

Dedicated to my girls.

Charlie Kipper By Benjamin J. Devlin

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Prologue

Looking down through a large window, he stood, pouting as he pondered. Past the reflection of long tube light bulbs and opposite the hospital grounds was a park, busy with children clambering about and laughing, carefree. Young girls with their hopscotch and boys climbing bars. Parents were sitting close by, talking about the weather. The view was slightly obscured by a large sign erected just outside of the building. It read 'Kimberley Bell Hospital, Oxford.'

He smiled at first but then frowned at the thought of how his son may find his mentally fragile father too embarrassing to be seen with at the park. But, fortunately his daughter was too young to understand his psychological troubles, and that was precious. He scanned the landscape and to the left saw a river through the branches of the bare trees. Feeling uneasy and a little sick, he turned away and sat back down at his table. On it was an unfinished, scattered jigsaw puzzle. Three of the sides were already conjoined, he could have completed the fourth but instead took a break. He hadn't thought about it at first, but as the pieces came together, he realised a river was within the picture. He slouched backwards in this chair and folded his arms quickly in frustration and tutted.

'Jonathan,' a voice faintly echoed in the background.
'Excuse me, Jonathan.'

Jonathan looked up to see one of the nurses looking directly at him and walking over. She was elderly but she seemed determined as she fiercely hurried along.

'Yes,' he answered, quietly.

The nurse smiled and seemed pleasant, but as she gained momentum her smile slowly changed into a grimace and then a look of misery and with evil in her eyes.

'I hope you're happy with yourself you little shit!' She screamed at him in a distorted deep voice. John stammered, panicked and froze.

'Because of you, she's dead... she's dead... she's dead! SHE'S DEAD!'

John sprung up from his bed, drenched in sweat, the bed clothes too were soaked. He was breathing heavily, he looked to his side to see his loving wife peacefully sleeping.

He rubbed his eyes and then his forehead with a sleeve. After a few deep breaths his head soon fell back down to his sodden pillow. John closed his eyes.

Chapter 1

A Good Lad

On a cool August morning in Lowed - Windlington, Dorset, around seven o'clock, the morning dew glistened from the bright sun, which had crept above the treetops. Among the trees, birds sang their morning song while gathering food for their young. The oak, ash and pine trees, all formed a wooded area known as Knottywood. A beautiful area home to much wildlife such as foxes, deer, badgers and also some snakes. Birds of prey had also been a regular sighting, buzzards and kites would be seen daily circling the area, especially Knotty Lane in case of any tasty roadkill.

Two lakes situated roughly in the centre of the woods were picturesque and tranquil and home to large carp, bream and perch, with a few nice soapy tench for good measure and night fishing was most popular, especially throughout the summer months.

Knotty Lane ran the whole perimeter of Knottywood, about four miles in total. It wasn't a busy road, as only so many houses were situated there, coupled by the fact it did not lead to anywhere else, instead went round in a complete circle, exiting the same way it entered. In fact, Knotty Lane was so quiet, children would often use it to play games.

Lowed - Windlington was a laid back and peaceful place, and that is exactly why about a year and a half ago the Kipper family moved there, leaving behind their friends and family for a fresh new start.

'Okay, Charlie! Can ya' give me a hand n' hold the shelf so I can make sure it's straight?' Jonathan called to his son from inside the shed. Although his American accent had become slightly diluted, it still stood out like a sore thumb in Lowed - Windlington, being it a small hamlet with mainly locals born and bred. Jonathan was in his mid-forties, born and raised in Gainesville, Northwest, New York. He was a writer and recently had gained moderate success with his debut novel *Nostalgic Tears*. He would normally be seen wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, and this day was no different. Jonathan spent most of his time around the house, waiting for Inspiration.

'Okay, Dad,' Charlie said as he came running into the wooden garden shed, wearing a pair of blue shorts with a white t-shirt and a pair of not-too-expensive trainers. Charlie was rarely interested in the latest and greatest brands nor having the same as all the other boys at school, instead he was happy enough with the bog-standard attire. The shed was a modest sized shed, a shed full of hopes and dreams. The kind of shed which looked brand new due to lack of saw dust and mess. No paint stains or dried up clumps of glue. It was a pristine shed which was home to the lawnmower, the garden strimmer and some shears. A Jerry Can full of petrol sat on the floor in the

corner as soon as the lawnmower would run dry. Those hopes and dreams were still in existence but slowly fading away. However, building the shelf could be the start of something special and keep those dreams alive. Charlie grabbed the shelf from his dad and held it firmly against the wall. Charlie was a good lad, an honest, helpful and pleasant young lad. He was thirteen years old, slim and blonde with blue eyes. Most of his spare time was either spent helping his mum and dad around the house or doing his homework. Charlie had been raised well, he was the type that would help an elderly person across a road, he would volunteer at local events such as school fetes and fun runs and so on. If it was for a good cause then Charlie was there, he certainly was a good and decent lad.

'Good boy, Charlie... hold it there, Son.'

'I've got it, Dad, don't worry,' Charlie responded in his Oxonian accent, which differed greatly from his father's. Charlie had never been to America, he was born and raised in Oxford with Cybill, his younger sister by five years. Charlie was twelve and a half when his family moved to Lowed - Windlington, and now it wasn't long before his fourteenth birthday.

'Okay, m'boy,' Jonathan said as he placed a small spirit level on top of the shelf. It was no longer than thirty centimetres and the shelf was just over a metre.

'Maybe it's time to get something bigger, Dad,' suggested Charlie, not wanting to sound insensitive.

'Nothin' wrong with this, Charlie... nothin' whaaatsoooveer!' The proud dad moved the spirit level from side to side a centimetre or so until he was satisfied it was dead centre. The spirit level suggested the shelf was a little off, so Jonathan gave it a little knock underneath the left-hand side. Now the shelf was off from the right-hand side, again, he gave a little knock, but this time on the opposing end of the shelf.

'Gotcha, you son of a bitch!' John bellowed with joy. Both father and son looked at each other and laughed.

'Well done, Dad,' said Charlie, still holding the shelf.

'Thank you, Charlie... oh hey, don't tell your mom, I swore around ya, okay,' he said, grabbing Charlie in a headlock, joking around.

'Okay, okay, I won't,' Charlie was red in the face from play-fighting whilst trying to hold the shelf up.

Jonathan let go and ruffled up Charlie's hair. 'That's m'boy, Charlie, good lad.'

'Um, the shelf's wonky again, Dad,' Charlie saw the bubble in the spirit level had gone far to one side.

'Ah, shit!'

'Jonathan!' Susan, (Charlie's mother / Jonathan's wife) came marching out from the back door, across the garden path and into the shed. The garden path split the lawn completely in half, it was a decent enough sized garden and a perfect square at around sixty feet by sixty feet. Bordering the lawn were flower beds, dense and colourful with some small trees and bushes

thrown into the mix. The shed was located at one end of the garden and was connected to the house via the garden path. Most of the shed's roof was obscured by a cherry blossom tree from the neighbour's garden, in the springtime a blanket of pink cherry blossom would cover not just the shed roof but the entire lawn. It was picturesque and a time of the year which Jonathan loved most. Susan on the other hand, couldn't stand the damn thing!

'Oh, hey, babe,' Jonathan sprung to attention. A little surprised and somewhat anxious.

'Don't *hey, babe* me!' Susan gave a blunt response whilst pointing at Jonathan. Sounding a little more common than her two children, but not too common, she spoke well, but just a little colloquial compared to some, and raised a little different than most of the other residents of Lowed - Windlington. 'Do you realise how early it is? We do have neighbours,' she continued. Susan was fresh out of bed, hair up in a ponytail, white and flowery dressing gown on and slippers to match.

'Shit... uh... hell, sorry, Susan. Did we wake ya?' Jonathan's American accent stood out more-so whenever being told off by his English wife.

'Shut up!' Susan blurted, annoyed at how thoughtless he could be.

'Sorry, babe.'

'Charlie... c'mon get inside love, breakfast and teeth.' When talking to Charlie, Susan had a more loving and caring approach but still firm and to the point.

'Yes sorry, Mum.'

'Okay, baby,' Susan smiled.

Charlie placed the shelf down next to the wall and hurried out of the shed, across the garden path and into the back door of the house.

'I'm sorry too baby,' Jonathan said lovingly as he put his arm around his wife.

'Stop being a twat, Johnny!' Susan shoved his arm away but also had a wry smile appear upon her face. 'It's really fucking early and you've already pissed the neighbours off this week with your early morning lawn mowing and other stupid things you keep doing at stupid o'clock,' she continued to moan.

'Do you want some tea?' Jonathan asked with a smile as he certainly knew how to fix this.

'... Go on then,' replied Susan. They both chuckled and made their way to the house, jokingly bargaining into one another along the way.

Their house was a much loved house; it was always clean and tidy and always bright and cheerful. It wasn't modern and it wasn't old fashioned, it was somewhere in between, it was... just right. The first room you come to from out the back, was the kitchen. Susan had the say in every last detail with the kitchen, she would not let her husband make any stupid decisions. You

can mess up the rest of the house, but don't fuck with my kitchen! Jonathan often wondered how rich he would be if he had a dollar or a pound even, every time he heard that.

Jonathan-Johnny, John had placed two mugs on the kitchen side which was right in front of the window looking directly out over the rear garden. As he stood peering out, admiring the garden and thinking how all his hard work had paid off, he spooned some sugar into the mugs followed by teabags and a dash of milk. On went the kettle and off went his concentration as once again he stood admiring his garden and all the work he'd put into it.

'Daddy,' a faint voice could be heard.

Reminiscing about how he single handedly transformed the garden from the mess it once was, to this little world of enchantment and tranquility.

'Daddy....'

He thought how lucky they all were to have him and told himself *without him, the garden... no, the whole town would be screwed!*

'DADDY!' A young girl bellowed from being ignored.

'Oh, shi... shoot!' John jumped as he was brought back down to earth. 'Cybill! Mornin' princess,' he put an arm around her, pulled her in close and gave a hug with a kiss on the head.

'Sorry about that Cyb, you made your old daddy jump, you scared the shhii... hhell outta me, baby,' John said, laughing.

Cybill clutched her favourite doll whilst being squeezed tight by her daddy.

'Can Charlie take me to the woods today?'

'Um, have you asked Charlie?'

'Yeah, he said to ask you or mummy.'

John, by this point had stopped squeezing. He knew that Cybill had purposely asked him over Susan, the reason being was that Susan would have probably said no due to the fact that some of Cybill's toys hadn't been tidied up from downstairs.

'Well, good girl for asking. But... um, yeah, that's fine, just let me know when you're leavin', okay?' John felt a sickness in his gut, he knew he'd done wrong and may feel the wrath of Susan for this terrible act of betrayal.

'Yay! Thanks, Daddy,' she said before running off, dancing her way upstairs. John leant back against the kitchen side and crossed his arms. 'Yep! Charlie's a good lad.' He said with a look of pride.

Suddenly Susan bellowed from the living room: 'Johnny! Where's my tea?'

'Sorry, babe.'

Chapter 2

A Horrid Thought

It was midday, the temperature had reached twenty-eight degrees, and it was going to get hotter. Earlier Charlie had promised Cybill a trip to the park, which was only a five minute walk away. It was situated in the woods, but not deep in them, in fact, you could easily see the park when driving along Knotty Lane.

Cybill, was sitting on the edge of her bed, dressed in her favourite pink and white summer dress, holding her favourite doll - Sophia the Princess. The princess had a long plait, and Cybill also had a plait of her own, it wasn't as long as her doll's but it was good enough for Cybill. Her bedroom, a typical one for an eight-year-old girl had pink wallpaper with white polka dots. Cuddly toys and lots of dolls filled the majority of shelves and her bed. However, there was a long shelf which covered the width of the wall opposite her bed and was filled with snow globes. Cybill collected them from different places that she'd visited. Having never been abroad, the snow globes were mainly from day trips to the seaside or other days out around the UK. Cybill was normally a clean and tidy girl, hated mess and clutter, but loved her dolls and teddies, and there sure were a lot of them. She'd been waiting for Charlie for only two minutes, but it sure felt like twenty-two minutes.

'Charlie!' Cybill shouted out of frustration, 'Can we go now?' she asked, slouching as she sulked. A couple of knocks and bangs followed by a loud thud, came from Charlie's room. The thud had vibrated through the floorboards and Cybill felt it whilst sitting on her bed.

'I'll be right there,' Charlie answered, sounding somewhat out of breath.

'What are you doing? What's all that noise?' Cybill called.

'Don't worry, I'll explain later.'

'Hey, Son!' shouted Jonathan from downstairs.

'It's ok, Dad, it was just me, it was nothing!'

'Okey dokey!'

Then there was another thud, but this time it was a little louder.

'Charlie, baby, what the hell are you doing up there?' called his mother.

'Just lifting some weights!' Charlie's voice travelled through the house so everyone could hear. Jonathan and Susan looked at each other puzzled as they sat on their brown two-seater leather sofa, watching the television. Cybill gave the same expression to Sophia the princess whilst still sitting on her bed.

'Why are you lifting weights, Charlie?' Jonathan and Susan both ask simultaneously. Loud footsteps rattled ornaments throughout the house as Charlie quickly made his way down the stairs. He carried on into the living room where his parents were snuggled up watching a bit of Saturday daytime television. 'I just

want to be a bit stronger, that's all,' he explained as they both turned their heads to him.

'Okay, Son, that's cool,' said John.

'Hang on a minute,' Susan said, putting down her cup of tea on the coffee table in front, 'you been having trouble again from those halfwits down the road?' Referring to three boys, two of which are twin brothers and the third is a friend of the twins. The brothers, Richard and Harley Butt are sixteen years old going on twelve. The friend, Billy Williams is also sixteen. They are typically known as 'The Willy Butts'. 'The Willy Butts' was never a term of endearment nor a name which they called themselves, it was a name the Kipper family had created a couple of years back when Charlie had been bullied by the trio for the first time. Charlie's parents assumed it had been resolved, but every now and then, when Charlie least expected it, when they were bored and had nothing better to do, the thuggish three would corner him. They loved to see the worry in his eyes as they tormented him. Poor Charlie would get pushed and shoved and on a couple of occasions even punched. The attacks were usually brief but still were humiliating and worrying for him. Each and every encounter would eat away at him.

'Sort of,' Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

'Babe, why didn't you say anything?' Susan said as she stood up. She grabbed Charlie and hugged him tight.

'I just felt a bit stupid and embarrassed, I guess,' Charlie said, quietly. His arms dangled, motionless as his mother squeezed the life out of him.

'D'you want us to say something, Son?' asked his dad.

'No... thanks, I'll be fine, it's nothing really. I guess I just wish I was a bit tougher and not so scared of confrontation.'

'I understand, Charlie,' said Jonathan.

Susan kissed his head and fixed his hair a little. 'Look, you just let us know. Don't suffer in silence and don't let those idiots get away with anything, Okay?' demanded his mum.

'Okay, Mum,' Charlie looked sad, but also a little relieved that he'd told them.

'I don't understand bullies!' Jonathan stated, 'would it kill 'em to just... I dunno, get along with people, be civil, be nice and not be dicks all the time? Someone needs to punish them, the little shits.'

'Jonathan!'

'Sorry, dear.'

Cybil had made her way down the nut-brown carpeted stairs. A carpet that still had plenty of thick sponginess to it and was a comforting addition to their lovely home. As Susan and Jonathan resumed their television program, Cybill asked Charlie what their conversation had been about but Charlie dismissed it as nothing. He didn't want to worry his little sister. Charlie grabbed his basketball from underneath the coat rack by the front door before both brother and sister left for the park.

Charlie dribbled his basketball as Cybill skipped on ahead. The journey from their house to the park would normally take about six or seven minutes by foot and only about a minute and a half by bike. Both siblings had bikes, but they decided it would be nice to walk as it's a warm, sunny day. But, more importantly it gave Charlie an opportunity to play with his basketball along the way.

As they neared the park, the sound of peddling bikes approached from behind, followed by, 'Kipper!' a male's voice shouted. Cybill stopped skipping and looked back and so did Charlie.

'Jesus!' Charlie whispered to himself.

The trio of bullies were closing in. Charlie sighed and tutted, he was anxious, he stood-still clutching his basketball, watching as the imbeciles surround them both. All of which were looking much the same in their skintight joggers and floppy hair styles. Richard and Harley Butt were both wearing the same t-shirts by a popular brand amongst teenagers. '*Hevy Dewty*', a brand created by a fat influencer called Robert Dewty.

'Kipper!' Billy Williams shouted as he skidded to a halt. The twins cycled for a moment longer, circling around Charlie, intimidating him before they too skidded to a halt.

'Give us your ball, Kipper,' said Richard Butt. He spoke with a sickening smile and a look of mischief about him.

'C'mon, fish!' Harley Butt added in a pleading tone. Charlie, shaking with nerves, shook his head, he was scared but he would not hand over the ball. It may only be a ball, but it was out of principle. Charlie gave them a look as if to say *you want it, come and get it*. A brave move from Charlie, but he couldn't help it, it must have been pride. Billy Williams, still on his bike, edged closer to Charlie and stopped right beside him.

'Charlie, just give us the fuckin' ball!' Billy said in a slightly calmer manner. Charlie sensed that Billy wasn't as big a threat as the twins. There was something a little, but not too much, more mature about him and in some way did not seem to fit within the small group.

Cybill watched, wishing they would go away. She was young but she knew it would embarrass him if she started telling them to leave him alone, so she watched on and kept quiet.

Charlie shook his head again. 'No,' he said.

'Jus' get the fuckin' ball Billy!' One of the twins blurted.

'I said *give* it!' Billy said holding out his hand. He then edged closer and smacked the ball from Charlie's grip, it bounced a few times before Harley Butt dropped his bike, ran over to the ball and grabbed it. Charlie had frozen. Once they had possession of the ball—the twins sniggered. Cybill wanted to cry, but the brave girl held it in, she needed to be strong for her brother. Charlie stepped forward in an attempt to retaliate, but stopped, he was too nervous. The decision to back down made him feel small and he too wanted to cry, luckily he also

managed to hold back the tears. However, an image had manifested in his mind when he made that forward step. An image of what he would do to them, how he would punish them, or at least one of them. He had images of wrestling one of them to the floor before pummeling them repeatedly in the face with a rock. These thoughts made him feel sick, but he couldn't shake them from his head.

Unfortunately, the single, short step forward from Charlie triggered a reaction from one of the members of the idiotic trio. Richard Butt, to prove his macho dominance; marched towards Charlie with fierce intent and with both hands pushed him so hard that he stumbled back about five paces before falling over and landing in a large prickly thorn bush. Collectively they laughed. Billy even looked away as he laughed to himself, as though he actually felt bad but couldn't help it. Cybill stood silently still, hoping they would leave now they've got what they wanted.

Charlie picked himself up and brushed himself down. The poor boy had sprained his ankle during the stumble and was also covered in scratches from a bush full of thorns. The impact of the fall had torn the back of his t-shirt, from one push, he looked a mess. He struggled but cleared his way from the bush and limped over to his sister, he didn't cry, however, he desperately wanted to. The gang enjoyed the show which they'd created and applauded Charlie for getting up.