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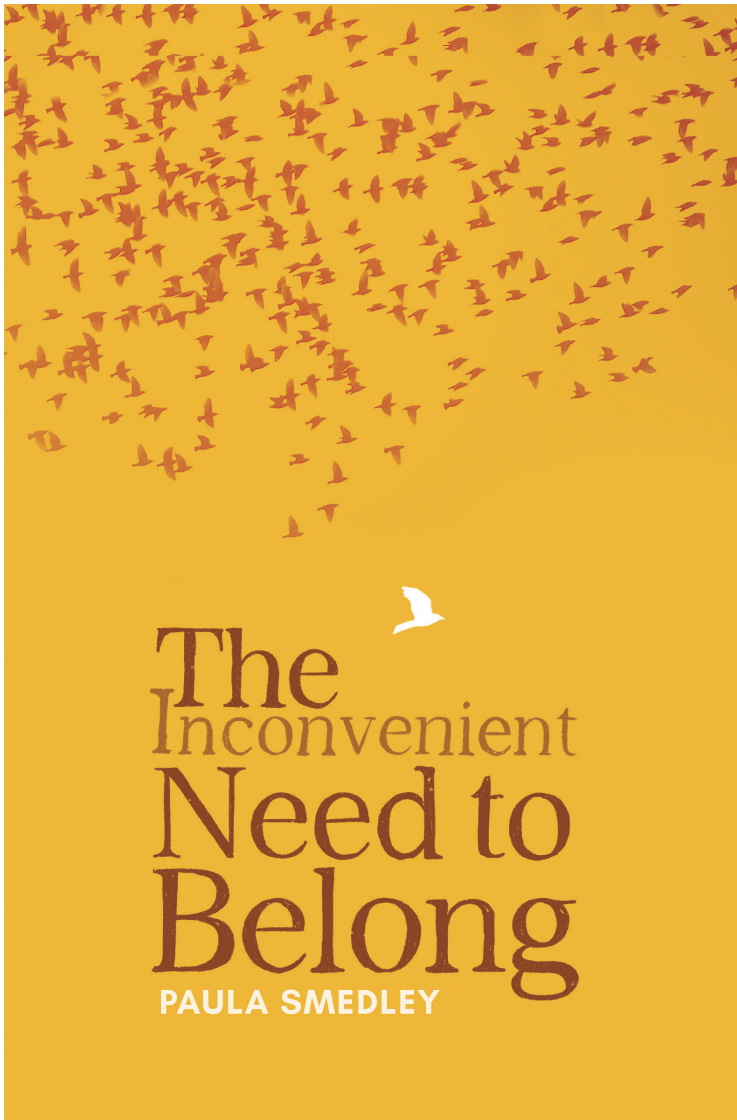
THE INCONVENIENT NEED TO BELONG

Written by **Paula Smedley**

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PAULA SMEDLEY lives in London with her husband. She began writing at a very young age, winning acclaim and awards for her poetry and short stories. *The Inconvenient Need to Belong* is Paula's debut novel. An extensive traveller, Paula has encountered vigilantes in Nigeria, escaped post-tsunami radiation in Japan, partied in a favela in Rio de Janeiro and left her debit card in a cashpoint in Sri Lanka

The
Inconvenient
Need to
Belong
PAULA SMEDLEY



SilverWood

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*For Joan and Trevor, who always led lives much
larger than the ones they were given.*

*And for Baker, without whom this book
would never have happened.*

Chapter 1

Alfie Cooper opened his canvas bag and carefully placed inside the bread he had stolen from breakfast, wrapped in the cheap napkins the care home used. He checked his old and battered watch and realised it was time to go to the park.

Technically, he thought the staff couldn't stop him from going, but he liked to sneak out nonetheless. It avoided any questions and made him feel a bit daring, despite his eighty-six years. He thought one of the nurses – Julia her name was – knew he snuck out, but she'd never asked and he'd never told.

He picked up his hat, almost as old and battered as his watch, and stole out of his room, down the hall and through the TV lounge, turning right before he got to the day room. Once out the side door, Alfie sprung the gate and began the walk to the park. It wasn't far, only the end of the street really, but at his age it took him a while to get there. He shook his head, remembering the days when as a cabinetmaker he'd spend hours lugging wood around and still have the strength and energy to do his daily fifty push ups.

He negotiated the crossing at the end of the road and entered the East Slatterley Community Park, relishing the fresh air and the smell of lavender that always reminded him of his mother. He closed his eyes briefly and inhaled, picturing her reaching up to adjust his

tie before the regular family Sunday outing to church, the smell of her hand lotion wafting up.

It wasn't a big park by any means, more of a green really. But it was his. He slowly shuffled in to the middle of the park to assume his customary position on the bench by the lake under the park's solitary oak tree, carefully stepping around the pine cones and dog poo.

He came every Saturday morning to sit on the bench and feed the ducks with the bread he stole from breakfast. Great care was taken to ensure that each piece of bread was the same size and that no duck received a second piece before each had received their first. It was a fair and equitable duck feeding.

With all of this done in a slow and methodical way, it was a necessarily time-consuming practice. Alfie didn't mind. It kept his mind and his hands occupied for a few blessed hours every Saturday. Enough time for visitors to Pinewood Care Home for Aged Residents to have moved on to the more interesting parts of their days. Of their lives. By the time Alfie got back around eleven-thirty, the day room would be empty of visiting relatives and he could get on with the business of lunch.

It didn't have to be this way. Not if he actually had visitors. And it was his own fault he had none of course. But without the ingredient of visitors, visiting hours, he felt, became somewhat redundant.

He still hated the name of the place too. You would have thought that a home whose residents only left by dying would name themselves after something other than a coffin.

He wondered if the boy would be at the park today. Alfie had been coming to the park since he moved in to Pinewood and, excluding the odd irritating morning when someone else plonked themselves on the other end, for most of those six years he'd had the bench to himself. But lately Fred had been joining him. Sometimes staying for hours, sometimes only a few minutes. Not every Saturday, but most of them, and Alfie wondered again what drew the boy to the unremarkable suburban park. To him.

He'd tried to get rid of the boy at first, naturally, but he'd just kept coming back. He had tried to ask Fred about himself, but he

was always evasive, and Alfie suspected that his situation at home wasn't ideal. Why else would a teenage boy spend his Saturday mornings sitting in a park with an old man?

Alfie got the impression that Fred didn't come from an affluent family; his clothes were clearly hand-me-downs from some time ago, given the style, and he didn't have a mobile phone even though kids were practically born with one in their hand these days. Alfie didn't know how they managed to walk and fiddle around on them without getting run over all the time. Evolution of the species perhaps.

Alfie was trying to impart some of his life's learnings on the boy to make sure the lad didn't make the same mistakes he had. He was having varying degrees of success, with Fred smug in the superiority of his youth. But with no family to bestow his memories on, secretly Alfie was grateful for the largely receptive ear and the promise of regular contact with the world outside Pinewood.

Alfie reached his bench and read the brass plaque screwed to the seat back, as he did every week. *For Rosalind, who loved this park. Mother and beloved wife.* And as he did every week he wondered who Rosalind had been, who the unimaginative sod was who had written the plaque, and then tried to come up with something better. *For Rosalind, who would have been an astronaut if she hadn't been so lazy.* Or *For Rosalind, who played a mean pinball.* He chuckled to himself, especially pleased with his astronaut creation. Probably a result of *Apollo 13* being on the telly this week.

He couldn't see Fred anywhere so he settled on his bench, placing the bag on his lap. He looked over the lake and savoured the view for a few minutes. He knew it wasn't the prettiest of lakes, or indeed actually a lake. More of a pond really. But it held a special place for him, being his sanctuary outside of Pinewood.

A pine cone rudely dropped to the ground in front of him, startling him out of his tranquil little moment. He glared at it and wished his flexibility and reach was what it had once been so he could kick it. Or his height. He had been over six foot once upon a time. Before old age gradually stole his stature from him, like he'd been shrunk in the wash.

“Hi Pop,” said a voice loudly into his right ear, giving him another start.

“I’m not bloody deaf, Fred,” Alfie said. “And besides, you shouldn’t do that to an old man. You’ll give me a heart attack.”

Fred chuckled, dropping his lanky frame onto the bench next to Alfie and immediately slouching down, his legs spread wide. He reminded Alfie of a rag doll when he sat like that. No bones, just a puddle of clothes with a head sticking out the top.

“Do you really have to sit like that? I’m sure it can’t be doing your back any good.”

Fred shrugged – a feat in itself in that position, thought Alfie. “You sound like my mum.”

Alfie waved a hand, “Fair enough. It’s your spine. You just look a little untidy, that’s all.” Alfie gave him a sidelong glance. “So how are you, Fred? Keeping well?”

Fred shrugged again, a favourite mode of communication. “I guess.”

Alfie sighed inwardly. He could never get a lot out of Fred about his private life. But maybe that was just because as he’d never had kids he had no idea how you were meant to talk to them.

“Can I have some bread for the ducks?” Fred asked suddenly.

Alfie glanced at the bread on his lap, unconsciously pulling his hands around to build a wall. He realised what he was doing and forced himself to relax. It was a breakthrough with the boy, he told himself. And it’s also just bread. If Fred didn’t break it up quite as precisely as he did, what did it matter? Still, he hesitated, unable to quite let go of total control.

“Forget it,” Fred kicked the ground. “I don’t care.”

“No, no it’s fine,” said Alfie. “Here, take this bit of wholemeal. Now, the trick is to break the bread into equal size chunks – you want all the birds to get the same.”

“Why do you care so much? About if each bird gets the same? They’re just dumb birds.”

“Not to me they’re not,” he said quietly, looking at his hands in his lap. He picked up a slice of white bread and started to

methodically tear it into pieces. “But besides, it’s just fair, isn’t it? You don’t want one of them getting fat and one going hungry.”

Fred shrugged again, sitting up a little straighter to throw his bread further away.

“So what were we talking about last week, my boy?” asked Alfie.

Fred threw some bread clear into the lake, putting his back into it. “You were telling me that you worked in a funfair – again. But you never tell me anything about what it was like or what you did. How did you end up in a travelling funfair anyway?”

Yes, it was time to tell the story, thought Alfie. His story. He couldn’t die with it untold and he couldn’t put it off any longer. “All right, let’s get started,” he said, settling in to a more comfortable position. He just hoped he had the courage to tell it.

Chapter 2

He took one last look around his childhood bedroom before shouldering his holdall and his tool bag, turning off the light and quietly closing the door. He knew his mum would be upset – and his dad would be furious – but he had to leave. He couldn't handle another day of being teased on the building site. And he definitely couldn't handle another day of his parents' smothering and overbearing morality. Of his father's rages.

He felt like one of those seedlings his mum had planted outside the front room. Desperately struggling to grow, but his parents kept piling soil on top of him. And besides, he thought, he was twenty – a man. He should be able to go off and start his own life. He knew men his age who were already married and yet he'd never even kissed a girl, let alone had a real girlfriend.

He felt a twinge of guilt at not saying goodbye to his sister, Betty, but knew she would understand. She was also being slowly strangled by their parents, but at sixteen there was little she could do about it just yet. Once she turned eighteen he thought he could invite her to visit wherever he was living. That would be nice. He could buy a gammon and get a tin of pineapple for dinner. He'd never understood Betty's love of gammon with cheese and pineapple rather than a delicious fried egg on top, but then she was a girl. Doris, his

older sister, would be altogether less forgiving or envious of his flight. He wouldn't invite her to come and stay and eat gammon.

He would write once he was settled somewhere, put his parents' minds at rest. He'd left a note obviously; he wasn't just going to disappear into the night. But he would write to let them know where he was staying and that he was doing well.

He didn't have a firm idea where he was going, apart from a direction. He had thought about going north, but he'd heard northerners didn't like Londoners and he just wanted to fit in. But then, sticking to the Home Counties didn't seem far enough away. So he thought he'd try his luck south-west, down Devon or Cornwall way. People said it was tranquil and pretty down there, and he was already on the right side of London. Maybe it was a sign.

He double-checked his note was still propped up against the fruit bowl on the kitchen table and quietly left the house and his old life behind, the echo of his parents' disapproval ringing in his ears.

By the time the first signs of daylight were appearing on the horizon, he thought he was getting to the outskirts of London. The houses were further apart with proper front gardens, and the signs of war weren't as bad.

He'd only been six when the war broke out, and he remembered terrifying nights being woken by the sound of the warning sirens. The whistles as the bombs dropped. The inevitable explosions, rattling the windows like an earthquake. His mother had been too scared to leave the house to go to the air-raid shelter so they'd all huddled in the cellar. He and his sisters should have been evacuated to the country, but his mother hadn't been able to let them go, not with their father away fighting.

So far tonight, his grand adventure had been less adventure and more just an ambitious attempt to get some exercise. The hours and the unexpectedly cold June night had dragged on interminably, the biggest excitement coming from stumbling across a fox going through some rubbish on the side of the road. They had both eyed each other up, trying to decide what the other meant to do. Once the

fox was comfortable he wasn't a threat, he'd gone back to inspecting the rubbish, ignoring him with almost wilful disdain.

The only other event of note had been when he'd caught his foot in a tree root and gone face first into the dirt. He wasn't sure exactly what he'd had in mind when he set out, but he was certain it involved more exciting things than being ignored by a fox and narrowly escaping a sprained ankle.

He heard a lorry rumbling behind him and stuck his thumb out, praying it would pull over. He was exhausted from a night without sleep and the miles he'd walked carrying his heavy tool bag, and wanted nothing more than to just rest his tired legs and feet. He heard the swoosh of the brakes and thanked his lucky stars. He didn't even care if the lorry was going in the right direction at this point, he just wanted to sit down and get warm. He'd thought upon setting out that he was rather fit from years as a cabinetmaker lugging wood and toolboxes around, but it appeared while he had strength, he somewhat lacked stamina.

He stood right back to give the lorry room to pull up. He saw a bloke in his thirties with close-cut hair looking at him through the passenger window. "Where you going to, kid?"

Not overly impressed about being called kid, he replied rather more confidently than he felt, "Anywhere other than London."

"Amen to that," said the driver. "Bleeding shithole. Hop in."

He climbed into the cab, thanking the driver for pulling over. "Don't mention it, mate." Wiping his hand on his worn and grubby trousers, he held it out saying, "The name's Michael. What do I call you?"

He took a breath to reply and then stopped himself. Why not a new name for a new phase, a new adventure? A new him. "Alfie," he said, shaking Michael's hand. "The name's Alfie."

"Well, Alfie, welcome aboard! Do you have a destination in mind or just out of that heaving pile of shit? Or was the coronation of our good Queen this week an inspiration to get out and see more of our fair country?" Michael laughed, clearly in some way finding what he'd just said amusing. "I'm bound for Plymouth and you're

more than welcome to ride with me the whole way if you'd like – I could use the company.”

Alfie sized Michael up, wondering if he was trying to lure him in so that he could rob him at a later stage. He was a big man, broad-shouldered and muscular, but he seemed nice enough, with an open face and a friendly smile.

“Sure,” he said, smiling at Michael. “That sounds great.”

Michael reached into the console and fished out a packet of Player's. “You want?”

“No thanks, I don't— Actually, why the hell not?” said Alfie, deciding that if he was going to start again as a new person, then perhaps this new person smoked. He took a cigarette and the lighter, coughing on the initial inhale.

Michael laughed, reaching over to give him a friendly thump on the back as he doubled over coughing. “Don't worry lad, they grow on you.” He took a long draw and closed his eyes briefly before exhaling and filling the cab with smoke.

Alfie tried a tentative second time and managed not to cough, although the sting down his throat did start to make his eyes water. He rolled the window down a little to get some air, on the pretence of flicking off the ash.

“So Alfie, are you off to seek your fortune in the country then? Settle down on a farm with a pretty country girl and milk cows?”

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “I just know I had to get out of London.”

Michael chuckled. “I know what you mean about London. Time was I worked at a dive of a pub in Soho. The Bell if you know it. Then again,” he said, looking Alfie over, “maybe you don't, clean-cut boy like you. Anyway, I worked there behind the bar for a few years after the war but I just couldn't take it anymore. The same sad drunks telling the same stories and drinking themselves further and further into the ground. Mainly ex-servicemen like me, although these poor sods had been on the front lines. Dave had been in the Battle of the Bulge, poor bastard.” He shook his head sadly. “Bloody sad.”

Alfie nodded and finished his cigarette – it had not grown on him – and threw it out of the window before replying. “My dad was on the front lines too. I don’t remember too much of what he was like before the war, but my mum tells me he wasn’t the same when he came back.” He tried not to picture his dad towering over him, his eyes crazed and far away. His face contorted with whatever he was seeing that wasn’t his terrified son.

Alfie, grown weary of talking and tired from all the walking, settled back into his seat, closing his eyes briefly as he relished the warmth and comfort enveloping him like a cosy blanket.

“Wake up sleeping beauty,” Michael said not unkindly, giving him a shove.

Alfie blinked, disoriented, struggling through the mental fog to recollect where he was. The lorry was parked and the sun was well above the horizon. “Sorry Michael, I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Where are we?”

“No worries mate. You looked like you needed it. And we’re in Exeter. I’m stopping for a late breakfast. I would have stopped sooner but wanted to give you a chance to get some shut-eye. Fancy some eggs?”

Alfie realised he was ravenous, and readily agreed. “I guess I haven’t made a great passenger, have I?”

“Don’t worry about it, lad. You’re still not the worst passenger I’ve picked up – remind me to tell you about the drunk Scotsman.”

“Well, let me buy you breakfast as a thank you,” he said. “I can at least do that much.”

“All right then, Alfie, if you’re so inclined that would be mighty generous of you.” He clapped an arm around Alfie’s shoulders and steered him across the street towards Esme’s Café. It had a worn, somewhat faded interior and a welcome smell of grease.

The place was half full, and they took a table towards the back, immediately poring over a laminated menu. After a few minutes, which seemed like an eternity given how hungry they were, the waitress came over, pad in hand, pen poised. “What can I get you?”

“Scrambled eggs and tomato with toast please,” said Michael.
“And a tea.”

“How would you like the tea?”

“With milk, thanks darling. Nice and strong,” said Michael.

Alfie sat quietly stunned while Michael ordered. The waitress was beautiful. Lips painted a shade of red that made him think of roses and big brown eyes that matched her glossy brown hair. She was perfect in every way.

“And what can I get you?” she asked Alfie.

He struggled to regain his thoughts and bring them back to the present. He’d already started to picture what their wedding would be like.

“I...I...uh...what he’s having please,” Alfie eventually said rather desperately, blushing.

“Right you are.” She nodded and jotted his order down on her little pad. “Scrambled eggs and tomato, toast, and strong tea with milk.”

“Oh, no, not the tea,” Alfie fumbled. “Coffee, please. Black.”

She scribbled on her pad some more. “Anything else?”

Blessedly, Michael took over. “That’s it, thanks love.” She put the pad away in her cute little apron and walked towards the kitchen.

Michael chuckled. “Not that clean-cut then, I guess, are you lad?” Alfie blushed even further, causing Michael’s chuckle to turn into a roar of laughter as he pulled out his cigarettes. He offered one to Alfie who politely declined. It turned out the new him didn’t smoke after all.

“So then, Alfie, will you stay in Exeter or keep with me until Plymouth? Don’t worry, you get used to the accent.”

Alfie nodded. The waitress’ accent had been very strange, but he’d been too dumbfounded by her beauty to take proper notice. “I don’t know – I don’t know anything about either of them. What would you do?”

Michael rubbed his chin. “Exeter is probably better for work, depending on what you’re after?”

“I’m a cabinetmaker by trade, but I’ve trained as a carpenter as well.”

“Well, there’s a lot that needs rebuilding here after the war. Although there is in Plymouth too, and it’s by the sea. But don’t rely on my advice, lad.” He dug back into his shirt pocket and pulled out a shilling. “This,” he said, waggling the coin in front of Alfie with a cheeky grin, “this is what you should let decide for you. It’s my lucky shilling – hasn’t let me down since I found it on Whitstable beach. What do you say? Heads for Exeter, tails for Plymouth?”

Chapter 3

Alfie glanced at Fred. “Didn’t I tell you it was a story?”

“Story? You’ve still not told me how you actually ended up working in a funfair. All you’ve done is tell me about some ride in a lorry.”

“Ah, but that’s just the beginning. And all stories need a good beginning. If you’re here next week, I’ll tell you all about how I got from that café with Michael into Crompton’s Travelling Funfair.” He glanced at his watch. “Now though, it’s time for me to get back before someone misses me.” He hesitated. “See you next week?”

Fred shrugged. “Maybe.”

Alfie sighed. The boy was always the same. He heaved himself off the bench, groaning a little at the effort. Even though it wasn’t a cold day, the cold still always seemed to seep into his bones.

“Well then, until next time...maybe,” he said, tipping his hat and starting to shuffle back in the direction of Pinewood.

As always, Alfie snuck back in half expecting a cry of outrage after his absence had been discovered. And as always he was left a little disappointed when there was none. He ambled down the corridor towards his room to tuck away his canvas bag, passing Julia who raised an eyebrow at him. Yes, he thought, she does know, or at least

she suspects. He liked it this way though, the not quite knowing. It was like a game of spies between the two of them.

Trevor, with whom he shared a room at Pinewood, blessedly wasn't there, and he walked past Trevor's side of the room, pulling the curtain closed behind him. He put away his jacket, bag and his hat, enjoying the temporary silence.

He went to the window to check on his bird bath and feeder. Grand terms for what were a plastic ice cream container filled with water and an ashtray he had nicked from Trevor filled with seeds. But the house sparrows that regularly came for a feed and a bath seemed to think the facilities were decent enough.

He'd had to look at a book to be able to identify what type they were, but he liked to know. He liked the way they would cheerfully hop around, vocally expressing their delight as they played around in the water. Or maybe they were telling him he needed to renovate the bath, he chuckled.

Trevor, messy as he was, had never noticed that his ashtray was outside the window. Alfie thought of it less as stealing and more of a civic duty he was fulfilling to try and get the man – who had emphysema – to stop smoking. Not that it had helped one whit. Not while the man's pushover daughter-in-law smuggled in cigarettes for him.

Suddenly there was a wheezing cackle. "Alfie! I've got a great one for you," called Trevor as he came in the room. "If James comes next week I'll tell it to him too."

Alfie's smile vanished. Trevor grated on his nerves and had done ever since he'd moved in after Arthur, his previous roommate, had died. Arthur had been a wonderful roommate; quiet, clean and with absolutely no interest in dirty jokes that he couldn't remember the punchline to.

The curtain was whisked back and Trevor beamed at him, his straggly grey beard and wild, unkempt hair irritating the clean-shaven Alfie just by looking at it. Although not as much as the ridiculous fake diamond stud Trevor wore in his right ear like some sort of geriatric pirate. "Do you want to hear it, Alfie? It's a cracker

– James is going to love it if he comes next week. He couldn't come again today, but I'm sure he'll come next week."

Alfie couldn't help himself. "James won't come next week, Trevor. James never comes, only Beth. Remember?"

Trevor wasn't listening to him, repeating the joke softly to himself to try and commit it to memory. "So listen. A guy is walking on the beach one day when he finds a genie bottle. He rubs it and a genie pops out and— No wait, it's two genies that pop out – and the guys says 'Two genies, that must mean six wishes' and the genie – I can't remember which genie but I don't think it matters – says, 'Sorry buddy, you only get three wishes'. Seems a bit of a rip-off if you ask me but anyway, the guy wishes for the most beautiful girlfriend and to be super rich— Oh wait, no he whispers that to the genie, you're not meant to know that yet." Trevor waved his hand. "Forget I said that. Let me go back. So the genie – I can't remember which genie – says 'Sorry buddy—"

"Trevor! Please shut up."

Trevor looked hurt and shrugged his shoulders. "Your loss," he said, moving back to his side of the room and turning his back to rifle through his overflowing and utterly chaotic cupboard.

Alfie closed eyes that once had been a startling blue, but were now watery with age, and took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He was sure that once upon a time Trevor wouldn't have irritated him so much. But almost thirty years of living on his own before coming to Pinewood had made him decidedly less tolerant.

He saw Trevor leave and brought his attention back to look at the bird facilities, which were in need of some attention. He retrieved the small bag of birdseed from his bedside cabinet and started the loop through Pinewood to get to the outside of his window. It was a circuitous route he had to take, going down the corridor, through the TV lounge and the dining room and then out the back door. Once outside, he then had to loop back around the outside of the building to his window. But he could get a cup of water in the dining room on his way through for the bath.

He had slightly misjudged the timing today though and most people were already sat down for lunch, the staff filling the plastic cups with water or juice. The birds would have to wait. He'd never make it all the way around and back in time, not at his speed, and he didn't want to miss lunch.

He looked at where the available chairs were, groaning at the choices he had available. Normally he timed it better than this so he didn't end up having to eat lunch with someone he despised.

It reminded him of being back in school and being the last person to the dining room and the only kids left to sit next to were the fat kid with the terrible body odour or the unattractive girl who wouldn't stop prattling on. In fact, he thought, that wasn't dissimilar to his choices today. He could either sit next to Mavis, who talked interminably about everything with false authority, or next to Ben, who farted uncontrollably and almost incessantly. At least he could tune Mavis out, he thought. There was no chance he was suddenly going to lose his sense of smell.

He took the chair next to Mavis, placing the bag of seed on his lap. Mavis was already in full flow with Joan. "...definitely faked, I tell you. You can see the flag moving! It was all filmed in a studio somewhere. The cousin of a friend of my son's brother-in-law works at NASA and he's confirmed it."

"Oh shut up, Mavis," Joan snapped. "No one with any sense believes that." She looked at Alfie and her eyes sparkled mischievously. "You may as well say that Santa Claus doesn't exist."

"Well now, that's an interesting topic because you know there's debate about the historical origins of the made-up Santa Claus. Some say—"

"Mavis!" Joan cut her off. "It was a joke. I do not want to hear about the origins of Santa Claus. It's only April. If I'm still alive in December, tell me then."

Alfie chuckled, pleasantly surprised by Joan's humour. He'd not spoken to her a great deal, although he'd not spoken to anyone a great deal, even after six years at Pinewood. But as she normally sat with Trevor, the two of them having some sort of romantic

affiliation, and him getting more than enough of Trevor having to share a room with him, he supposed he'd spoken to Joan less than most. She had lipstick on and small blue earrings in the shape of a clam. He liked that she put a bit of effort in to make herself look nice. And she did look nice. She must have been a real looker when she was younger.

One of the nurses appeared with a cart carrying the day's lunch. They were meant to get a choice of two meals at lunchtime, but frequently it was a choice of one.

"What's on the menu today? Any prawns?" asked Joan hopefully. Alfie stopped himself from laughing. Prawns? They were lucky if they got boiled fish.

The nurse, Claire her name tag said, shook her head. "Sorry, Joan. It's corned beef and mash today." She placed a plate in front of each of them and both Alfie and Joan looked in disappointment at the grey meat and grey potatoes. "But I do have ice cream for dessert," Claire said, with a wink and a smile to Joan before moving on.

"Will you be coming to bingo later, Alfie?" Joan asked him. "It's a lot of fun. I'm sure if you tried it just once..." She tentatively took a small mouthful of greyness.

Alfie shook his head. "Nice try, Joan, but no. Besides, I wouldn't want to win and deprive you of your chocolate winnings." Joan had an enviable record at bingo within Pinewood, winning more chocolate frogs than any other resident. And given Joan's sweet tooth it couldn't go to a more receptive winner, he thought.

With Mavis determined to ignore them and speak only to the almost deaf Clyde, lunch passed pleasantly enough, chatting with Joan. He learned she had four children, but only two lived locally. The other two lived abroad, one in New Zealand and one in the US. "It's hard sometimes, but you know with Skype and FaceTime these days it's a whole lot better than it used to be. I can see my grandkids and great-grandkids. Of course, I need someone to set it up for me – I'm not that much of a techno granny," she laughed. "What about your family, Alfie? Do they live away too? I've never seen you have visitors."

Alfie shook his head. "I never had children, no."

"What about siblings?" pressed Joan.

He looked away. "A sister in Bath." He pushed himself back from the table. "Anyway, must get on and fill up my bird bath. They'll be thinking the star rating has dropped even further at Alfie's Bird Motel."

He was dozing peacefully in his chair by the window a few hours later, Gold radio station playing softly on the radio, when Trevor burst into the room, much as a tortoise would burst through a paper bag. "I won!" he announced gleefully. "I bloody won the bingo!" He did as much of a jig as his eighty-four-year-old body would allow him, cackling to himself before the cackle turned into a hacking cough, sending him almost doubled over. "I gave the frog to Joan, of course," he wheezed, once he'd caught his breath a little. "Got a kiss for it too." He smiled broadly, his eyes twinkling. It was probably just the tears in his eyes from all the coughing, Alfie thought meanly.

Trevor started rooting around in the disaster he called a cupboard. Alfie had no idea how he found anything in there, it was such a jumble of chaos. Eventually, after pulling out a sweater, a slipper, a floral shower cap and a balled-up parka with a fur-lined hood, he came upon what he was after. "Ah ha!" he exclaimed, pulling out a half empty bottle of Scotch and shaking it at Alfie. "Fancy a Saturday night snifter?"

Alfie looked at his watch. "It's hardly Saturday night, Trevor. It's only four o'clock."

Trevor shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, taking a swig from the bottle. "And besides, you know we'll all be in bed by eight-thirty, so it kind of is Saturday night. It's all rock and roll at Pinewood, Alfie me boy." He took another swig and then put it back in the cupboard, shoving the excavated items back in and closing the door quickly before they could fall back out.

"Right, I'm for a spot of telly, I think," he said, rubbing his hands. "See you at six for *Pointless*?"

Alfie nodded, vaguely waving him off. The game show *Pointless*

was the one show he watched regularly. He wasn't sure what it was about the game, but he enjoyed it. And god knew he enjoyed precious few things these days. He sighed. Two hours to kill until then. He picked up his book and decided to read in the garden.

The sun was out so the garden was busy, and he picked as secluded a seat as he could find. He was halfway through *Strangers* by Dean Koontz and it was getting rather good. He knew some people thought of him as a sub-standard Stephen King, but Alfie infinitely preferred him. Koontz's novels were darker. Plus, Alfie liked the fact that Koontz wasn't as well known. He didn't like to be seen doing what other people were doing. Which is why it irritated him that he enjoyed *Pointless* so much.

He still had a hundred or so pages left of *Strangers* and he wasn't sure he'd get through them all before the weekly trip to the local library on Wednesday. If he could get enough peace and quiet from Trevor, he might.

Apart from his escapade to the park every Saturday, the weekly trip to the local library was the other highlight of his week. Pinewood had a minibus, which ran them to the library and back. It was his only other regular contact with the outside world. It was also free, which was very welcome, given he had virtually nothing left once Pinewood had taken its cut of his meagre pension.

Lately, he had also discovered that seniors could use the internet on the public computer in the library for free for an hour. He wasn't as technically savvy as Joan with her tablet and Skyping, but he'd been given a quick lesson on the computer and how to log on as well as how the mouse worked. It was enough to be able to read the news on the BBC and look at the weather for the coming week. Sometimes he'd even watch a video on YouTube.

He picked up his book and started reading, glad to lose himself in the pages for a while.

Julia watched Alfie through the window. He was an odd fish. Compulsively private and by turns irascible and kindly. The turns between mood weren't odd in themselves, not in elderly care where

most of the residents swung between peevish and saintly. But there was something about him. He wasn't even the most cantankerous of the bunch – Mavis won that crown. She couldn't quite put her finger on it and she sighed, annoyed with herself that she couldn't work it – or him – out.

She knew that he disappeared somewhere every Saturday morning for a few hours. At first when she'd noticed it, she had been about to raise the alarm, but then he had wandered back in looking happy as Larry. She should have raised the alarm. She should have told him he wasn't allowed to just leave or she'd need to report it.

But he looked so damned happy whenever he came back and god knew he rarely looked happy any other time. And he had all his marbles still and wasn't a danger to anyone. So she kept letting him sneak out, always keeping an eye out to make sure he was back by eleven-thirty for lunch. She thought the old devil quite liked the excitement of having one over on them too. Besides, she felt sorry for him, never having any visitors. She'd looked at his paperwork and there was no next of kin listed. She sighed. She should make an effort to try and break through to him, although she suspected even her Australian charm might fail her this time. Still, it was her job to try even so.

"Shit!" She turned to see Joan and Trevor sitting together in a corner of the day room, a large puddle of water and an overturned plastic cup on the floor between them.

"All okay?" she asked, walking over. "I mean, spillage aside?"

They both nodded. "My fault," said Trevor. "I was getting a little overexcited. At least I didn't spill it on my trousers – it would have looked like I'd pissed myself!" He laughed that wheezy laugh of his and Julia couldn't help laughing with him.

"Let me get a cloth and I'll clean this right up."

"Sorry love," Trevor apologised. "It's just that this one here gets me so excited." He patted Joan's arm affectionately.

Joan happily swatted his arm away. "Get on with you. You're just clumsy."

Julia went to the kitchen to get a cloth, smiling. Joan and

Trevor were her favourites at Pinewood, making a very cute almost-couple. They reminded her of her own grandparents, although both had sadly passed away years earlier. Thinking about them got her starting to think about her parents, who were also now getting on a bit. She really should make an effort to get back home more to see them, she thought.

In the sixteen years she'd been in the UK she'd only gone back three times, and even those had been flying visits. She realised if she kept up her one visit every five years or so she'd likely only see her parents five times before they died. Tops. It was a sobering thought and she set an alarm on her phone to Skype with them tomorrow and float the idea of a trip home.

She'd always meant to get home more often. But there was such a big world out there to explore, and if she had to choose between two weeks exploring Morocco or Japan and two weeks in Jimboomba, then anywhere other than Jimboomba would win every time.

She mopped up the spillage as best she could, thankful she was mopping up water rather than urine. Not that she could complain about the latter too much. Pinewood was a care home rather than a nursing home. Once the residents got too frail and in need of constant tending they were moved to other facilities. It was one of the things that had attracted her to Pinewood, as she got to see the residents as people rather than patients. The fact that she rarely had to clean up urine was an added bonus.

The next Saturday saw Alfie back at the park at the usual time. Part of him was irked at being so predictable. He hated routine and it was a source of constant irritation at Pinewood that every part of his day was dictated to him – wake up and lie there until someone came at seven-thirty to help him out of bed and give him a shower or a sponge bath. Get dressed. Eight am breakfast. Activity or free time until lunch at twelve. Activity or free time until dinner at five. Then TV in the lounge until bed at eight-thirty. And of course, all the talk of activity time sounded grand, until you realised that really there weren't that many. The trips to the library, bingo and singing

were about it. Although he had heard talk of chair yoga recently and shuddered at the thought.

But the pleasure he got from coming to the park and the simple company of the birds, and somewhat less simple company of the boy, made it all somewhat bearable. It was an escape, both physically and mentally, for a time.

As usual he made up infinitely more interesting plaque inscriptions for Rosalind. *For Rosalind, who really owned that moustache in later life* or *For Rosalind, who had a phobia of unripe bananas*. He could understand her on that last one if he was honest. Bananas should definitely not make your teeth squeaky.

“Morning, old timer,” Fred shouted behind him, making him start.

“I’m not bloody deaf, Fred, I keep telling you. What’s wrong with just coming up and saying hello like a normal person?”

“Where’s the fun in that? Besides, you’d miss having it to complain about.”

He was right, thought Alfie, and that also irritated him. Bloody kids.

He passed a slice of bread over to Fred, eyebrows raised. Fred accepted it with an almost imperceptible dip of the head and started to break it up into equal pieces, Alfie noticed with pride and delight.

“So, fancy hearing some more of the life of Alfie Cooper then? Where were we up to?”

“You were in some cafe with a lorry driver.”

“Oh yes, Michael. But the coin, lad, the coin really did seal it all.”

Chapter 4

Michael flipped the coin up in the air. They watched it with bated breath but it was up and down so fast Alfie barely saw it. Neither did Michael apparently, as it bounced off his hand on to the floor and rolled beneath the table next to them. The man at the table retrieved it for them, leaning over to hand it back.

“Thanks,” said Michael. “I don’t suppose you saw what it was?”

“Sorry me boy, I didn’t. But I couldn’t help overhearing, and if you need a decider on where to settle down I could do with a pair of hands on a job I’ve just picked up this morning. Especially those of a skilled cabinetmaker-cum-carpenter. It’s not glamorous work, mind, but I’ll pay you a decent enough wage.”

Like the waitress, the man’s accent was incredibly strange to Alfie and he wasn’t sure he’d actually understood half of what the man had just said. But he thought he’d understood enough. Alfie leaned forward, hardly believing his luck that it could all be this easy. “I’m not worried about glamorous, believe me! What’s the job?”

“The army has some land not too far from here that they use for training. There’s a house on it that they use as part of that training, for when they go into civilian areas and to help them practise explosives work.” He chuckled. “Basically the army will go in and either blow the house up or shoot it to shreds and we then

need to go in and reconstruct it so they can come back in and blow it up again. Now, we're obviously not talking fully functioning house with plumbing and electricity and the like, but it does have the façade of a normal house and it's a bit more than just a shell inside, with a fitted kitchen and the like. What do you think, lad? Your skills would be perfect if you can do the cabinet-making interior bits and also the structural carpentry. I take it you can?"

Alfie nodded vigorously. He'd been evaluating the man as he spoke and he seemed honest. Around forty, with close-cut brown hair and a cleft in his chin that his mother always told him denoted a nice man. His father didn't have one, Alfie couldn't help but think whenever she'd said that.

"Good. In between that I've also got a ton of work rebuilding bits of the town – there's still a lot of work that needs to be done after the war. I can pay you eight pounds, four shillings a week. I know it's not a lot, especially once the taxman has his share, but it's enough to live modestly off."

Alfie shook his head, certain he'd never heard anything as stupid as building a house just to blow it up, but it sounded like good honest work, and it had practically fallen in his lap.

"The name's Derek. I'm off to the site now, but come and see me in the office at four-thirty and we'll get you sorted." He scribbled an address down on some paper and handed it over before standing, ready to go.

Alfie jumped up and introduced himself, noticing as he stood how tall Derek was – a good inch taller than himself. "Thanks very much, Derek. I'll be round this afternoon. You can count on it."

"Well, didn't I tell you, lad? You can always count on the coin!" said Michael, after Derek had left.

Alfie wasn't quite sure that was how Michael had intended the coin's intervention to play out, but he couldn't doubt that the shilling had neatly solved his dilemma of what he was going to do for work.

Breakfast was delivered and they both tucked into the plate with an appetite and appreciation bordering on lustful.

“So tell me, lad,” said Michael, in between mouthfuls of egg, “which part of the rat-infested shithole that is London do you hail from?”

“I grew up in Fulham,” Alfie said, trying not to inhale his tinned tomato. “It actually wasn’t so bad around there. The house we had was a bit rundown – there’s a crack in the load-bearing wall downstairs that’s been growing every year since I can remember. I think it was there when Dad bought the place and he just never quite got around to fixing it properly.” Alfie remembered growing up thinking that the crack was growing to keep pace with the darkness in the house, absorbing his father’s rages and displeasures. His mother’s disapproval. If so, he could only marvel that the house was still standing. “There’s damp in the cellar too,” he continued. “But Bishop’s Park was nice to play in growing up.” He smiled as he remembered chasing Betty in and out of the shrubbery, trying to avoid the park keeper. Her squeals as he would dunk her in the paddling pool.

Michael finished chewing his toast and smacked his lips, grabbing a napkin to wipe the grease from his mouth. “Well, certainly sounds a lot nicer than the East End where I lived, lad. And now that you’re out in the proper country you don’t need parks – just walk five minutes out of town and you’re in the countryside, with cows and everything.”

After breakfast they stood a little awkwardly by the lorry. “Well, best of luck, lad. I’m sure the shilling will have steered you truly.” A hearty handshake, a wave and Michael was off, leaving Alfie standing in the lay-by with his holdall and his tool bag.

“Well Alfie,” he said, looking around, “looks like we’re living in Exeter.” He shouldered his bag and set off according to the directions Derek had given him.

He found the place easily enough. A small office squeezed between a bakery and a corner store, Derek’s Building Services painted a little clumsily onto a makeshift sign. He checked his watch; he was three hours early. Looking at the watch, a present from his parents and his two sisters for his last birthday, got him

thinking about how they were all doing, and he hoped they weren't all too angry or upset.

He'd been intending to write to them, but maybe he should call his dad at work at the butcher shop. He'd passed a telephone box half a mile or so back and he had some coins.

He was in luck and there was no queue. Of all the people he could have spoken to, his father would have been his last choice. But he had no way of calling his mum or his sisters; a butcher's wages were a good deal short of the Cooper family having its own telephone.

As he dialled zero for the operator he wondered how long he should say he wanted. Not too long. Not long enough for this father to start yelling. He gave the operator the number and asked for one minute, duly feeding the amount she told him in to the top of the box. He liked the sound the coins made as they fell through, although he couldn't have said why. He held his breath while it rang. Half hoping no one would answer.

Then he heard his father's voice rattling off the number. His hand was over the button to open the call but he hesitated, unsure if he was ready for what would inevitably be a very difficult conversation. Then he thought he should just do it rather than risk his father getting angry and pushed the button.

"Hi Dad, it's me."

"Son? Where the devil are you?"

His dad sounded like he was down the bottom of a well. "I'm fine, Dad, I just...I just needed to get away and make my own mark."

"Yes, so your note said. Your mother was in floods of tears when I left her this morning. You couldn't have just sat us down and told us? You had to sneak off in the middle of the night like some criminal?"

"I'm sorry, Dad, I really am. I just didn't know how to tell you. But I'm okay. I'm in Exeter and I've picked up some work already. I'll write and let you know where I'm lodging." The pips went, letting him know his time was up. "Look Dad, I've got to go, the phone is about to run out. Tell Mum I'm sorry. I—" The line went dead.

Probably for the best, he thought. It avoided any awkward goodbyes. Or further recriminations.

To pass the rest of the time before he was due to meet Derek, he ambled about exploring Exeter. It was a pretty town, despite the highly visible scars of the war. The High Street was busy, and he thought Friday afternoons must be the time most of Exeter did its shopping. He was pleasantly surprised to see a Marks & Spencer and a Co-Op, and realised he'd had no real idea of what to expect outside of London. Everyone was speaking in the same thick accent that Derek had, and he realised it must be the way people spoke in the West Country. He'd have to get used to it.

At four-thirty he returned to Derek's office. He opened the door to find Derek in a cramped room sitting at a desk too small for both his height and the amount of paperwork on it. Derek waved him to the only other chair in the room. "Glad you found me, boy. Sit down." The chair was awkwardly low.

"Apologies for the smell of bread. You get used to it if you're in here long enough. So, boy, you're a qualified cabinetmaker then who is also trained in carpentry?" Alfie nodded. "And I can see you've got your own tools." Derek motioned to the tool bag at Alfie's feet. "We've agreed your wages, so the next thing is when you can start. The army job starts on Monday if you can be available then?" Alfie nodded again. "Good." He paused, looking Alfie over. "Do you have somewhere to stay, boy?"

Alfie, originally bristling at being called boy, realised it must be part of the West Country dialect as Derek was using it so often and without malice. So he simply shook his head. "No, I hadn't got that far yet."

Derek searched for a scrap of paper. "Go and see Hilda," he said, scribbling down an address. "Tell her I sent you and that you need a room. They're not fancy, but she doesn't charge the earth and her cooking won't kill you."

"Thanks, Derek. I really owe you one."

"Don't mention it. Be waiting at the bottom of South Street past the cathedral at six on Monday morning and you can jump

in the van. It's about a mile from Hilda's, give or take." He stood, shaking Alfie's hand. "Welcome aboard and I'll see you bright and early on Monday."

He found the boarding house easily enough. Aside from the bright blue front door it was a nondescript terraced house with a slightly overgrown front garden and a front gate that appeared to be hanging from just one hinge. He took a deep breath and knocked on the door. A short redhead, hair bound in a scarf, answered the door, drying her hands. Alfie estimated her to be in her late forties.

"Alright me 'andsome. What can I do you for you? If you're after Matthew, he's at work." She noticed his bags on the ground, "Although I think maybe you're after a room?"

He nodded, shifting his bags awkwardly. "Derek sent me. He said to ask for Hilda."

"Well, you've found me!" She beamed at him, revealing crooked teeth, and opened the door wider to show a narrow hallway. "Well, come on in, me boy. Don't just stand there like a goose. What's your name?" she called over her shoulder, turning to walk down the hall.

"Alfie Cooper," he called, following her into the front room. It was painted a shade of purple that made him think of a turnip.

"You can put your bags down in the corner over there. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes please, Mrs...? Strong and with milk please." Alfie floundered for how to address her. Using her first name didn't seem right somehow.

"Of course it is. And no Mrs this or that, call me Hilda. Right-o, I'll be back in a flash." Hilda left the room in a swirl of cheap perfume and the swoosh of her skirt.

Alfie took the opportunity to have a better look around the room, now that he'd adjusted to the paint. It was cosy, with a fireplace and three armchairs arranged around it. A shelf above the fireplace was home to a small assortment of books, a framed photo of Winston Churchill, a small radio and a clock. Underneath the

window was a sideboard so filled with ceramic animals that it was a veritable menagerie.

He walked over to have a further look, finding tigers, owls, dogs, frogs, horses, fish, penguins, squirrels, elephants, zebras and even a unicorn. Forget a menagerie, he thought, this was a collection to fill the ark. He picked up the unicorn, an unexpected whimsy in a sea of ordinary.

“I’m particularly proud of that one,” said Hilda, coming back into the room and startling him, so that he thought he might drop the bloody thing. He put it back carefully in its place between a cat lying curled in a basket of flowers and a giraffe. She handed him his mug of tea. “Una comes from a little village in North Devon. I hadn’t seen a unicorn before.”

“You’ve named them?”

“Oh yes. That’s Gary the giraffe, Pam the poodle, Oscar the otter, Reg the rhino – you get the idea,” she chuckled. “Of course, I can’t remember them all, so tomorrow it might be Rebecca the rhino and Oswald the otter. But that just makes it more fun. Una is always Una though.”

“How come?”

“Well, apart from the fact that names starting with U are a bit harder to come by, she was the last one that my husband bought me, god rest his soul.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” said Alfie, flustered. “I didn’t mean to...”

“I know you didn’t, me dear. How could you know? And it’s not like you killed him, is it? You weren’t out there directing the drunk sod into the big hole he fell down. I always told him the drink would kill him. Of course, I’d meant with his health, but there you go.” Alfie didn’t quite know how to respond to that and was searching for something even vaguely appropriate to say when she rescued him.

“So, you’re here for a room anyway, aren’t you, me dear? The price is three pounds, two shillings a week and that includes your room, two meals a day and your laundry. Breakfast is served in the dining room, but I know Derek likes to start early so I expect you’ll be needing something before I’m up and about. I can do some boiled

eggs for you the night before and you can help yourself to some porridge – how’s that for you?” Alfie nodded.

“That would be very nice, thank you Mrs— Sorry, Hilda.”

“Right, good then. Dinner is served at six, also in the dining room, and is whatever I’ve felt like cooking up. Like it or lump it, I’m afraid.” She finished her tea and placed the mug emphatically on the sideboard, upsetting Gary the giraffe. “He’s so clumsy,” she said affectionately, putting the animal back upright. “Anyway, assuming that’s all acceptable to you, Alfie Cooper, then I’ll show you your room.

“It’s not much,” she continued, walking ahead of him up the stairs, “But then I’m not charging you much, am I?” She stopped on the landing at the top of the stairs. “Right, that’s Matthew’s room, that one there is Joe’s and this is your room here. My bedroom is downstairs at the back with the bathroom.”

She was right, thought Alfie. It wasn’t much. But it would do. It had a single bed, a small desk under a window that looked out to the road, a cupboard and a small basin and jug. He did a quick mental calculation of how much money he’d have left every week. Not a lot by any stretch, but it should be enough for his needs.

“Bath day is Sunday and I go first so I can get a start on dinner. You can work out the rest of the order between yourselves. In between you’ve got your own basin there for freshening up.”

Alfie nodded, wondering what Matthew and Joe would be like; how old they’d be, if they’d be friendly. And, most importantly, would they like him?