

# 1

Moonlight spilled through the window into pools on the floorboards, casting a cold, pale light over Trevor's tear-streaked face. He sank to his knees and hunched over his rucksack, jamming clothes inside with shaking hands.

He sniffed as he fought to control the pain hammering his chest. The noise of the film still playing in the lounge, with haunting echoes of Ariel singing 'Part of Your World', floated upstairs, a stark contrast with his dad's shouts.

"Stay up there! Out of my sight!"

Fine. You'll be lucky if you ever see me again, *'Dad'*. Trevor wanted to shout the words out but then his dad would win. He sat up, his mind grasping for answers as he switched on his lamp. He couldn't do this. He'd kept out of the way all day, knowing he'd be in trouble after school yesterday. Five minutes ago all he'd done was walk across the hallway with a ham sandwich on a plate. His father, red-faced, grizzly, with his wild dark hair and beard streaming everywhere, was

sprawled in his armchair in the lounge. He was watching *The Little Mermaid* again with a bottle of red wine, his totally freaky Saturday-night habit, and for once, the door was open. He saw Trevor and exploded. Wrong place, wrong time.

Dad kicking off wasn't weird, but tonight was like someone had plugged him in and amplified him. Trevor was used to dodging the sting of words, but this time Dad had gone too far. Trevor ducked when the apple core flew across the room, and lost his balance. When his head met the corner of the sideboard his so-called *dad* hadn't even noticed. The bump under his hair throbbed with a heartbeat all its own.

Trevor scanned his possessions strewn across the floor. All he had to show for thirteen years. Bert, his tired old cloth badger, frayed and patched. The book on birds of prey, her gift to him. Inside the book, the photograph of her, his only one. The most treasured thing in the world. He'd found it behind his chest of drawers; it must have fallen and been missed in the big clear-out.

His hand shook again as he picked it up. She was perfect, her hair shining like an angel's, framing her smiling face. She had one arm around him, and in the other she cradled her cat, the mackerel tabby who rarely left her side. Trevor and the cat both stared up at her with adoring eyes. Trevor turned the picture over. Even her writing on the back was precious, beautiful. 'My Trevor, Mrs Bingo & Me – Part of my world!' He was twelve when it was taken, and they looked so alike; matching noses, blue eyes and blond hair. Then she was gone. Just like that. It came out of nowhere... and changed everything.

Trevor frowned. The TV noise had stopped, replaced by staccato sounds of Dad stomping and slamming doors. He'd be thumping upstairs next to slide into one of his snore-infested sleeps. Saturday nights were always worst. Trevor slipped the photograph between the pages of his bird book and added all his treasures except Bert to the rucksack. He pushed it under his bed, and the rough jute snagged on splinters as it scraped over the floor. He leapt under the covers fully clothed, clutching Bert, and pulled the ancient blanket around his neck as the stairs creaked. Home was crap, school was crap, life was crap. And no way was he going to get hurt like that again. That was it. He'd wait till the snores started. Then he'd go, just disappear. He'd find a way to get by.

Footsteps stopped just outside his door.

"Be ready. Eight o'clock. I'll take you, then you'll be out of my way. But if you pull that stuff at school again it's the only time you'll go. Trust me."

After a pause the voice slurred again, muffled through the wooden door. "I need your help too, boy. Just say something. Anything. Thank you would be a start."

Trevor bit his lip as his father walked away. Seriously? Helping, speaking... saying thank you? He'd got to be joking. Since that rubbish day in Goyt Valley, when his father properly lost it for the first time, Trevor had decided to stop talking... to anyone. Except Mrs Bingo-Wings. He looked at her, curled up and purring on the shabby wicker chair by the window. His memories were stacked full of the three of them together. In the kitchen, Mrs B winding herself round Mum's

legs, tail curling and uncurling, always purring. Finding the closest places to sleep, always on Mum's lap whenever she sat still. Mum spoke to Mrs B all the time, like she was a person, so since Mum had gone he did the same. Mrs B was his shadow now, his symbol of happy days.

"Oi, Mrs B," Trevor whispered, sitting up on his elbows. "Shall I run away tonight? Or hold off, and go to the bird of prey centre tomorrow?"

Mrs B's purrs paused and her ears twitched as she stretched, all four legs rigid.

"I didn't think he was going to take me," said Trevor. "Honestly... I was excited about going. I thought I'd blown it. School must have said it's still OK.

He studied the slender cut curling across his palm like a crisp new moon. At least he knew now that metal could be sharp if the chair had a nail in it and you gripped it hard before you threw it.

"Maybe they went on at him again, after the meeting. Mr Mac's not scared of him..."

Mrs B drew one mackerel-striped leg up and started her ritual of cleaning; slow deliberate licks punctuated by snuffly old-cat grunts. Her eyes flicked to Trevor, then back to her paws.

Trevor let the blanket go loose and watched Mrs B's silver ears switch left to right. His first volunteer day... it could be amazing. To see those birds, maybe even meet the legendary Adam Shotlander in person. He sighed. No matter how he felt, it was reason enough to stick around.

"I should stay, Mrs B, right?" he said. "Tomorrow could be

one good day. I could go to the centre, then run away after."

Mrs B paused and held Trevor's gaze for a moment, her tongue stuck out of her mouth in a familiar frozen pose. She looked so gormless, it was hard not to smile.

"Even if it's a letdown, I wouldn't be home all day. So... I'd only have to put up with him for a few more hours tomorrow night, and then I could—"

A door slammed suddenly, so hard it made the window shudder. Mrs B leapt up in the kind of startled shock only a cat can manage. Trevor jumped with her. If only his father would just go to sleep. Calm after the storm would be helpful, seeing as things were never calm before one in this house. Some days it felt like a charge was building, a steady rise of pressure and static before a lightning strike. The bump on Trevor's head pulsed again, and sudden white-hot anger flared. If his father wanted him to talk then he damn well would... in his way. He flung back the blanket, reached over to his bedside table and flicked on the lamp. Mrs B padded across the wooden floor and jumped on the bed. She pressed her head against his other hand, purring and insistent.

"Not now, Mrs B."

Trevor grabbed his notepad, and a red felt tip from the pot on his table.

"I'll give him something to think about tomorrow night. When I'm gone and he's all alone."

Mr Sykes,

Well, I can't call you Dad, can I? You aren't one. You'll be happy I've gone. In case it needs saying, don't bother looking for me. I won't be back.

You're the loser, not me, shouting and being a pig. Why should I talk? You're the reason I stopped. Ever since Mum went you never helped me. Why do you hate me? Everything's your fault.

A scratching noise made him stop and look up. Mrs B stopped purring. It was coming from the window, but when he looked over there was nothing there. A mouse? No, outside, maybe. Mrs B's jade eyes were fixed on Trevor, and she gave a single plaintive 'meow'.

Trevor gnawed the end of his felt tip, waves of fury still building. He should say it. Why not?

Anyway, I hate you. Why are you so horrible? Why couldn't you just be my dad, like you used to be. It's not my fault she went. You don't love me. If Mum was here she'd

He couldn't do it. The wave broke, tears welled and spilled, fat drops mingling grief and anger, splashing off the notepad, bouncing off Mrs B's coarse white whiskers as she stood up and pushed her head against his neck. He brushed the tears away with a swipe of his hand. If only. If Mum was still here, Dad would be happy, and everything would be OK. Why had life worked out like this?

Teardrops smudged his writing, blending words and letters to blood as they trickled down the page. It was easier to keep it all in, screw the hurt into a ball, shove it deep inside and carry on saying nothing to anyone, ever. Trevor ripped out the

page and crumpled it tight in his fist, gripping the little ball until his palm hurt. He leaned out of bed, arched underneath and fumbled for the strap of his rucksack, hauling it over the floor. He rammed the paper ball deep inside and, with a vicious shove, sent it all back into the shadows.



It was the darkest part of the night, just before dawn. Mrs B had long left the room to curl up downstairs by the remnants of the fire. Trevor slept fitfully, roused from his sleep by random night sounds. Scratching sounded outside his window again, and he turned, murmuring, half-opening his eyes before drifting back into unsettled dreams.

The little owl on the windowsill ruffled his silver-grey feathers and turned, snapping crossly.

"Watch what you're doing!"

"Sorry," muttered the tawny owl, looking down. "I bodge the landings sometimes. It happens when you're a bigger bird."

"Stop showing off," retorted the little owl, and it turned back to watch Trevor. "It's getting really bright now, his glow, isn't it? I saw him from over the street. The room's full of light. Someone needs to tell Garnell."

"Give him a chance. Plenty of time for that." The tawny owl bobbed his head as he looked through the window. "But you're right, it's unmistakable. Any doubt I had is gone. Do you think the boy knows himself yet?"

"If he doesn't, he will soon," said the little owl. "Any day now." He turned his head to look at his companion. "And when he does, his whole life is going to change."