

# THIRTEEN

by Tom Hoyle

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Summary: Targeted by a dangerous cult, thirteen-year-old Adam must save himself—and the rest of London—before the New Year begins.

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# prologue

In 1982 a sixteen-year-old boy from London was taken into care after attacking his parents. The boy's bedroom was filled with books, films and essays about the devil. One scribbled page had the title *The Great Book: A Prophecy*.

The boy's name was Michael Brown.

In 1996 he changed it to Coron.

By 1999 others were being drawn to Coron's message. At first, a handful of adults. Then more. Soon after, children began disappearing from the streets of London; many became members of the cult known as The People.

By 2013 Coron's Great Book ran to 1,138 pages. The following lines were underlined thirteen times: "By the time he is fourteen, the boy has become a man. . . . Thirteen is the last year of childhood. . . . The boy must be killed before he is a man."



# part one



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1999

A man clasped the sharp end of a sword, raising it above his head. The blade cut into his hands, sending a web of blood down his arms and across his T-shirt. Drops fell onto the cold tarmac of the hospital car park.

In the distance a group of kids could be heard singing rowdily. It was the last five minutes of the millennium: 11:55 p.m. on Friday, December 31, 1999.

The man edged the sword higher, upright, far above his head. He muttered what sounded like an incantation, then strode toward the bright lights of the entrance.

Inside the hospital, four floors up, a young mother was giving birth. A nurse and a doctor stared at the tiny head that was emerging. “Well done. Keep pushing. That’s it. Push hard.”

The mother gave a growl-like scream through her teeth. “How much longer?” she moaned.

“Nearly there. One more push.”

Shoulders appeared. Then a tiny chest.

Fireworks crackled outside, and waves of cheering echoed through the windows. Singing could be heard from somewhere within the hospital: “Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind. . . .” Then, “Happy New Year!” The deep chimes of Big Ben drifted in from a television nearby.

Finally, and quickly, the rest of the baby boy slid out.

The nurse lifted Baby Adam onto his mother so that she could hold her damp, bawling son. His fingers curled around hers as he calmed, listening to her heartbeat.

“Well done, Kylie. You have a gorgeous, healthy boy,” the nurse said.

The nurse looked down at her watch. She wrote some details, then added another line: “Born exactly at midnight at the start of the new millennium.” The doctor gave a cheerful farewell and quickly left the room, pleased to be able to join the celebrations outside on the ward.

The newborn nestled into his mother’s chest, and she held him close. Kylie was very young, still only sixteen, and not entirely sure of the identity of the boy’s father. She smiled, happy for the first time in weeks, and tickled the baby’s cheek with her knuckle. The birth had been easier than expected, and on exactly the due date, just.

There was another burst of noise from outside: giggling nurses flirting with a couple of grinning doctors. Fireworks continued across the city, just as they did up and down the country. Closer, Kylie heard another noise, faintly rising up through the lift shaft outside her room.

Four flights below, in the entrance hall of the hospital, a man was striking wildly at the button for the lift with the hilt of a sword.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

*Crack.* Some plastic shot across the tiled floor. Two nurses were calling desperately for security—one on the phone to the police, the other pleading, “Help! Someone help!” over the loud-speaker. But the usual security guards were not there; they had gone to watch the millennium celebrations on the television in the storeroom.

“Stay away from me!” the man shouted, holding the sword in his left hand.

The lift arrived—an elderly man in a wheelchair ready to



emerge. The sword was pointed erratically at him as the doors opened, and then at the terrified porter accompanying him.

But the man with the sword wasn't interested in them, so as they edged warily and desperately out of the lift, he pushed his way in and saw what he was looking for: Level Four, Maternity. He pressed the button, leaving a red smear on the panel, and the doors closed.

In the entrance hall the nurses and the porter watched numbly as the lift ascended, the numbers lighting up in turn: one...two...three...then, at four, it stopped.

*Maternity.*

In the lift the man transferred the sword to his right hand.

Thomas, the porter on the maternity ward, stood next to his empty trolley, waiting for the lift and quietly humming to himself.

Inside the lift the man prepared murder. *Kill them all*, he thought. *Like Herod. Sacrifice them all.*

The lift doors parted.

Thomas's punch arrived as soon as the doors were fully open. He saw an intruder with a sword, and that was enough. His fist hit a combination of jaw, teeth and lip.

But it made little difference. Although the man fell back against the rear wall of the lift, the sword didn't leave his hand; he lunged at Thomas, slicing a gash in the flesh at the top of his left arm.

The lift doors closed, trapping Thomas inside with the intruder.

As Thomas put his right hand to the wound, he was head-butted. Blood seeped through his fingers and dripped down his face. He fell back against the lift buttons and slid to the floor.

The doors opened again.

The man with the sword stepped out into the corridor, nudging the trolley out of the way.

A nurse appeared in the distance. "What the hell...?"

Sword and man stalked up and down the corridor, searching. He was not interested in the ward itself—only the delivery rooms, the ones with babies in them.

The man spoke to himself as he threw open doors. “Not that one. No. No.” These were empty. He knew what he was looking for.

Then he returned to the lift, where the trolley stood in front of the metal doors. There was a room opposite. He pushed down on the handle, but the door was locked. Inside, nurse and mother and baby had heard the commotion and were cowering together in the far corner, trying to hide.

“This one. Yes. This one.” He shoulder-barged the door. Then again—cracks appearing near the doorframe. On the third push the handle and fixing splintered, and the man fell into the room.

Nurse shielded mother, bravely, keenly, self-sacrifice and glorious headlines filling her mind. Mother shielded son, terrified, distraught, confused. The tiny boy cried.

Anger and hatred dribbled and spat from the man. He shouted loudly, his words like a bass drum, “Hand the Imposter to me! He. Must. Not. Live.”

Then, even louder:

“HAND HIM TO ME. HE IS EVIL!”

Kylie couldn’t think. Couldn’t speak. She tried to hide, tried to hide her son, tried not to be so completely paralyzed by fear.

The man’s voice changed as he moved toward them, now speaking quietly and calmly. “Okay. Then I will kill you all.”

Kylie couldn’t take her eyes off the sword, smeared, from tip to hilt, in blood.

Suddenly, Thomas appeared at the door and rushed forward in a blur, grabbing and pushing, wounded and wild. The two men stumbled toward the window, locked together; the sword fell to the floor and spun around and around until it stopped under the bed. Then they smashed against the large window

that occupied much of the outside wall, their struggle lit up by another burst of fireworks in the night sky.

It was an old hospital, and this window had been on the repair list for some time. The combined weight of two heavily built men was enough to force the entire window from its rotten frame, showering glass down the side of the building and leaving Thomas holding tight to the other man as they balanced precariously on the very edge. Two policemen and several doctors and nurses rushed into the room, then came to a halt at the sight of them.

The oldest of the doctors, a tall woman with flowing ginger hair, spoke to Thomas. “Mr. Macfarlane, pull him back in.”

The policemen stepped forward to assist as Nurse Bunce, Kylie and Baby Adam stayed in their frightened huddle by the side of the bed.

The man leaned back, pushing his center of gravity beyond the edge of the building, then, by forcing his arms sharply upward, snapped Thomas’s grip from his T-shirt. Thomas snatched at him, trying to regain a hold, but though his fingers grazed the sword man’s jeans for a second, he couldn’t grasp him. The man fell backward, eerily silent, his eyes locked on Thomas, who had been grabbed by a policeman.

The man sliced through the branches of a large oak tree that reached up towards the window.

*Snap. Snap.*

*Crack. Crack.*

*Thud.*

*Smash.*

Silence.

The policemen and Thomas looked down from the window, unable to see properly through the tree and the billowing gloom fed by firework smoke.

Five minutes later, six policemen, led by Detective Inspector Grey, ran around the building to where the body had fallen.

Three ambulances were parked under the tree. The one in the middle had its blue lights smashed. Grey stepped forward, his shoes crackling on colored glass and flecks of wood.

“Give me a leg up,” he told one of the policemen.

“Yes, sir. Would you like me . . . ?”

“No. I’ll do this, thank you.”

Detective Inspector Grey rose slowly. Fearing the worst, he warily glanced on top of the vehicle.

In the middle was a deep dent, part of a large branch, and a carpet of twigs. But no body.

Fireworks fizzed in the distance.

And, in the confusion of millennium night, the man with the sword was gone.

## 2

FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 2000

The Master spoke in a whisper: *Find the Baby. Find all the Babies.*

Coron closed his eyes and nodded. He pressed his hands together. The scars hurt, but Coron liked the pain. He would kill again on Friday, April 21, at the ninth hour. Three o'clock in the afternoon.

Three o'clock on Good Friday.

From the air, the tower blocks looked like neat Legos, but close up they were chaotic: graffiti-covered lifts and passage-ways, windows boarded up with cheap plywood, stairs fouled by a mix of pale litter and stale urine. The block, Bakunin House, was to be pulled down in six months—in the meantime, only the desperate remained.

On the fifth floor, halfway along the concrete-gray passage-way, behind her watery yellow curtains, was Kylie.

Baby Adam yelled and shrieked. He screamed with hunger and itchy discomfort. A gray toy caterpillar peered down at him like an angry snake. Three jars of baby food, a smear of green sludge left in each, sat on the table.

Adam howled. The same sound, over and over: *Waaa*. This wasn't the desperate sudden cry of a child in pain; it was the bawl of a confused baby. The same sound, over and over. *Waaa. Waaa.*

Kylie put her head in her hands and started to cry herself. In time with Adam, she sobbed.

A rusty fridge rattled in one corner. It was 1:30 p.m., and Kylie was suddenly hungry. The only food was a packet of ham, the only drink a can of Coke.

*Waaa. Waaa. Waaa.*

Kylie opened the red, thinly built cupboard and dragged out a glass. She opened the can and poured some into Adam's bottle.

Then she stopped and slumped to the floor, her head filled with tentacles of noise which grabbed hold of her brain and squeezed it tight.

*Waaa. Waaa. Waaa. Waaa.*

She held the glass tighter and tighter and felt that the noise would make her brain bleed.

Adam kept on crying.

Kylie sat on the dirty kitchen floor, feeling desperate, and thought of killing herself.

But then something deeper stirred within her. If she died, Adam would die. She had to get him away from here. Away from *her*. So she wrote the words *His name is ADAM* on the back of an old lottery ticket and tucked it inside his top.

Shivering, Kylie dragged Adam from his cot. Immediately he stopped crying, but the noise still surged through his mother's mind.

Kylie opened the front door and took short, old-woman steps down the passageway and stairs. Then she turned left out of the car park and reached the main road. She had to give Adam to someone who could look after him.

Kylie drifted over the curb and a car hooted at her, its driver glaring and shaking his head as he passed.

Kylie stumbled on, her mind whirring. Who could take Adam? And then, an answer. A big building with lights. A hospital? Possibly. Probably.

Kylie crossed the divided highway, not waiting for the lights. More horns blaring and drivers swearing.

Kylie walked on, oblivious. As she crossed the last lane, an Audi driver looked up from fiddling with his radio. He hit the brakes and swerved, smashing his side mirror on the truck beside him. Plastic flew into the air, and one of the larger pieces hit Kylie's shoulder. But still she walked on.

Confused, unaware of where she was, and almost totally unaware of what she was doing, Kylie left Adam on the steps under the lights, next to the large wooden sign. At exactly 2:13 p.m. she pushed Adam gently against the back of the step so that he did not roll away.

A short while later, a loud knock, more like a thud, came on Kylie's door. It was 2:50 p.m.

"Open up. It's Social Services." It was a woman's voice.

Kylie was slumped on the sofa. The empty can of Coke lay on the floor, alongside Adam's baby bottle. She didn't know what she was doing, or where she was—she just knew she didn't want to live any more.

"Open up. Social Services," said the woman again. *THUMP. THUMP.*

"Open up!" This time it was a man.

Kylie shuffled toward the door, bewildered.

Outside stood two neat figures. Kylie only noticed details: a golden butterfly brooch on the woman; a brilliant white shirt on the man. One of them spoke, but Kylie wasn't sure which: "We have come for the baby."

Kylie laughed. It was a helpless flare of laughter that shot out from deep inside her. She laughed and laughed, without a smile. "I have given my baby away." She spat out the words madly. "I haven't got a baby anymore."

The two visitors stepped into the room. The woman immediately went to the empty cot and said, "It's true. He's gone."

The man spoke. “Where have you hidden him?”

Kylie’s mind was a smudge.

The man spoke again. “You’ll find it easier if you tell us now.”

Kylie’s eyes wanted to close. She could only see fragments: a jar of baby food, a knife with brown sauce on it, the scars on the man’s hands.

She had seen this man before. In the hospital. The man with the sword.

The woman closed the door and stood in front of it.

The man slowly put down his bag. “Kylie. I have been sent to find this child, and I will not disappoint my master. You will tell me where he is.” Desperation erupted inside him. It was nearly 3:00 p.m. “TELL ME.” He stepped closer. “HE. MUST. DIE.”

Kylie thought it was all a nightmare. *I will wake up soon.*

Then she was forced to the floor, his hand digging into the back of her neck. “YOU will die.”

But Kylie couldn’t answer what he asked again and again, because she didn’t know. She couldn’t think, couldn’t tell him, no matter what he did.

She died thinking that someone had come out of that brightly lit building and picked up her baby. She died thinking that Adam was safe.

She was right.



# 3

## MORE THAN THIRTEEN YEARS LATER: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2013

Adam looked at his science results. He knew what the graph was meant to do, but the thermometer was not cooperating. The mercury stubbornly refused to go above eighty-five.

Turning to Megan, he mumbled, “This water is boiling like mad, so I’m going to say it’s reached a hundred degrees.”

Megan, on his left, had a neat collection of crosses in a straight line. Adam’s graph looked like the outline of a deformed camel. He took another piece of paper and drew his crosses so that they made the shape of a smiley face, then placed it on top of Megan’s sheet.

She smiled and shook her head slightly.

Then Adam drew a graph for Leo, on his right. It was clearly in the shape of a pair of breasts. Leo spluttered.

“Adam!” hissed Megan in warning as Mr. Rugg, the science teacher, drifted near.

But Adam had lost interest in the task. He had the two cleverest people in the class on either side of him—a wonderful opportunity to discover the right answer. He flipped open his textbook to the biology section. There was a picture of a peculiar-looking fish. “That’s you in the morning,” he said to Leo, who chuckled.

Megan looked at the picture. It did bear a passing resemblance to Leo.

There was a pause as Adam flipped to a page featuring an octopus. “Hey, Meg—look. This creature’s amazing. It says here it has eight testicles.”

Megan whacked him with her exercise book. “*Tentacles!*”

“I know!”

Leo laughed, half at Adam, half at Megan. Mr. Rugg didn’t hear, but Jake Taylor did.

Returning from elsewhere in the room, Jake stopped at the end of the row and yet again punched Leo for no reason.

Leo pushed his lips together, keen not to antagonize Jake, who walked on.

Adam frowned and turned around. “Why did you do that?”

Jake had forgotten about Leo already and was saying something out of the corner of his mouth to the boy on his left. They were laughing in a cold and humorless way. Jake had already turned fourteen and was several inches taller than anyone else; his voice had broken, and he even had the hint of a moustache.

Adam felt anger stir within him like a deep rippling pool. Why did Jake want to spoil their fun? He stared at Jake and spoke louder: “Why did you do that to Leo?” Leo was one of the good guys, awkward and odd, but good. In need of protection.

Jake heard Adam over the hubbub of the classroom and raised his middle finger, but subtly, dismissively, as if an automatic, lazy response. He mouthed words at Adam: “Leo is a fat sack. I’ll do what I like.” Then he smirked and nudged his right-hand neighbor, a boy with a square face and gray eyes; they were staring at Megan’s chest as she put her thermometer back in the box.

Jake’s sniggering and muttering made Adam’s anger more forceful and energetic, a fountain rather than a pool. Jake was unreasonable, nasty. Adam felt as if he was having an allergic reaction.

Mr. Rugg said something about the experiment, but it was

all a haze to Adam. The words *One hundred degrees is boiling point* stared down from the whiteboard.

Adam wanted to calm down; he wanted this sudden anger to go away. But it was like gravity—hopeless to resist. He stood up. Five strides later, he had reached Jake and hit him. No one had noticed Adam leave his seat, not even Megan. A single spurt of blood shot out of Jake’s nose and onto the science book on the desk: page twenty-eight was later given an arrow and the words *Jake’s blood*.

Jake fell from his chair and everyone else in the room backed away as Adam stood over him. Megan closed her eyes and breathed out deeply.

Mr. Rugg dashed from the front of the room to restrain Adam. He wasn’t a big man, but he was wiry and probably would have been good in a scrap himself. But the moment had passed for Adam now—his anger evaporated as quickly as it had arrived.

Jake squealed his innocence from the floor. “I was just getting on with my work and this idiot came over and thumped me. He’s probably broken my nose.” He wiped his face and held out his hands as if in surrender. “What have I ever done to him? He needs to get his head examined. Typical—no wonder his parents gave him away.”

Adam said nothing. His head felt as if it was full of porridge. He had never done anything like this before.

Mr. Rugg marched Adam out of the room. Mr. Sterling, the deputy head, was just passing, as he always seemed to be when least wanted. He looked through the glass strip in the window and shook his head at the situation. Jake was inside, fingers prodding his nose. A group had gathered around him: boys asking him if he would get revenge; girls chuckling and pointing. Sterling didn’t try to give advice, nor did he ask for an explanation. He treated everyone equally rudely, but he was rarely actually mean, and *never* unfair.

Mr. Sterling slowly massaged the dark smudges under his

eyes. “Adam Grant. It’s a disgrace that one of the smallest boys in the class has floored the biggest. And especially a boy as warmhearted as Jake Taylor. I’m sure you understand how disgusted I am.”

Adam wasn’t sure. He thought there was a compliment tangled up in Mr. Sterling’s reprimand, and maybe the whole thing was sarcastic. It was always hard to tell with Sterling. Though what he said next was very clear:

“You’re suspended. Until Monday.”

Adam nodded and looked down.

Mr. Sterling leaned forward and spoke only slightly above a whisper. “Don’t get caught being so rash again.”

Adam certainly heard an emphasis on the words *get caught*.

And that was it. Mr. Sterling strode off. Adam had two days off school.

Megan’s garden was back to back with Adam’s, separated only by bushes and a rarely used path that ran between the houses.

They had been friends since before they could remember, and people often joked about how they were like an old married couple. Adam had never previously thought about Megan like that, though recently he had begun to notice things about her that made him uncomfortable. Like how her hair fell against her cheek, and how her swimsuit clung to her. This was the one subject he couldn’t talk to Megan about, and he pushed it to a corner of his mind.

That evening Megan appeared through the bushes that separated the gardens.

“He’s grounded,” said Adam’s adopted dad, who was putting away the mower. “He hit a boy at school and has been suspended.”

Megan knew: she was in the same class, after all. “Please, Mr. Grant, can I see him for a second?”

Adam’s dad sighed. “Okay. But not for long.”

Megan dashed in and ran up the stairs. She didn’t knock.

Adam lay on his bed in his usual blue shorts and tatty T-shirt, tapping a drumstick on his forehead.

Megan went to the window and half-sat on the ledge. “You *are* stupid. Jake says that he’s going to get you,” she said.

“And hello to you,” Adam said, sitting up. “Look, Meg, I couldn’t help it. Leo never does anyone any harm. And Jake is a—prat.” He wanted to say something worse, but Megan rarely swore.

Adam wanted to explain that Jake had also been looking at her, but he couldn’t find the words to explain it in a way that didn’t hint at jealousy.

“I have to write a letter—can you believe it? To Jake! Screw that. I’d rather be expelled.”

Megan turned and looked out of the window. “Just write the letter. We all know it doesn’t mean anything. You know teachers have to make it look like *something’s* being done.” She glanced unthinkingly at the bushes at the bottom of the garden. “Come on, we can write it tog—”

She stopped. Then her words came out very slowly and deliberately. “There’s someone at the bottom of the garden, in the bushes by the path. He’s looking up here.”

Adam tapped the drumstick from knee to knee. “Oh, it’s probably that lunatic from two doors down looking for his cat again.”

“No, Adam. He looks much younger. And this guy’s trying not to be seen. He’s by that old milk crate.”

By the time Adam reached the window the hooded figure had gone, but it was not the first time the house had been watched. Nor would it be the last.

# 4

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2013

Darkness lurked in the tunnel, pressing against the walls, searching for glimmers of light to choke.

A faint rattling came from the rails, then a high-pitched whine echoed closer. The rattle became thunder, the whine a screech. Louder and louder—a mechanical thunder of wheels and carriages. A tube train was on its way.

Nick stood near the exit from the tunnel, backpack hung over one shoulder, school tie short and wide, pants low enough to reveal the red Hugo Boss brand on his boxers. He stood in the same place every morning, trying to get a seat in the last car. His mind was fuzzy with the early-morning thoughts of a boy who was three months shy of his fourteenth birthday.

Rats scampered away from the oncoming train, trampling over one another to hide from the wall of metal that swept away the darkness and replaced it with a blaze of lit cars.

Wires dangled from Nick's ears. "Hurry up," he said into the space over the track. "Come on."

The train hurtled toward the station: a twenty-five miles-per-hour wall of metal.

On the platform a hundred people stood in near silence. Arrivals came every two minutes, announced by a breeze from the tunnel as air was pushed ahead of the train.

A city banker stood to the left of Nick. She did not know that she should have been looking carefully at what was happening around her. But the mornings were always the same: drowsy people heading to work, iPods and iPads, scruffy kids, free newspapers. It was just another day.

The train raced closer, its rumble becoming a rattle, its light just visible on the walls at the bend in the tunnel before the station.

To Nick's right was a girl, slightly older than him, perhaps fifteen. She had dark brown hair and blue eyes. Not ordinary eyes; deep oceans of eyes. He admired the scatter of freckles on her nose.

Nick pulled out his phone to have an excuse to glance down and to the right. She wore white sneakers with no socks. He noticed smooth legs and a short black skirt. She was more than pretty—she looked as if she knew things. Things he wanted to know.

“Hi,” he said, glancing away for a second.

“Hello,” she mouthed, the sound hidden by the approaching train. Nick only saw the movement of her tongue and lips.

Behind Nick were a man in a suit and a blond boy of about sixteen. The man carried a leather-bound book; the boy's hands hung idly at his side. Like everyone else on the platform they gazed ahead, staring at the tunnel wall and sometimes the adverts. They glanced at the arrivals board that now warned, STAND BACK. TRAIN APPROACHING.

No one thought of murder, or of blood.

The train thundered closer and closer, a fist of metal and air and noise. It sped out of the tunnel, the driver only half aware of his actions as he prepared to slow.

The man shuffled to Nick's left, next to the city banker, and the girl moved a little closer on his right. Nick felt his stomach flip pleasantly as she brushed against him. The boy, arms still limp, had stepped forward to stand immediately behind Nick, who, in the excitement and confusion of girl and train, knew nothing.

The boy pushed out his arms, and Nick was sent into the air over the track. The space was immediately filled with the train.

The driver saw a shape and heard the crack of his window before he understood that the blur was a body. There was a screech of brakes, then several seconds of slowly spinning silence.

Next came screaming and crying. People turned away, united in shock, too late to help. Not that Nick could be helped.

Blood dripped onto a crisp packet that lay between the tracks.

In the confusion, a man in a smart suit, a boy with blond hair and a pretty girl in a short black skirt left the station—unhurried, calm and professional. They had been watching Nick for a long time.

He was the eleventh boy to be killed by The People.



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2013

Adam awoke. A memory of Jake clutching his bleeding nose jumped into his head. He felt depressed and dragged his covers over his head. Then he leaned across, pulled back the curtains and looked toward Megan's house. Her bedroom faced his, although they were some distance apart. No sign of her this morning. But, he realized, with a pair of binoculars he could probably see in.

"Adam, get dressed. I can hear you're awake." It was his mum.

He went down for breakfast. The good news was that he was allowed out with Megan that afternoon.

Before that, there were jobs as a punishment.

First his dad: "Adam—it hasn't rained for nearly two weeks..."

So he had to water the garden. He actually enjoyed this, as the hose didn't reach the far end, which meant sending a snake of water over improbable distances. He held the hose between his legs and said, "Champion piss—look, no hands!" until vigorous banging on the window behind him made him stop.

Then his mum: "The washing machine has finished its second load..."

So he had to put clothes on the line. It was boring and fiddly,

but the sun was out and he could hear the radio playing some good tunes through the open patio door.

Then Megan appeared through the bushes at the bottom of the garden. She ran up the garden and stood in front of Adam's parents with her hands behind her back, looking completely innocent, more like she was eight years old than just turned fourteen.

"Hello, Mr. Grant. Hello, Mrs. Grant. Is it still okay if we go to Paradise Fields?"

After they left the house, their conversation was mostly about the fight:

"I bet he won't try to hassle *me* again."

"I bet he'll try to *kill* you."

And a few other things:

"I *will* admit to liking Cheryl Cole. *Everyone* does, Meg!"

"Adam, even *you* can tell that new guy on *X Factor* is *way* fitter than Harry Styles!"

Adam was his usual lively self, turning toward Megan and smiling, his arms waving around as if he was a puppet with a drunken operator.

Lost in conversation, they didn't really notice the scruffy teenager on the bench at the corner. He was part of the scenery, like a tree or a passing car. Adam was looking ahead, wondering if Asa would be outside Spar as he had promised.

So they did not notice the boy hiding his stained hoodie behind the bench and following them, at a distance of about a hundred yards, all the way to the shops.

Mr. Rawley's Corner Shop had the best collection of sweets in the area, and was regularly targeted by kids, who nicked their favorites when Mr. Rawley wasn't looking—even Adam had taken a handful on a couple of occasions, though he'd felt guilty both times.

Adam and Megan went in with Asa, who was bragging about his performance on Call of Duty and FIFA and trying to explain to Adam how to get around Internet filters. Megan was

more interested in finding the type of licorice that went around in swirls. While they chatted, the bell jangled and in walked the boy from the bench; he went to an aisle near the back, where he put small items in a basket. Unnoticed.

Megan didn't recognize him as the person who had been in the bushes. Equally, he was uninterested in her—or only *indirectly* interested. Asa was of little consequence to him. It was Adam he watched, even as they left the shop and walked up the street.

As soon as they reached the park, mouths full of sweets, Leo came running over. “Jake’s here and he wants a scrap. He says that only girls sneak up on people in a fight.”

Megan sighed.

Leo continued, voice like a tolling bell, shaking his head slowly. “I don’t think you can get out of this.”

In the middle of the park was a field, and in the middle of the field was Jake, with three of his mates.

Adam swore. After a brief pause, he said, “Stay here, Meg. I can’t avoid him forever.”

Insults and swearing drifted across the park toward Adam. Adam couldn’t make it all out, but “orphan” and “complete knob” were certainly near the end.

Megan put her hand on Adam’s arm. “He’s really not worth it.”

He pushed her arm away.

Megan sighed again as Adam strode toward Jake.

Megan, Asa and Leo all wanted to see Adam beat Jake, but it looked like an unequal contest. Adam was six inches shorter and had a smaller frame, though he was all muscle. Still, he threw himself at Jake and grappled bravely for a short while, landing a punch or two. Then the pair fell to the ground and Jake’s weight winded Adam. A punch just below Adam’s belly button followed. Finally, to make his revenge and dominance clear, Jake pushed Adam’s face hard into the ground and held it there.

Adam should have stayed still. Everyone could see that it was over. But anger buzzed in him like a thousand wasps and as soon as he was released he threw himself on Jake again. Jake reeled as the punches came: chest, face, shoulder, ear, then back to face. He couldn't recover; couldn't hit back. Jake retreated to the ground as if looking for somewhere to hide.

His friends looked on, dumb spectators.

Megan yelled for Adam to stop. Leo and Asa bellowed for him to continue.

Adam heard nothing. "Leave me alone. And leave Leo alone," he shouted in Jake's face.

Megan ran to him. She pushed her mouth to his ear. "You've *won*. We can go now."

Asa and Leo patted Adam on the back, full of admiration. "Sick," said one; "wow," said the other.

Jake never bothered Adam or Leo again. Nor did anyone else at school. "He beat up Jake Taylor," they said. "He's hard." But the kids at Gospel Oak Senior were not the real threat.

In the corner of the park, between the swings and the roundabout, a seventeen-year-old boy watched Adam intently, wondering when he should make his move.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2013

Somewhere in the distance a gate swung lazily against a post. Trees rustled, hushing the night. Drizzle hung in the air. And a car, with little more than a rumble, crept along the quiet residential street, then stopped.

Watery yellow light drifted from the street lamps, and a few early autumn leaves pirouetted to the ground. Otherwise, nothing happened and no one moved.

After a while, a man, a blond-haired boy and a pretty girl stepped out of the car. All three of them were dressed entirely in black. The man carried a leather book.

They had come to kill.

Inside the house, a boy slept soundly, head deep in his pillow, surrounded by posters of soccer players, graffiti art and girl bands. On the floor, next to a crumpled and poorly completed math book, were a PlayStation and a belt. A green light winked from the laptop perched on the end of his bed.

In the distance was the low rumble of a bus pulling away. Here, at 2:00 a.m., everyone slept.

The three strangers didn't enter by the gate: gates creaked. Neither did they enter by the front door: front doors were usually double locked and people recognized their sound. Through oily darkness, they went down the side of the house. Their first

five paces were on the left of the path—avoiding recycling boxes and bins. Their next three steps were on the right—stepping around an old fence panel. They had rehearsed this many times. Back at the Old School House everything had been taped out in the gym.

They tiptoed to the patio door at the back of the house. From his top pocket, the man with the book pulled out a small bronze key. Even in the gloom, it went into the lock first time—that had also been practiced on an identical patio door in the gym. They knew it would work: it had been stolen the day before when Marcia had lied about coming to read the electricity meter.

They dared not get this wrong. The four who had failed to kill the boy near Wembley Stadium two months previously had spent fifty-two hours in Dorm Thirteen.

Thoughts of Dorm Thirteen crept into their minds and scuttled around for a moment.

Upstairs, the boy slept.

His parents slept.

They passed through the sitting room and paused briefly at the bottom of the stairs. Items were sometimes left unexpectedly on stairs: toys, clothes, Legos, school bags. But these stairs were clear.

The three went up, all moving in the same way. Right foot first. The fifth and eighth stairs were missed—they creaked. Marcia had discovered this when she had asked to visit the bathroom.

At the top, they headed to the room at the end of the corridor. The girl walked five paces in, then switched on the dim bedside light. The boy woke suddenly, breathing in short bursts.

Initially terrified, the boy slightly relaxed into confusion when he saw a vaguely familiar and very pretty face.

“What’s going on? Who...? Why are you...?” he asked blearily.

“Don’t worry. Keep quiet and you’ll be fine.” Deep blue eyes suggested reassurance. “I need to ask you to do something.”