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Cracks

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Chapter 3

wires

'I've found a way for you to pay Ryan back,' says Des.

I look up from my dinner, trying to keep my expression blank but knowing I'm not going to like this.

'Yeah?' I say, through a mouthful of chips.

'It's through my mate Loz,' he says and my heart falls as I picture the skinny, stoner freak with mad eyes Des sometimes works with. He's about a hundred and four, with ginger dreadlocks, and he's always hoiking huge phlegm bogies onto the ground.

'Right,' I say. My misery only adds to Desmondo's glee.

'Well, he's got a bit of work on at the moment renovating a building and you're going to help him. Pay's good – a tenner for evenings, twenty-five quid for weekends.'

'OK, I say suspiciously. 'Where is it?'

Des puts half a sausage in his mouth and chews, grinning

the whole time so I can get the full chewing action. 'Not far. You can see it from here.'

'Aw, come on,' I say, 'I'm not having to work in the brewery with Pig—, Ryan, am I?'

'Nope,' says Des and spears the rest of the sausage, still grinning. 'Try again.'

'It's not school!' I say. 'I'm not working at the bloody school!'

'Not there either,' says Des. 'Try again!' He pauses but can't hold it in any longer. 'I'll tell you then. It's Riley Hall! You should feel right at home among all those losers and toe rags.' Des actually slaps his leg, he's so chuffed. 'Close your mouth, Princess, you'll catch flies,' he says, sitting back in his chair and letting out a massive burp.

I don't feel like the rest of my dinner but I keep going so he can't see how freaked out I am. He couldn't have given me worse news.

I've always had the horrors about Riley Hall. I can't explain why. I've never been there, but I only have to hear the name and I get this choking feeling. I have a recurring dream about it too, where I'm endlessly walking down corridors. All I can hear is a boy screaming in a room I never find.

Weird.

'So,' I say casually, which takes a truly impressive amount of effort. 'When do I start?'

'Tomorrow after school,' says Des. 'Make sure you get back here quickly.'

It gets worse every second. 'But I have art club on Wednesdays!'

Des leans across the table and lowers his voice. 'Not until you've paid for that Xbox you haven't.'

I try and swallow the rest of my dinner but it tastes like sand and polystyrene. Art club is one of the few places I feel like I'm any use. It's nothing to do with the fact that Miss Lovett, who takes it, is blonde and pretty and smells like she's just come out of the kind of frothy bath you see on adverts. And she says things like, 'That really is wonderful, Callum' and 'I think you have a real aptitude for this,' which aren't words I hear anywhere else. I'd promised I'd help her paint some backdrops for a Year Eleven exhibition. Looks like I'm going to let her down.

I want to kick something. But I'm not giving Des the satisfaction.

After dinner, Mum's watching one of her soaps and Des is on the phone in the kitchen. Ryan's probably out torturing baby chicks or something. I'm sat on the sofa opposite mum, staring at a piece of paper with the words *Cal Conway, 9BF* at the top and nothing whatsoever about the stinking Union Jack Flag or whatever the hell it's called. I'm thinking about everything that's been happening and suddenly Mum gets up. She moves to the middle of the room and in a voice that isn't really her own says, 'He can't be waking. It isn't possible. Increase the dosage by another five mils . . .'

'Mum? Mum, what are you doing?'

She turns her head and stares at me, still as a statue.

Des is still on the phone next door.

'Des!' I shout, 'Something's wrong with Mum!' Normally

he'd yell at me for interrupting him. That's how I know, with another fizzing chill, that he can't hear me.

I jump up and stand in front of her, waving my hands about. But there's no reaction even though she's looking right at me. Her eyes are starey, like she's not even human. Then she abruptly flops back into her chair.

'What's the matter with you? Why are you gawping at me like that?' she says irritably.

I drop to my knees and cling onto her awkwardly, because I'm so scared and freaked out by everything. I can feel her body tighten but I hang on and squeeze harder. My head pulses with a sudden headache and I'm dizzy, so dizzy I cling tighter to Mum to stay upright.

'Cal, will you give over, you're hurting me!' She pushes me away and reaches for her fags, her face tight and annoyed. 'I don't know what's wrong with you at the moment, I really don't. Now get on with your homework and let me watch Corrie.'

I don't get any relief from worrying about all this at night-time. Oh no.

I already have a full repertoire of strange dreams. Not just the Riley Hall one. There's another, where I'm in a car, listening to the same nursery rhyme over and over again. Then everything goes scorching hot and I can't breathe. I've had that dream for as long as I can remember. But lately the two dreams are on shuffle.

I try and stay awake, listening to Pigface oinking in his sleep and sounds I don't want to hear from Mum and Des

but eventually my eyes droop and now when I close them I go hurtling down a Technicolor tube like a combination of the biggest rollercoaster and water park slide you can imagine. Except instead of being a laugh, I'm fighting for my life. I see things exploding and body parts lying like joints of meat in a street. Ghostly white faces with no features lean over me,whispering harsh words I can't make out. I wake up coated in slimy sweat and feeling like I've done ten rounds in a boxing ring, my duvet strangling me.

There's a good dream too, though. It only comes now and then. I can see sunlight sprinkling the ground and I'm really high up. There are strong hands holding my legs and a little kid is laughing fit to bust. I think the little kid might be me. A woman with reddish hair is smiling up at me and reaches up to touch my face. I try and remember more because it feels good, like a warm bath, but it always stays just out of sight.

The next day after school I wait for Des's idiot mate to collect me. Telling Miss Lovett I wouldn't be at art club for the rest of term was bad, especially when I had to add the bit about not helping with the exhibition.

'Is there any way I could talk to your parents and we would reach a compromise?' she'd said, a lovely crease between her lovely brown eyes.

'No,' I said. 'I have to pay for something . . . something I broke.' I felt ashamed and suddenly angry, because she was making me feel bad.

'Well, maybe you can carry on with the picture you were

working on at home? It's so unusual, it would be a shame not to finish it.'

The picture she's talking about is of loads of wires. That's it, wires. They're snaking all over a room and a person is imprisoned in them, right at the centre.

Unusual is one word for it.

Anyway, I tried to picture myself at home, taking over the kitchen table with art stuff. Maybe Mum could say, 'Here's a nutritious snack, darling! You must keep up your energy levels for these marvellous artistic endeavours!' And then Des could come in, fart loudly and smack me round the back of the head for behaving like a girl. This made me angry too so I said, 'Nah, don't think so,' and walked out of the room without even saying goodbye or anything. I could feel her looking as I walked down the corridor and her gaze stayed on my back all day like a stain.

So I'm looking out the window, getting ready for Loz's arrival when Ryan comes into the kitchen with a sandwich in his hand. The other one is rummaging about in his trousers. He's home from work early for some reason and he stops dead when he sees me. His eyes narrow and I know he'll die before he forgives me for the other day.

'You know what they do in Riley, don't you?' he says.

'No, Ryan, why don't you tell me,' I say in a bored way.

He comes and stands over me so I feel his warm breath. 'They make weapons out of anything they get their hands on,' he says quietly. 'Bed springs, disposable forks, bits of plastic covering from the table.' His breathing is shallow like he's been running. 'Then they slice each other up with

them. I reckon you'll be painting a wall and thinking your pathetic thoughts and the next thing, someone will come up behind you and open you up until you cry like a stuck pig.'

I swallow and I know he can see the fear in my eyes because his smile widens.

'So you'd better watch your back,' he whispers into my ear. 'And if they don't get you, I will. Only a matter of time.' He grins and moves away.

I hear a sound and look out the window. A battered white van, exhaust spewing a toxic brown cloud, parks in front of the house.

Ryan gives a snort and moves away to switch on the TV, while I pull on my trainers and think about how nice it would be if I were about to have all my teeth pulled out with a pair of broken pliers. Better than what I have to do now, anyway.

Chapter 4

sacrifice

Loz's van smells of feet, fags and dog. The mutt in question, a barrel of pure muscle and teeth, is called Tizer. He's tied up by a bit of string but I can feel his stinking breath on the back of my neck. If I turn he rumbles like a washing machine about to spin.

Loz comes from Glasgow and I understand about a tenth of what he says. He mumbles into his chest and every now and then grins to show the little brown gravestones of his teeth.

He has a conversation into his mobile most of the way. Every now and then I catch something like, 'Wuzznae like that, hen,' or 'You're breakin' ma heart, darlin'!' I tune him out and stare at the sky, which is a weird pink colour. The clouds seem to be moving really fast. Do they usually look that way, like they're brewing something poisonous?

I suddenly can't remember what the sky normally looks like and that only adds to the battery acid feeling churning in my guts. The headache's back too. It comes and goes in a rhythm, squeezing my temples like a giant fist. I close my eyes for a minute and when I open them, the world stays dark for a scary second and then everything looks normal again.

Soon we're approaching a high barbed wire fence with a CCTV camera on massive metal gates.

You'd better watch your back.

Pigface's words come back to me and I unconsciously lean back in my seat, prompting a snarl from Tizer.

Loz roots around in his pocket and comes up with a dog-eared piece of paper. A tall guard glances at it and then we're driving up towards the main building.

If it looks grim from the top of the hill, close up it's downright scary.

Made from grey stone, it has hundreds of slitty windows that look like eyes peering down on you. Something about it feels really familiar but also makes me want to run away. My heart's beating like it's got a microphone strapped to it. I swear I can hear it all around me and I glance to check whether Loz has noticed, but he says nothing. For a minute I feel like I'll stop breathing if I have to go any further, which is so stupid because it's not like I've broken the law and got any reason to worry. It's this feeling I keep getting, that's all. Like if I go in there, I'll never get out again.

I clear my throat loudly and take a big breath. Got to get a grip on myself.

We reach another security entrance, where we have to walk through a metal detector. Another unsmiling guard pats us down all over our bodies, including between our legs, which is a bit embarrassing. He says, 'Right come with me and I'll show you where to go and then I'll explain how to get back round with the van when it's been checked.'

Even Loz looks a bit nervous now and we trot behind the guard like pet dogs. I can hear lots of voices as well as the echoey sound of footsteps. It sounds a bit like school, except with no girl noises at all, and I miss them.

I glance up and see there are four levels of floor with a wide open plan area in the middle. Boys of different ages, mainly late teens, are sitting around at tables, texting or playing cards and they all look at me and Loz as we walk by. One boy smiles nastily at me and then shouts, 'BOO!' at the top of his voice. I flinch and hear the mass hysteria that follows. Luckily we soon leave that area and go through a huge kitchen, filled with adults but also what I reckon is more inmates. It's hot and steamy and smells of old chip fat. Out the back there's another room that reeks of smoke.

The guard goes over to a window and pulls up a metal blind. Light floods in, revealing a room covered in black streaks. Dust is swirling around and there are bits of floating stuff in the air like black confetti that make me cough. I look up. There's some kind of metal air vent with cobwebs hanging from it.

The guard speaks. 'As you probably know, we had a fire in here. Most likely started by one of the lads working in the kitchen.' He pauses. 'We're not exactly short of arsonists

here. So what we want is for it to be given a good clean before you paint it.'

There's a window on one side that looks over a courtyard, which has a basketball net and goal broken on one side with ripped netting. Probably an exercise area. I can see various lads hanging around in clusters. They all wear grey hoodies and one boy is standing in the opposite corner just facing the wall. But unlike the others, he has a huge X marked on his back. I wonder whether he's been picked out for something horrible. It gives me the creeps.

The guard clocks my expression. 'Don't worry,' he says, but not nicely. 'There's no access to this bit of the building from the yard. Water's over there.' He points to a filthy square sink to the left. There are cracks all over it that look like spider webs. 'Mops, buckets and cleaning stuff in the corner. OK?'

'Aye, right enough,' mumbles Loz and the guard nods before going out the way we came. We hear the sound of many locks being turned.

Loz goes and sits down on a chair in the corner and gets out his mobile. He glances up at me. 'Get on wi' it then,' he says and starts furiously texting.

I look at the metal bucket propped up in the corner and, instead of filling it with water, I walk back over to the window that looks over the exercise yard. At first I think the yard is empty but then I realise the boy who was facing the wall is still there. He's turned towards me but the grey hoodie is pulled down low, hiding his face. He's as still as a statue with his arms down and his palms facing out. The

word 'sacrifice' comes into my head for no reason at all. Adrenaline sizzles up my spine because I somehow know he's looking right at me. He's like a a coiled spring and I imagine him suddenly leaping at the window. Then I give myself a little shake and tell myself to stop being such a muppet.

'Ye no started, yet?' Loz's voice makes me jump. Trying to hide my burning face, I hurry over to the sink and start clanking around with the bucket.

The next two hours are completely horrible. Loz keeps disappearing off for a cig or to make a phone call and I'm left to do everything. Where the smoke hasn't reached, the corners are sticky with spilled food or crumby dust piles. I haul out one box and see tiny brown pellets that make my stomach heave. I want to ask Loz if he thinks there might be rats in here but know he'd only tell Des and they'd have a right laugh at my expense. I don't even have any rubber gloves and I decide that I'm not going anywhere near Rat Poo Corner until I've got a full chemical hazard suit on, or at least a pair of Mum's Marigolds.

After a lifetime, the guard comes back and looks around, frowning.

'Well, I hope you're going to work a bit faster than this,' he says and Loz looks genuinely offended even though he hasn't done a single stroke of work.

Soon we're outside in the fresh air, hearing the clunk of locks turning from inside. Loz doesn't say anything and we trudge back to the van.

Tizer is so excited at our return that he fills the car with

toxic gas. Loz ruffles his ears like the dog has just done a trick and starts the engine. We're coming towards the main gates when I see something that makes me twist sharply in my seat.

'Whit's the matter wi'you?' says Loz.

'That boy,' I say, 'can you see him?'

He's standing right up against the inner fence with his hands outstretched, palms up. 'Course I can see him,' says Loz. 'Nasty wee neds, the lot of them'.

I don't answer. The boy had something on his hand . . . some sort of birthmark. I open my own palm and stare down at the identically shaped mark there. I give myself a shake. Stupid. It's just a coincidence. Right?

When I get back, a note on the kitchen table tells me Mum and Des have gone to the pub. Pigface seems to be having one of his mammoth sessions in the bog with his car mags.

I root about in the fridge and then make myself a doorstep sandwich. I eat the sarnie and then stare at my hand for ages. The birthmark is pinky brown and lozenge shaped. Maybe loads of people have ones like this? It's bit weird though . . . Pigface's mobile is on the table and it starts ringing. It doesn't go to voicemail and just rings on and on. Eventually it stops, then starts again. I don't know why I pick it up. I often don't know why I do the stupid things I do.

'Yeah?' I say.

'Who's this?' snaps a girl on the other end.

'Who's this?' I throw right back.

'It's Yasmine. Put Ryan on.'

Yasmine is the new woman in Pigface's life. Suddenly, my horrible new job and the fact that I'm going nuts and no one cares all come whizzing together and I find myself saying, 'Actually, Yasmine, didn't you know? He's gone out with Tanya White this evening.'

'He . . . *what?*'

'Yeah,' I go on, warming to the theme, 'I think he said he was taking her to the pub and then the new *Saw* movie.'

'The little . . .'

There are quite a few very unladylike words then and she hangs up. I stare at the phone. Then the toilet flushes and all the blood from my body seems to be replaced by iced water as I think about what I've done.

I hurry off to my bedroom and push a full chest of drawers up against the door. Mum's right, I'm an idiot and I don't help myself.

I hear sounds outside and can picture what's happening. Pigface sees he's got a missed call and then dials Yasmine's number. I know I've made a terrible, terrible mistake and, sure enough, a few minutes later I hear raised voices and I think about jumping out the window when there's an ear-splitting . . .

Bang Bang Bang!

. . . and Pigface is throwing his full weight against the door. I crawl backwards on to the bed and watch in horror as the doorframe actually starts to split apart. The chest of drawers is shifting sideways and I know that Pigface has gone way beyond the point of caring about the furniture. I

throw open the bedroom window but have only just got my head out when I hear him burst into the room and his arms are round my waist dragging me back to the floor. He flips me over onto my back and squats over me, his eyes wild and a dangly bit of spit hanging off the side of his mouth like a rabid dog.

'Look, Ryan, it was only a joke! I didn't mean to —'

'Think you can make a monkey out of me, do you?' he screams and starts to punch me. The last thing I remember is reaching for the football trophy next to my bed and then there's nothing at all.

Chapter 5

gone

Voices come and go in surging waves and something's tugging at me. Not my body, but inside my head.

I say, 'Not yet, I'm not ready!' for some reason, and my eyes snap open.

It's morning. I'm in bed, fully clothed.

I can hear the radio on in the kitchen. I get up slowly, giving my ribs an experimental pat to see how bad they are. But they feel fine and when I pull up my T-shirt there are no bruises. I go into the kitchen and Mum's in there smoking and drinking a cup of tea. She looks up at me, but doesn't seem especially curious about anything.

'Tea in the pot,' she says, stubbing out her fag and patting the back of her hair.

I lean on the table as my words coming rushing out. 'Ryan beat me up! He could have killed me!'

She frowns, then smiles. 'What are you talking about, Cal?'

For God's sake! She's not going to believe me, is she? Either that, or Des will have persuaded her I was in the wrong. I can see them all sitting around the table discussing it, while I was out cold.

'You've got to believe me, Mum! He's completely out of control! He came into my room and started battering me and —'

Mum gives a funny laugh. 'Who did, Cal?' Like every word I've said was incomprehensible.

'Ryan!' I shout this time, unable to control myself a second longer. 'Bloody Ryan! He attacked me! He's out of control!'

Mum stops smiling. 'Cal, you've obviously had some kind of nightmare . . .' She pauses. 'You're not making any sense. Who's Ryan?'

Someone stops the clock.

I can hear every tiny noise in the house, from the water in the pipes, to the ticking of the clock in the hall.

I can hear Mum breathing and my own blood whooshing round my veins.

Maybe if neither of us speaks again, we can forget how mental this moment is and carry on as normal.

But instead I take a deep breath, swallow, and say, 'OK, not sure what's going on here but you know who Ryan is. He's Des's son, isn't he? You know, Desmondo? Lover boy? Your darling husband?'

Mum turns away and reaches for her handbag, shoving

her ciggies in the top. 'I don't know what's wrong with you this morning,' she says, 'but you'll be late for the programme if you don't hurry up.'

'Late for what programme?'

'Late for *school*, Cal! I said SCHOOL! Remember school? OK, there's my lift. Better get going!'

Chills zigzag up my neck. Mum walks briskly out the door. I run out behind her but she's already in a car that's puttering down the hill.

I'm shaking all over. My brain's hard drive is full. I can't take any more weirdness. I haven't got room. I look around the kitchen. Shock spikes in my belly again because I know something is different but I can't put my finger on it.

And then I realise.

Des's chair isn't here. It's an old battered armchair where he likes to sit in the morning and drink his tea. There are none of his sweatshirt tops lying around either and no copy of yesterday's *Sun* where he normally leaves it next to the kettle.

There's nothing of his in the kitchen whatsoever.

And I'll tell you what else is missing. I can't see any of Pigface's stuff lying around. I scan the room again. The picture on the wall above the telephone – the one of Des and Mum on their wedding day – has gone. Instead, there's a painting of a vase of flowers. It's a different size to the wedding picture and I move it to one side and can see the right-sized mark on the wall, telling me this one has always been in that spot.

I run into Mum's bedroom. It looks normal but when I

throw open the wardrobes, they're empty. Are they all leaving home? Is that it? Weren't they even going to tell me? My eyes sting. Well, stuff the lot of them. I'd rather live here on my own.

But then I hear something. A woman's crying somewhere in the house. There's something else . . . a police car siren outside. And it's getting closer. The sounds stop, abruptly, and all I can hear is my own heartbeat.Where have they gone? I try and picture family friends or someone I can ask. But it's like trying to watch a broken television. Panic's rising inside me and I'm drowning. I try and clutch at any memory. Last year, last week? But I can't remember anything that happened before the last couple of days. Not Christmas or birthdays or anything.

Nothing before I saw that crack in the ceiling of the boys' bogs.

I look down at my hands, needing reassurance that I'm at least real. The strange pin-pricks of light are there again. I shove my hands hard into my pockets, shaking all over.

'Not real, not real, not real,' I whisper. I have to get out of this house right now. School. I'll go to school, just like normal. Schools don't disappear even when you want them to.

I run out of the house and head down the hill.

'It's all right, see?' I murmur to myself. 'I'm fine. Just fine.'

But the cracks aren't done with me yet.