then suddenly the work got harder. His homework had taken him hours to do and then he'd got bad marks for it – and for the weekly tests. Then, he'd been asked to leave, just like that, without warning. The head had written to his parents saying he wasn't the 'right material'. He'd seen the letter, but still didn't know what that meant. Not the right material. He fingered the cuff of his blazer.

And Nick, watching Danny, saw him. He was doing what he'd promised his father, watching before he made up his mind. So far nothing had made him change his first opinion. What a prat.

'I'm nervous.' What a prat thing to say! Though he ought to be nervous looking like that. Calf eyes – big, brown and watery. Skin like raw pastry. And most people had a hair-style nowadays. Danny Lamb just had hair. Nick admired his own velvety skull in the mirror – and Callum's. They had identical cuts except for the Nike logo at the back of Callum's. His dad wouldn't

allow that. He glanced again at Danny, leaning forward in his seat clutching his school bag. He obviously had no idea what *laid-back* meant. Hadn't he seen the streets of Lindley before?

He was an anorak. He even wore an anorak over his Lindley uniform. You could just see him collecting train numbers.

Suddenly, a Radio 4 voice said, 'Today's school bully has a four to one chance of being tomorrow's criminal or a captain of industry according to a leading psychologist. It depends...' But the rest was drowned by crackles. Mrs Tate said, 'Blast, that was interesting, I wanted to hear that,' as she fiddled with the controls. 'We have trouble with bullying in some schools.'

Callum mouthed 'Nerd', with a nod in Danny's direction and Nick grinned. Exactly. Nerd. Turd. Wally. Dickhead. All rolled into one. The sooner they dumped him the better. It would not do to be seen walking into the playground with him.

When Danny saw the sign saying LINDLEY ROAD he thought they must be nearly there. The traffic was heavier, with cars bringing pupils to school mostly and Mrs Tate had slowed down. Lindley High was a comprehensive with a good reputation, she said again. It had been the grammar school and people came to it from miles around. They were lucky to live in the leafy suburbs and not on one of the estates round Allton, she went on. Then she drew in suddenly, saying, 'I'd better drop you here, lads, or I'll be late.' They were by a beech

tree in front of the driveway of a big house.

Nick and Callum got out and started walking ahead, but Danny's bag caught on the handbrake. Then the cord of his anorak got caught in the door.

Mrs Tate called out, 'Don't forget to show Danny the ropes, boys!'

Then Danny had to run after them, wishing he didn't need to. But he had to because he wasn't sure where the entrance was. He wished he could see Toby. Once he'd found Toby he wouldn't need these two.

They were walking even faster, now that Mrs Tate had driven off, and he had to stop to let a car into another driveway. It looked like a school entrance. He could see a brick doorway with white pillars on either side but there weren't any pupils going into it. But he couldn't see Nick and Callum now, either. Thinking he'd lost them, Danny kept on walking but Nick was waiting, leaning against a gatepost further up. Hundreds of pupils, some on bikes, were streaming through the gateway towards a more modern part of the school. Danny thought he might just follow them when Nick smiled and said, 'I'll show you the ropes, okay?'

So Danny smiled back and followed him along a gravel path towards a glass door in the side of the building, though no one else was going that way. Everyone else was going in the other direction. But Nick had opened the door and was holding it open, pointing inside. So Danny looked – into the gym – and saw that Nick was pointing to the ropes bunched at the side by the wall bars.

'Ropes,' he said. 'Go hang . . . ?' He smiled again, but before Danny could smile back he sighed loudly and set off across the gym, motioning Danny to follow. So he did – through a door on the other side into a corridor where there was a flight of stone stairs leading to the first floor. And Nick stood there pointing to a rubber plant at the top.

'The form room,' he said. 'It's up there.' His words echoed in the empty building. Danny's heart thumped against his ribcage. He could feel it. Something wasn't right. He shouldn't be here. Where should he be? Why did he think so slowly? He must *decide* what to do. Why had Nick brought him here?

'Room 8. It's at the top of the stairs,' said Nick, tapping his foot against the stone step. The sound rang out and Danny still didn't move.

'The form teacher will be there,' Nick said. He spoke slowly and distinctly as if to someone thick. 'You can ask her about things.' Danny felt his palms go sweaty and stared at the rubber plant. Slow thinking – that was his trouble. That's why he'd been asked to leave Park House. He couldn't think fast enough. The weekly tests against the clock, even more than the mountains of homework, had beaten him.

Tap tap tap went Nick's foot.

Twenty spellings in a minute.

Tap tap tap.

Twenty mental arithmetic.

Tap tap tap.

Twenty French vocab.

He knew the answers, just couldn't think of them fast enough.

Nick started to climb the stairs. 'Come *on*!'

Danny followed. Past the rubber plant – and there was a corridor with lots of doors. Nick opened the first door and held it open, pressing his back against it.

'This is 7Y's room,' he said. 'Miss ----'ll be here soon.'

Danny didn't catch the teacher's name as he stepped inside.

'W-what does one do now?' he managed to say at last.

But Nick had gone, closing the door behind him. Hearing his receding footsteps, Danny hated himself for being so stupid. If only Toby were here.

Should he go and look for him? But he might get lost if he did. How long was it till the bell? It was a quarter to nine by his watch. Going with Nick had been a bad idea. Why hadn't he just followed all the others into the playground? *Why* didn't he think of things at the right time?

He looked round the classroom. What was the teacher's name? It must be here somewhere, but everything was in a muddle. The desks weren't in lines like at Park House. Some of them were pushed together. There were lots of things on the walls – multiplication tables and parts of speech, and the planets of the solar system and more planets hanging from the ceiling. Mars twizzled above the teacher's desk. Eventually he opened the door and found her name on the other side. Of course. Mrs Dempsey, that was it. He'd met her last

week with his mum. She'd seemed nice, like his granny. He looked forward to seeing her.

But when the bell rang the teacher who came into the room wasn't Mrs Dempsey. This one was much younger with blonde hair like Jess's Barbie doll. When she came up the stairs with the rest of the class, she didn't notice him standing by the door. Nobody did. They just passed by him.

'Good morning, 7Y,' she said brightly.

'Good mor-ning, Mrs Pep-per,' they all droned and sat down.

So he was the only one standing up.

He could feel them all staring at him.

She said, 'Sit down, boy!'

But the only spare seat was in the middle of the room, near Nick and Callum.

A girl said, 'He's new, Miss.'

So was the teacher. She said, 'Sorry, yes, I have been told, it's er...' She consulted the register. 'Danny Lamb, isn't it? Well, Danny, I hope you'll be very happy at Lindley. Now there's a spare seat by Nick I think.'

But that chair had gone.

Mrs Pepper said, 'Come *on*. There was a spare chair.'

Someone laughed.

Someone else said, 'Baa Lamb!'

And Mrs Pepper said, 'Come *on*,' again.

Then the girl who'd said 'He's new' found the chair on its side at the back of the room. Carrying it back to her place, she said Danny could sit by her.

When he didn't move she said, 'Come here.' When he

did there were a lot of whistles and laughter.

A boy, with eyebrows that met in the middle, shouted, 'Be gentle with him, Louise!'

Mrs Pepper said, 'That's enough, Kevin. Thank you, Louise.'

Louise was tall with long, fair hair. Even sitting down she looked taller than anyone else in the class. She introduced Danny to a plump, dark girl called Rachel and the other girls in their group, but Danny didn't take in their names straightaway. One of them asked him how he grew his eyelashes so long. She said his eyes were nice. He thought her name was Patsy. Rachel had a brace on her top teeth. That's how he remembered her, and because, when Mrs Pepper gave him a copy of the timetable, she explained it. First lesson was Art, she said, a double lesson in the art room downstairs. They weren't streamed for Art so they all went to the same place. It was very confusing so he just followed her.

Two boys shoved past on the way down, but everyone else was okay. When they arrived in the art room, Mr Turtle, the teacher, was stapling something to a screen, and paused only to tell them to get on with what they'd started last week.

Louise said, 'Don't you think he looks a bit like a turtle? With his little head peeping out of that polo?'

She explained that they were supposed to be doing self-portraits in whatever medium they chose. Some people had brought in photographs to work from, she said, but there were mirrors to use. You could draw or paint, do a collage or work with clay. When he just stood

there – because it was confusing – Rachel got him a mirror and some paper and charcoal and told him to draw himself.

It was really interesting, looking in the mirror. He had got long eyelashes. The boy called Kev pushed his chair once, but when Louise told him to get lost he went away. Quite a few people didn't seem to be doing much work. Kev didn't do any at all; he just went round annoying people. He'd push someone's elbow or kick their chair for no reason at all. Mr Turtle didn't seem to notice. Nick seemed to have disappeared.

In fact Nick was working in the store at the back of the art room. He tried to keep out of other kids' way in Art. It was one of the lessons they tended to mess around in. He didn't like messing around. It wasn't worth the risk. Things could get back to his father very quickly. Besides, he had a good idea and wanted to make it work. He wanted to make a model of himself as an athlete, but it was proving harder than it looked. He was trying to combine two images – a favourite photo of himself getting a medal for swimming, and a Greek statue of a discus thrower. But the brown clay kept falling off the wire frame he'd made.

It didn't help having that nerdish Danny Lamb in the room.

He persevered though and by the time the bell rang it was taking shape. The arms and legs looked muscular and strong. If he put a bit more on the chest he'd have a good likeness in his opinion. Thinking he'd ask Mr

Turtle if he could stay in at break and finish it, he went to find the teacher.

But when he came back there was Callum in the store, head on one side, grinning.

'Who's this then?' he said with his slightly Scottish accent. 'The seven stone weakling or Dopey the dwarf?'

Laughing, he moved round the table to look at Nick's model from another angle.

Then he said, 'Do you know what? Your athletic hero looks a bit like the new prat.'

He didn't say any more. He couldn't have said anything worse. Nick wasn't laughing. His eyes had clouded over. He'd seen it – that was the trouble – there was a resemblance.

Callum said, 'Come on, forget it. Let's go and have a game.'

But Nick picked up a bit of wire and began to stab the weakling's eyes out. Then he hurled the lot in the bin.

3

In the playground Danny looked for Toby and spotted him playing football. He didn't manage to speak to him though. He just couldn't seem to catch his eye. During the lunch hour he looked for him again, but couldn't find him anywhere.

Toby was keeping a low profile, even lower than he'd intended. When Callum came into the playground that morning saying a real nerd had joined the school, Toby guessed who and kept quiet. For about a second he considered being a hero saying, 'Danny's different, that's all, leave him alone.'

Then he'd had a flashback – of Danny in the junior playground pretending to be a butterfly. He'd kept out of Danny's way ever since. It wasn't that he wanted Danny to suffer. He didn't. He kept an eye on him, from a distance in the playground – and Danny looked okay. Some of the girls seemed to like him. He didn't *need* Toby. Talking to the girls at break didn't improve his standing with the boys, of course. There was a bit of name-calling. 'Big girl! Show us your tits!' – things like that but nothing serious. Even Kev Walsh left him alone. Kev, who had a go at most new kids, was more interested in playing football. There was a lot of competition to get in the school teams that term. Toby was trying hard to get in the Year-7 team.

He was behind Danny going home on a couple of occasions. Well, half-way home, because Danny had further to go, and that confirmed what he'd seen at school. Danny was okay. He was always by himself but he didn't look unhappy, just as if he was in a dream. He'd stop sometimes to stroke a cat or dog. Danny liked animals. He'd have loved a dog, but his mum didn't like them. He should have had a dog, an adoring Labrador or a huge St Bernard to look after him, Toby thought.

But Danny *was* unhappy. It wasn't long before Toby learned that. Danny wasn't happy at all. How many times did he hear that from his mum?

'Danny isn't happy, Tobe.'

'Elsa says Danny isn't happy at Lindley.'

'He says he never sees you.'

'I'm in a different class, that's why.'

'I don't like to nag, Tobe, but Elsa thinks if you walked home with him sometimes.'

'I have clubs.' It was true. He did have clubs or practices, three times a week.

'Or talked to him in the playground.'

Things did get worse for Danny in the playground. Toby saw that. But it was bound to. Kev Walsh couldn't hold off for long. The thing to do was stand up to him. Toby had had to do that in the first two weeks. Say, 'F--- off, Kev!' – and give him a shove.

Danny didn't, of course.

If only he'd been good at something that other people cared about. Or if he knew how to act. The football

crowd didn't let him play football naturally. So *why* did he start hanging around on the sidelines, as if he expected to be invited to play? The others started using him. If the ball went out of play, into the spinney or the ditch at the far side of the playground, then Kev or Nick or Callum would send Danny to fetch it. Then they sent him to fetch it when it *didn't* go out of play.

'It's gone into the spinney, Danny. After it, boy!'

And when he came back without it – 'Bad boy, Danny! Fetch bally! Go fetch!'

It got them lots of laughs. Of course, this didn't happen when teachers were looking. Toby *willed* Danny to say, 'No. F--- off!' Or just go away.

It was after school one Thursday, when Toby saw things take a turn for the worse. Danny must have been at Lindley for about two weeks. Toby happened to be going home after chess club which had ended early. He came out of a side entrance into Stockwood Road and there was Kev Walsh, on the opposite side, shouting. It was just beginning to get dark, and he was standing beneath a street lamp whose orange glow made his shaved head look like a Belisha beacon. His hands were cupped over his mouth.

'Dani-elle! Dani-elle!'

You didn't have to be a genius to guess who he was yelling at.

Danny was further up the road on the pavement, his way barred by a couple of other boys. It was hard to see who, because the beeches were casting shadows in the

yellow light. But when a car went by, Toby recognised Callum Nolan and Froggy Lewis. And there was someone else near Kev, half hidden by the lamp post, saying something to him.

Toby felt that he should make his presence known, but he'd stopped walking and it wasn't easy to know when to start.

The person talking to Kev was Nick Tate.

'Dani-elle!' Kev yelled again. '*Danielle, parlee-voo france-say?*'

Danny must have been daft enough to show he was good at French in class.

'Dani-elle, do you smell?'

The others all held their noses and fell about laughing.

It looked as if Nick was making the bullets and Kev was firing them. Toby was surprised.

'Wee wee!' yelled Kev.

Then Nick and Kev started walking towards Danny, who just stood there with his head down. Toby started walking too,

Sticks and stones will break my bones,

But names they cannot hurt me.

That's what he hoped. He kicked the leaves as he went to be more noticeable. Surely they wouldn't do anything, not if they knew someone was watching? Nick Tate wasn't the sort. His father was a policeman who gave talks in school assemblies. Nick was well in with teachers. He talked as posh as they did, posher than some of them.

'Dani-elle, do you smell?' Kev didn't talk posh.

'Yes, you do! You're a poo!' The rest chanted as if they were at a football match.

'Flush him down the TOILET!'

Laughing, they'd surrounded Danny now, but he started to walk forwards. Good old Danny, Toby thought. It made Callum and Froggy Lewis and a third person – a tall, curly-haired dark boy called Big George – start to walk backwards down the street. They were all laughing, well all except Kev who seemed annoyed that he wasn't getting more reaction from Danny, who just kept his head down and put one foot in front of the other – even when Kev pulled the cord out of his anorak and threw a few leaves at him.

They carried on till they turned into Lindley Road and the traffic increased. Then they quietened down a bit, probably because there were more people about. And Toby, still following at a distance, saw Big George and Froggy Lewis cross the road and turn left into Elm Road. Some people called those two Little and Large.

In Beech Road, where Toby lived, Kev dropped Danny's anorak cord in the gutter. Toby picked it up. None of them saw him though.

He felt a bit bad when he turned into number forty-two, because Danny still had a ten-minute walk ahead of him, and so did Nick and Callum. He could see them following him. But his main feeling was relief – for several reasons.

The house was quiet. His mother must have taken Polly somewhere. Yes, there was a note on the table saying so. He stroked Smoke who was asleep on the

Aga, and made himself a drink.

After about ten minutes he rang the Lambs' number. Nobody answered. After another five he rang again. Someone picked up the phone, but put it down again.

Danny was in fact home and did hear it ringing. It was ringing as he came in the door, shaking so much he could hardly get the key in the lock. He didn't answer because he thought it might be one of his persecutors. When it kept ringing and he lifted up the receiver and heard Toby's voice, he put it down again. He went straight upstairs to his bedroom and closed the door. Then he tidied the collections on his shelves. He couldn't trust his voice.

Toby, taunting him.

For that's how it looked to him. He'd glanced back once and there was Toby with the others. Toby, his *first* friend. Toby his *best* friend – with Kev and Callum and Nick and some other boys. All the way home, that's what he'd thought of most. That's what had hurt him most. When the phone rang again he didn't hear it. He was far too busy.

Toby, at the other end of the phone, was worried.

Ten minutes later he rang again and kept ringing till at last Danny's mum answered it. She'd just come in the door, she said, and would hand the phone to Danny. She said he must be upstairs. He'd have answered if he'd been in the kitchen. As she climbed the stairs to Danny's room, Elsa said how glad she was that Danny and Toby

were in touch again. In the background he heard Jess say, 'Tell Danny to feed Bunjy. It's his turn.'

Elsa said she was sure Danny would be okay if he had just one true friend.

When Toby got to speak to Danny he tried to give him some good advice. He said, 'You've got to stand up to them. Tell them to F-off. Say it. Swear. Use the same language they do. Stand up for yourself.'

But Danny didn't say anything. Danny couldn't say anything. He felt as if he didn't know Toby any more.

Afterwards he wondered why he didn't say, 'Why don't you stand up to them with me, instead of joining them? If standing up to them is such a good idea, two of us together would have more chance.'

Instead he let Toby talk. Toby went on for several minutes. Then he said, 'Danny? Danny? Are you there? I've got your anorak cord.'

But the line went dead.

Toby swore as he put down the phone. If Danny didn't want his advice, he'd save his breath. He'd tried to help. He'd done what he could. If Danny didn't want to talk about it, it was his own stupid fault. He'd have to cope with the consequences. He didn't have to come to Lindley. Nobody asked him to.

At supper Elsa Lamb said, 'That was nice of Toby to ring. What did he want?'

Danny didn't answer. He studied his dad's collection of old kitchen implements on the pine wall. It was too upsetting. The two mothers were best friends. What

would they say to each other if they knew he and Toby had broken their friendship? What would their fathers and sisters say? The families were friends still. The Peters were all coming for Sunday lunch soon, so his mum said.

When his mum asked what sort of day he'd had, he did say he'd been teased on the way home. And his dad, who was a gentle person – he and Danny looked a lot alike – said, 'Give as good as you get, son. If they punch you, punch them back.'

But his mum said, 'If you're not a puncher, Danny, don't punch.'

It was confusing. They said different things.

His mum said, 'Should I have a word with your teachers?'

But his dad said that might make things worse. He said he'd been bullied when he was a new boy at school. They'd moved from the north to the south and he'd had the wrong accent, but when he'd thumped the biggest bully it had stopped.

Jess said, 'I'd tell them to flop off and kick them in the goolies.' She would too. She looked all cute and girlie with her bows and bunches but she could be really fierce. Elsa told her to finish her moussaka quickly and go upstairs, but she didn't.

The talk of thumping made Danny feel even more nervous about school the next day. When he went to bed he read till he was nearly asleep, but when he put his book down he started worrying again. After he'd been lying in the dark for a while, Jess came into his room

and asked him to read her a story. Climbing into his bed, she said she couldn't sleep either. She smelt nice – of talcum powder and toothpaste and she had one of their favourite stories, *Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?* It was about Big Bear who was a grown-up and Little Bear who was afraid of the dark – till he cuddled up to Big Bear who showed him the big yellow moon. Jess was a bit afraid of the dark. She switched on his bedside lamp and said, 'Read this to me, Dan, like when I was little.'

Near the end of the book there was a lovely picture of the two bears by the fire.

'What do they mean?' she said, pointing to some tiny words under a statue of a bear throwing a ball. The statue was on Big Bear's mantelpiece – and it was one of the reasons Danny liked the book too.

'URSUS MAJOR,' he said, and told her they meant Big Bear. 'Ursus' was Latin for 'bear' and 'major' was Latin for 'big'. 'And his book's called URSUS. Look,' he said.

She said, 'You *are* clever, Dan, and nice and gentle like Big Bear. I don't know why those boys are horrid to you.'

He said, 'You're horrid to me sometimes.'

She furrowed her brow. 'That's different. I'm your sister.'

He put out the light and she said, 'You're not afraid of the dark are you, Dan?'

He said, 'No.'

'What are you afraid of?'

'People,' he said, because it was true. He didn't understand people.

Light followed dark and dark followed light. But you never knew what people were going to do next. Soon he could hear the soft sound of Jess, sucking her thumb. Then he lay awake, with Jess cuddled up beside him, wishing he didn't have to go to school in the morning.

4

His mum took them both to school in her yellow 2CV, dropping Jess off at All Saints first. On the way Jess said, ' I've been thinking, Dan. You're too nice, like one of those stiff old-fashioned teddy bears. Perhaps you should be fiercer?' When she got out she said, 'Don't forget what I told you about kicking, Dan!'

His mum said, 'Jess!' but she'd already run off to join a crowd of her little friends. Jess had loads of friends even though she was bossy and selfish a lot of the time. When they got to Lindley High, his mother drew up behind the Tates' Volvo, though Danny asked her not to.

Mrs Tate shouted from the Volvo window, 'Any time Danny wants a lift, he's only got to ask!' Then she drove off. Nick had told her that Danny didn't want to come with them on a regular basis.

Danny waited till Nick and Callum were out of sight before he got out of his mum's car. But they were waiting for him round the comer. Nick stepped out from behind one of the huge trees. 'Bonjour, Danielle!'

'F--- off!'

They laughed. 'Who's a naughty girl then? Ooh la! You mustn't swear, Danielle. Nice girls don't swear!'

This went on till they reached the playground where Mr Hall was on duty. Then they became perfect pupils. Mr Hall was one of those teachers no one messed with.