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1

SHOVE



Hal blamed Luke. Luke blamed Hal.

Afterwards, trying to account for himself in the Year Head's office, Hal couldn't explain how annoyance had exploded into rage, how it had taken him over. How Luke had goaded him to the point of lashing out in fury. Wanting to hit. Wanting to hurt.

Luke didn't know when to stop; that was the trouble. Those things he kept saying about Mum, about Grandad – like a wasp that had got inside Hal's shirt and was stinging him, burning and branding him, while he swatted in vain.

The corridor at lesson change-over time – with the flow of bodies in both directions, people dawdling, people pushing past – was hardly the best place for a fight. But all Hal could see was the smug expression on Luke's face. It filled his mind, maddened him.

It began with a shove, and, through clenched teeth, 'Shut it, will you? Just shut it!' But the push was harder than he intended. Luke, unbalanced by his rucksack, fell heavily against a window-ledge. Righting himself, he directed a

murderous glare at Hal, then shrugged off the rucksack and leapt at him.

'*Fight! Fight! Fight*,' chanted eager voices. And now Hal and Luke faced each other like gladiators in an arena, surrounded by faces keen with excitement or alarm. Luke's expression was a taunt.

Osman tried grabbing Hal's arm. 'Pack it in, you two!'

'Go for it, Marbles!' a voice shouted; another jeered, 'Watch out, he'll go mental.'

Hal didn't look to see who'd called out. He launched himself, whamming his fist into the softness below Luke's ribs. Luke doubled up, but recovered with a head-butt that slammed into Hal's chest, winding him. Then it all got messy – scrabbling and grappling for holds, trying to kick, to wrestle free.

'Boys, boys!' said a female voice.

Dimly Hal registered that another body was intruding, a hand on his shoulder, pulling; a waft of perfume reached his nose. He lurched and toppled; hearing a gasp, he shifted his focus from Luke's next move, and saw a frail figure stagger back to collide hard with the wall, then crumple.

Books, bag and stick were strewn across the carpet. She'd fallen awkwardly, like a dropped puppet. Her skirt had flared out above her knees, revealing legs that looked too thin for the clumpy shoes she wore.

Ms Kenwood. Who had to walk with a stick because of arthritis or something.

It seemed all wrong – wrong and suddenly more serious, an adult disaster forcing its way into a private quarrel. Ms Kenwood seemed too shocked to get up, even to try; only her eyes moved in her pale face.

There was a moment of frozen silence. The other kids had backed away, leaving Hal and Luke exposed. Fights weren't unusual, but knocking over a teacher – a *disabled* teacher – was unheard of. What if she was injured? Something broken? She looked frail enough for an arm or a leg to snap.

'Christ!' Luke muttered. 'You've done it now, Marbles.'

Someone giggled nervously. A corridor-jam was building up in both directions, as people tried to move along, or were drawn by curiosity. Only now did time seem to jolt itself forward again.

An older girl moved to help Ms Kenwood – 'Miss! Are you all right?' – and Osman began to pick up the scattered books and belongings.

'I – I think so.' Ms Kenwood gave a weak smile. 'If you could just – oh—'

Hal couldn't move, couldn't think. He felt big and clumsy, faintly dizzy: mind whirring, eyes not quite seeing. He might have been watching something in a play or on TV, nothing to do with him. How had this happened?

'What's going on here? Let me through.' This voice belonged, unmistakably, to Mrs Stanley, Head of Year Nine. The barricade of watchers parted to let her through, and at once she was in charge. She stared, taking in Ms Kenwood on the floor, now being helped gingerly to her feet by the year-ten girl, then her pale eyes swerved to Hal and to Luke, who reached up a hand to straighten his tie.

'Get along to your lessons, all of you,' Mrs Stanley said. 'No, not you, Hal. Nor you, Luke. To my office.'

Was she telepathic, or what? How did she know Ms Kenwood hadn't been taken ill, or fainted? But she *did* know. She was one of those teachers no one ever thought

of disobeying. At once, the corridor traffic began to move smoothly in both directions, people keeping to the left, as they were supposed to. Mrs Stanley turned to Ms Kenwood, who was standing unsteadily, supported by the girl. Osman had given her back her stick, and now, at Mrs Stanley's instruction, was fetching a chair from the nearest classroom.

'What are you two hanging round for?' Mrs Stanley snapped at Hal and Luke. 'I said go to my office. Wait there till I come.'

Ms Kenwood looked weak and dithery; she stood clutching one elbow. Was her arm broken, elbow dislocated? All because . . . Hal tried to replay the incident in his mind; wished he could go back and wipe the whole thing, start again.

Luke turned to go. Hal dithered, feeling that he ought to speak.

'Uh . . . sorry,' he mumbled.

Ms Kenwood's eyes were big and swimmy. She looked about to speak, but Mrs Stanley got in first. 'I should hope you *are* sorry! At the very least. I'll deal with you in a moment.'

He followed Luke. Neither spoke until they reached reception; then Luke said, in an undertone, 'Look, it was an accident, right? You didn't mean to do it.'

'What do you mean, *I* didn't?' Hal flared. 'What about you?'

'Yeah, right – blame me, why don't you?' Luke flung back. 'You're the one who's losing it—'

His face was doing that mocking thing again, that sneer that acted on Hal like an electric goad. Anger coursed through him all over again. He grabbed the strap of Luke's

rucksack and yanked it hard; letting out a yelp, Luke was flung off-balance. Hal twisted him in a head-lock. In a voice that didn't sound like his own, he snarled into Luke's ear, 'Lay off – got it? Just leave me alone.'

'Loser!' Luke's voice came back, muffled by Hal's arm.

Hal raised his knee, getting a satisfying *ooomp* from Luke. But there was a wheezing gasp as the automatic doors parted, and now here was the suited figure of the Head. The receptionist had scuttled out from behind her glass hatch, and a visitor, a woman with a sharp, peevish face, was staring from a low chair by the noticeboard. Hal had lost all sense of his surroundings, but now they sprang out at him in vivid colour – the art displays, the Head's red tie, the visitor's bright green raincoat.

What was he *doing*?

'Stop that at once!' barked the Head, as if Hal wasn't already as still as a waxwork.

'I saw what happened, Mr Blake.' The receptionist stepped forward, darting nervous looks at each face in turn. 'This boy here just flew at this other one, and started wrestling him.'

Mr Blake frowned. 'Marborough, isn't it? Hal Marborough. And—?'

'Luke Spicer,' Luke supplied.

'I do apologise for this,' Mr Blake said smoothly, turning to the visitor. 'Excuse me just one moment.' Then, to the boys, 'Wait here. And smarten yourselves up, both of you.' He indicated the precise spot where they were to stand.

Hal looked down at the carpet. His brain was throbbing; hot tears would burst out of him if he tried to speak.

You've done it now, Marbles, Luke had said. And probably he had.

2

HALF



As always, Hal went into JJ's to tell Mum he was home. He opened the door to the hot, scented air inside, the busy sound of driers, and Radio 1 cheerful in the background. Mum was there, with a customer, busy with comb and scissors and conversation.

Usually he went straight to Mum, even if she had a client, but this time he stood in the reception area and waited for her to see him. She glanced his way, quickly excused herself and came over. She gave him her usual kiss and arm-rub, and he thought for a moment that she didn't know. But then she said, 'Mrs Stanley phoned.' Just that: no more.

'Uh.' Hal didn't trust himself to speak. Was everyone looking at him? He felt hot and awkward. Too big, too male in this feminine place.

'You go on up. We'll talk about it later. All right?'

Hal nodded, swallowing hard.

'There's carrot cake if you're hungry. See you in a bit.' Mum turned back to her client; Jacky, the salon owner, gave Hal a big grin and a wave.

Mum always wanted to know everything about his day – what lessons he'd had, how he'd done in PE, whether he'd been praised for good work or effort. But *this* day he wanted to forget. There was no way he could keep it from Mum, though: not if Mrs Stanley had been on the phone.

'You know how things stand, Hal,' she'd told him in her office. 'You've been in here often enough. But you just don't seem able to control yourself. I'll have to take it further.'

Outside, he went along the row of shops, through the door between the newsagent's and the fish-and-chip shop, and upstairs to the flat. *Take it further.* What did that mean – chuck him out of school? Mum couldn't know quite how bad it was, not yet, or she wouldn't have been talking about carrot cake. He had the sense of having crossed a line. Mrs Stanley usually finished her telling-off with a joke and a smile: a rather fierce one, but still a smile. There'd been no smile today, no lightening of tone. And he hadn't been allowed back into lessons. He'd spent the whole afternoon in Mrs Stanley's office, working by himself, or at least pretending to work while he fretted about what would happen next.

Course, it wasn't as bad for Luke. Luke was in trouble too, but he hadn't had all those warnings; hadn't been hauled up to the Year Head's office several times before. Besides, Luke could blag his way out of anything.

Hal didn't want to think about Luke. He dumped his rucksack in his room and changed into jeans and hoodie. For once he hung his blazer and trousers in the wardrobe instead of flinging them over the back of a chair; he'd better start getting *some*thing right.

Into his mind flashed the picture of Ms Kenwood sprawled and winded, and the fear in her eyes – fear of what being knocked over might do to her. Mrs Stanley had made sure Hal was well aware of that. It wasn't like someone pushed over in a game, who'd just get straight up and carry on playing. Mrs Stanley had wanted to call an ambulance, to get Ms Kenwood to A & E, but Ms Kenwood insisted that there was no need, nothing broken. Still, her husband had been summoned from work to drive her home and look after her.

Whoever's fault all this was, it definitely wasn't *hers*. With a wincing shrug, Hal tried to blank her out of his thoughts.

He turned on his PlayStation, but couldn't summon any interest; switched on the TV, but found nothing to hold his attention; wandered round the flat, and stopped at his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Still, sometimes, his face surprised him, though he ought to know what it looked like by now. But often he thought he knew only half of it. Half of himself.

There were glimpses of Mum in the face that looked back at him: the slim nose, the well-defined lips. But the rest was different – the dark brown eyes (Mum's were blue), the dark curly hair (Mum's was brown, with copper highlights). And the *skin*. Beautiful skin, Mum said, quite without blemish. Not fair and prone to sunburn, like hers. Not black either, but somewhere in between. Caramel, she said. Or good strong coffee. Or crème brûlée. Or toast done to the perfect degree of brownness. Good enough to eat, she was always telling him.

But half of him was missing. The black half. His father's half.

At school Hal wanted to think of himself as black, but everyone knew he had a white mother. How could he be one of the black boys, when there was no one black in his family? Dual heritage, he was called now. But the dual heritage people in his form included Kazumi who was half-Japanese and Jazza who was half-Indian. Neither was like him, and they both had two parents, so knew what their different halves were. All Hal knew was that his missing half was Afro-Caribbean. He was proud of that, but he wanted more. Wanted something to get hold of and keep.

Who is he? Hal asked his reflection. Who's my Dad? *Where* is he? Does he know about me?

Mum would never tell him, no matter how he pleaded.

'Don't *you* know who he is? Is that it?' he would try.

That always made her hesitate, so that Hal thought she'd have to give in. She didn't want him to think there could be several possible fathers – what would *that* say about her? But if she denied it and said yes, of course she knew, then why wouldn't she tell him?

She did know. Hal knew she did. So why couldn't she just say?

'Why do we live here?' he'd asked her once. 'Is it cos my dad's from here?'

Mum had looked startled, then her face took on the shut, obstinate look he recognised too well. 'No, no, he isn't. Why are *we* here?' For a second she looked unsure. 'Well – it just turned out that way. I got a job and a flat, and it suited us, and we've stayed. I suppose one day we could live somewhere else. Where would *you* like to live?'

She made it sound as if he could choose anywhere he fancied: a New York penthouse, a castle, a ranch.

'By the sea,' he said. 'I'd like to live by the sea. Like you used to.'

Mum gave a small sigh, as if she'd like that too.

Still, at least he knew not to look at every black man he saw around town or at Powerleague or at the leisure centre, wondering if one of them might be his dad. It had been a game he'd always played, sometimes with Luke, until Luke had turned traitor. That one there. No, that one. No, too young, too old. No, he's someone else's dad. Hal didn't want to share his dad with anyone.

Now he went back to his bedroom and reached an arm under his bed, groping through the muddle of discarded games, DVDs and an odd football sock. His fingers met with soft fabric, and underneath it the grating chink of glass.

Carefully he drew out the cloth bag that contained his marbles. This was all he had, the only thing he could take out and look at, actual evidence that his father had ever existed – apart from his own body, his own self, which felt real enough. He took out a marble and held it in his palm, looking into the strange swirl of purple-red, like a slick of wet paint trapped glistening and alive in the glass. Some of the marbles were amber, or deepest blue, or misty-white; some were spangled, shot with gold specks that glinted in the light.

They seemed to hold a promise, a secret. When he was little, he used to put one in his mouth, like a gobstopper, and roll it over and over, tasting its cool curves, its heaviness. Sometimes he'd hold two in his mouth, one each side, so that his cheeks bulged out like a hamster's. Mum used to tell him off for that, in case he swallowed one by mistake, so he only did it when she wasn't looking. The

marbles had started off as hers, but she'd given them to him years ago, and told him in an unguarded moment that they'd been a gift from his father. It had been a sort of joke, she said, because she'd had the nickname Marbles when she was at school, just as Hal did now.

A bag of marbles. It wasn't a substitute for a real live father.

Still, Mum had kept them, and that must prove she didn't *hate* the man who had become his father. And he'd given her a present, even if it was only marbles.

Does he know about me? Does he even know I exist?

Hal didn't play with the marbles any more, didn't put them in his mouth, but he liked to know they were there, proof of something.

Restless now, he put the bag back in its hiding place and roamed from bedroom to lounge to kitchen, opened cupboards and closed them, rang Osman's number on his mobile then cancelled it, poured some juice and forgot to drink it. He still had to go through today's incident with Mum, and she'd want to know every single thing. She was quick to weigh in on his side if she thought something was unfair; but today he'd crossed that line, blundered over it to where even Mum's support might be withdrawn.

Mum looked tired as she let herself in at the front door. She dumped three bags of shopping in the kitchen, kissed Hal again and put on the kettle.

'I need a cup of tea,' was all she said, opening the cupboard for a mug. 'Oh, you didn't start on the cake. Weren't you hungry?'

Hal shook his head. He wanted to get it over with, but first Mum put away every item of shopping and changed out of the black clothes she wore for work – all making for

an agonising build-up. Then, at last, she took her tea into the lounge, and said, as if she'd only just thought of it, 'We need to talk about what happened today, don't we?' Sagging into her favourite chair, she motioned Hal to sit on the sofa.

'Well,' he faltered. 'It was Luke, winding me up like he always does . . .'

At once he heard how pathetic he sounded, like a little kid bleating excuses: *It wasn't my fault, he started it, it's not fair* . . . How useless words were, the only words he could find! They couldn't begin to show Mum how infuriating Luke could be, how he mocked with an upward roll of his eyes, or a whining imitation of something Hal said.

He faltered through his account. Mum listened, nodding, while he gave an edited version of how Luke had wound him up (he couldn't *tell* her, not what Luke had actually said!) and of not even seeing Ms Kenwood till she was mixed up in the fight.

She didn't say anything at all till he'd finished, and even then she left a long, weighty silence. She pressed her lips together hard, as if she might cry if she let her face do what it wanted. Then she said, 'Hal, this is serious. You do know that? It's not just a squabble between you and Luke. That poor teacher knocked over and hurt, when she was only trying to stop you from hurting yourself or anyone else – you can't just shrug it off and say she got in your way!'

Hal looked down at his trainers, scuffing his toes together. Nothing he said could make it unhappen.

'I'm going to get supper now,' Mum said, 'and I want you to sit down and write a letter to Ms Kenwood, apologising. That's the first thing. And you've got to mean it.'

'Couldn't I just—' Hal wasn't very good at writing letters.

'No. Write a proper letter. It's the least you can do. Write a rough version first and then copy it out in your best writing.'

Mum fetched a pad of writing paper and some loose pages torn out of a notebook for the draft. She began to chop onions for Bolognese, while Hal unscrewed his pen top and chewed his bottom lip. Staring at the blank paper, he drew a doodle that started to look like a face.

'Get on with it, Hal,' Mum said, with her back to him, while she tipped the onions into a pan.

Dear Ms Kenwood, Hal wrote. *This is to say I am very sorry for what happened in the corridoor today. I didnt even see you and I didnt mean to knock you over. I know you were only trying to stop me and Luke fighting and you could of got hurt much worse but it wasnt your fault.*

He paused, thinking of brittle bones snapping, of ambulance sirens, and hospital beds. At least it hadn't been *that* bad – but, as both Mum and Mrs Stanley had pointed out, it was only his luck that she hadn't been hurt more seriously, needing hospital. Being knocked over must be awful if you were as frail as she was, with her lurching walk, and her built-up shoe. Hal had thought arthritis was an illness old people got, but Ms Kenwood was younger than Mum. There was something bird-like about her, as if her bones might easily snap. What if something *had* snapped? And it was his fault?

How could he say sorry for that? But what else could he say?

I am really sorry, he wrote again, *and I wish it hadnt of happened*.

Again, he couldn't make the words mean what he wanted. He wished, he really did wish, he'd seen her in time to stop hammering away at Luke. And that wasn't only because he was in trouble now. He liked Ms Kenwood, liked her sudden smiles and the way she made him feel good about himself. She'd done the Black History Month special assembly, and she'd put posters all over her classroom. 'We've been doing a lot about slavery lately,' she'd said, 'but black history isn't *all* about slavery.' She'd told them about Arnaldo Tamayo-Méndez, the first person of African descent to fly into space, and about Andrew Watson, the first black footballer to play for Scotland, more than a hundred years ago. And she'd shown them a website where they could look up ninety-eight more black firsts. She was OK, Ms Kenwood.

But now, when he pictured her face – pale with shock, or pain, or both, as if she couldn't believe this had happened – he could only feel bad, ashamed. And angry at Luke all over again.

Best wishes, Hal Marborough, he finished.

Mum read the letter, corrected the punctuation and spelling and changed *could of* to *could have,* then said he could copy it out neatly.

Was that it, then? His punishment? Had he got off so lightly?

'Now,' said Mum, when he'd written Ms Kenwood's name on the envelope she gave him. 'About tomorrow. You won't be going to school at the usual time.'

He looked at her.

'It's serious, Hal, like I said. We've got a meeting with Mr Blake and Mrs Stanley at ten o'clock. You're not allowed back into lessons till they've decided what to do.'

'What, they're chucking me out?'

'I don't know, Hal. I don't know,' said Mum. She was blinking back tears as she went to the fridge for tomato purée to add to the mince and onions in the pan.

The idea played itself in his head: unreal, almost thrilling. They wouldn't, would they – they couldn't! He wasn't evil, wasn't malicious, wasn't even deliberately disruptive. He just got into situations where the only thing to do was lash out. No matter how many detentions, how many tellings-off, how many warnings, he just couldn't stop himself. His body seemed to act on instinct. Then the rush of satisfaction in his own power – seeing someone sprawling, or doubled up – before his brain kicked in with the knowledge that he wouldn't get away with it, that every incident was making things worse. Luke, or Jason Green, or whoever it was, they always won in the end, by pushing him that bit too far but holding back themselves. He ought to know by now.

'I'll do my best – we both will,' said Mum, stirring the sauce. 'And a lot depends on how you behave at the meeting. Hal, you've got to show you know you were in the wrong. But maybe they've already decided.'

Then what? Hal wanted to ask, but didn't. What if he *was* chucked out, for good? Mum would find him another school, he knew that; he wasn't stupid enough to think he'd be excluded for ever and ever. But if he did start somewhere new, he'd go with a Reputation. With his card marked. The teachers would be watching him, waiting for

him to explode. Waiting for their chance to get rid of him. If he started on that path – or was he already on it? – it'd be hard to step off.

How had he got this far into trouble? He hadn't chosen it – trouble seemed to be following him, like a vicious dog, driving him into corners he couldn't get out of.

It wasn't Mum's way to dwell on bad things. They'd have their conversation, she'd say what she needed to say, but she wouldn't go on and on about it, or freeze him out all evening. While they ate their meal, she told him about the customers she'd had today: one who was going to Australia, and another whose son had just started at a specialist sports college, which Mum thought Hal might consider in a year or two, after year eleven. But this brought them back to the fate hanging over him: maybe leaving school, *this* school anyway, without getting as far as GCSEs.

Usually he joined in with bits and pieces from his day, but now he didn't feel like talking. It was an effort even to eat his dinner – the tangy, tomatoey sauce that usually he liked so much was hard to swallow, and the strands of spaghetti seemed intent on twirling themselves off his fork before he could get them to his mouth. He could easily have given up and gone to bed hungry, the way he felt.

When they'd finished, Mum insisted that he did his homework straight away, so that he'd have his books to show at the meeting with all work up to date.

At bedtime he checked his mobile and found a message from Osman: WOTS GOING ON?

TELL U 2MORO, Hal sent back. He'd be staying at Osman's next week while Mum was away. He tended not

to get into trouble while he was with Osman; Luke was the problem.

Tomorrow, though? This time tomorrow, after Mr Blake and Mrs Stanley had finished with him, everything might be different.