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opening extract from

Kit's Wilderness

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They thought we had disappeared, and they were wrong. They thought we were dead, and they were wrong. We stumbled together out of the ancient darkness into the shining valley. The sun glared down on us. The whole world glistened with ice and snow. We held our arms against the light and stared in wonder at each other. We were scorched and blackened from the flames. There was dried blood on our lips, cuts and bruises on our skin. Our eyes began to burn with joy and we laughed, and touched each other and started to walk down together towards Stoneygate. Down there, our neighbours were digging for us in the snow. Policemen were dragging the river bed for us. The children saw us first and started running. Their voices echoed with astonishment and joy: Here they are! Oh, here they are! *They clustered around us. They watched us as if we were ghosts, or creatures from some weird dream.* Here they are! *they whispered.* Look at them. Look at the state of them!

Yes, here we were, the children who had disappeared, brought back into the world as if by magic: John Askew, the blackened boy with bone necklaces and paintings on him; Allie Keenan, the good-bad ice girl with silver skin and claws; the wild dog Jax; and me, Kit

Watson, with ancient stories in my head and ancient pebbles in my palm.

We kept on walking towards our homes with the children whispering and giggling at our side. We smiled and smiled. Who could have known that we would walk together with such happiness, after all we'd been through? At times it seemed that there would be no end to it, that there would just be darkness, that there would be no light. It started with a game, a game we played in the autumn. I played it first on the day the clocks went back.

One

In Stoneygate there was a wilderness. It was an empty space between the houses and the river, where the ancient pit had been. That's where we played Askew's game, the game called Death. We used to gather at the school's gates after the bell had rung. We stood there whispering and giggling. After five minutes, Bobby Carr told us it was time and he led us through the wilderness to Askew's den, a deep hole dug into the earth with old doors slung across it as an entrance and a roof. The place was hidden from the school and from the houses of Stoneygate by the slope and by the tall grasses growing around it. The wild dog Jax waited for us there. When Jax began to growl, Askew drew one of the doors aside. He looked out at us, checked the faces, called us down.

We stumbled one by one down the crumbling steps. We crouched against the walls. The floor was hard-packed clay. Candles burned in niches in the walls. There was a heap of bones in a corner. Askew told us they were human bones, discovered when he'd dug this place. There was a blackened ditch where a fire burned in winter. The den was lined with

dried mud. Askew had carved pictures of us all, of animals, of the dogs and cats we owned, of the wild dog, Jax, of imagined monsters and demons, of the gates of Heaven and the snapping jaws of Hell. He wrote into the walls the names of all of us who'd died in there. My friend Allie Keenan sat across the den from me. The blankness in her eyes said: You're on your own down here.

Askew wore black jeans, black trainers, a black T-shirt with 'Megadeth' in white across it. He lit a cigarette and passed it round the ring. He passed around a jug of water that he said was special water, collected from a spring that had its source in the blocked-up tunnels of the ancient coal mine far below. He crouched at the centre, sharpening his sheath knife on a stone. His dark hair tumbled across his eyes, his pale face flickered in the candlelight.

'You have come into this ancient place to play the game called Death,' he whispered.

He laid the knife at the centre on a square of glass. He eyed us all. We chewed our lips, held our breath, our hearts thudded. Sometimes a squeak of fear from someone, sometimes a stifled snigger.

'Whose turn is it to die?' he whispered.

He spun the knife.

We chanted: 'Death Death Death Death . . .'

And then the knife stopped, pointing at the player.

The player had to reach out, to take Askew's hand. Askew drew him from the fringes to the centre.

'There will be a death this day,' said Askew.

The player had to kneel before Askew, then to crouch on all fours. He had to breathe deeply and slowly, then quickly and more quickly still. He had to lift his head and stare into Askew's eyes. Askew held the knife before his face.

'Do you abandon life?' said Askew.

'I abandon life.'

'Do you truly wish to die?'

'I truly wish to die.'

Askew held his shoulder. He whispered gently into his ear, then with his thumb and index finger he closed the player's eyes and said, 'This is Death.'

And the player fell to the floor, dead still, while the rest of us gathered in a ring around him.

'Rest in peace,' said Askew.

'Rest in peace,' said all of us.

Then Askew slid the door aside and we climbed out into the light. Askew came out last. He slid the door back into place, leaving the dead one in the dark.

We lay together in the long grass, in the sunlight, by the shining river.

Askew crouched apart from us, smoking a cigarette, hunched over, sunk in his gloom.

We waited for the dead one to come back.

Sometimes the dead came quickly back to us. Sometimes it took an age, and on those days our whispering and sniggering came to an end. We glanced nervously at each other, chewed our nails. As time went on, the more nervous ones lifted their school bags, glanced fearfully at Askew, set off singly or in

pairs towards home. Sometimes we whispered of sliding the door back in order to check on our friend down there, but Askew, without turning to us, would snap,

'No. Death has its own time. Wake him now and all he'll know for ever after is a waking death.'

So we waited, in silence and dread. In the end, everyone came back. We saw at last the white fingers gripping the door from below. The door slid back. The player scrambled out. He blinked in the light, stared at us. He grinned sheepishly, or stared in amazement, as if emerged from an astounding dream.

Askew didn't move.

'Resurrection, eh?' he murmured. He laughed drily to himself.

We gathered around the dead one.

'What was it like?' we whispered. 'What was it like?'

We left Askew hunched there by the river, strolled back together through the wilderness with the dead one in our midst.

Two

I'd only been in Stoneygate a week when Askew found me. I was alone at the edge of the wilderness, standing against the broken fence. I stared out across this new place, the wide space of beaten grass where dozens of children played.

'Kit Watson?'

I turned and found him there. He climbed over and stood beside me. He was broad-faced, broad-shouldered. His hair hung heavy on his brow. A thin moustache was visible on his lip. He held a sketch pad under his arm, had a pencil behind his ear. I'd already seen him in school, lounging bitterly outside a closed classroom door.

'Kit Watson?' he repeated.

I nodded. I caught the scent of dog on him. I shifted away from him. I felt the skin crawling on my neck.

'What is it?' I said. My throat felt dry, my tongue felt too big for my mouth.

He smiled, and pointed to our house, across the potholed lane behind us, behind its own fence and its narrow garden.

'Just moved in, eh?'

'My Dad came from here. And my grandfather.'

I tried to say it proudly, to let him know I had the right to be here in Stoneygate.

'I know that, Kit.' He held out a packet of sweets. 'Go on. Take one.'

I chewed the sweet.

'You're from the old families. That's good, Kit. You're one of us.' He contemplated me. 'Been watching you, Kit, ever since you come.'

He waved his arm, indicating the kids at their games: football, fighting, little kids skipping or playing shops and houses. 'There's something to you,' he said. 'Something different to this rabble.' He stared, like he was waiting for me to reply.

'What d'you mean?'

'What do I mean? That you're like me, Kit.'

I looked at him, the thick body, the darkness in his eyes. '*No*,' I thought. '*No. I'm not like you.*'

He pointed out again. 'What do you see out there?'

'Eh?'

'Eh? Eh? Out there. What d'you see?'

I looked across the wilderness. 'Kids. Grass. River. Same as you see.'

He grinned. 'Aye. That's right. That's all, eh?'

I looked again. 'Yes.'

He laughed and shook his head. He slid a sheet of paper from his sketch pad. 'Made this for you,' he said. 'Go on.'

It was me, a charcoal drawing. Me sitting against the chain

link fence at school, as I had two days ago, staring down into the grass.

'Good, eh?' he said. 'Just like you, eh?'

I nodded.

'Best artist in the school. Not that it counts for nothing in that blasted place.'

I held it towards him. He laughed. 'Go on,' he said. 'It's yours. Take it home and pin it on your wall. An Askew original. Collector's item.'

I rolled it carefully, held it in my fist.

'Not very happy that day, were you?'

I shrugged

'No mates yet, eh?' he said.

I blinked, shrugged again. 'Yeah.'

'Not proper, though, eh? Not yet, eh?' He kept casting his eyes across me, staring at me, assessing me. 'You'll come to see more.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You'll come to see there's more,' he said. 'You'll come to see the others that walk beside us in the world.'

'What others?'

He shook his head. 'Nowt. Don't let it bother you for now. But we'll get closer, Kit. Me and you. We'll get so close it'll be like we're joined in blood.'

I looked away from the darkness in his eyes. I shifted backwards from the scent of him. I wanted him gone, wanted to be left alone again.

He nodded, started to move away. 'There's a bunch of us,'

he said. He looked into the wilderness. 'Him,' he said.

I followed his eyes.

'And her, and him, and him, and her. Others. Good mates. Special. Kids that's different to the rabble.'

I followed with my eyes, saw the children he pointed to, those I would come to know, those who would step down with me into Askew's den. There was Daniel Sharkey, Louise McCall, Wilfie Cook, Dot Gullane. Ordinary children, nothing to mark them out except the fact that they came from the old families of Stoneygate, and that they were the ones to play the game called Death.

He held out the sweets to me again. 'You as well,' he said. 'You most of all. You're like me, Kit. You think you're different, but you'll come to see that me and you is just the same.' He winked, patted my shoulder. 'Askew,' he said. 'John Askew.' He watched me for a while. 'It's like I've been waiting for you,' he said. 'Expecting you.'

Then he grinned, turned, strolled away. Two girls stood up as he approached, walked away from him. The little blond boy I already knew as Bobby Carr ran towards him. The wild dog Jax was running at Bobby's heels.

'Askew!' Bobby yelled. 'John Askew!'

Askew waited till Bobby and Jax were at his side, then they wandered on.

My mother came out from the house to my side. 'Made a friend?' she said.

I shrugged.

'Looks kind of rough,' she said.

'Dunno,' I said. 'John Askew, he's called.'

'Oh,' she said. 'One of that lot . . . But we mustn't be guided only by appearances, or by the family that produced him.'

I showed her the drawing. She whistled.

'Now there's a talent,' she said. 'Must be something to him, eh?'

We looked again. Askew, Bobby and the dog went over the edge towards the river. I watched, saw nothing else. Just the kids, the wilderness, the river. I felt my hands trembling, felt the sweat on my palms. That night I dreamed I followed him through the night across the wilderness. I woke up dreaming that his hands were at my throat.