

WHERE
the RIVER
TAKES US

LESLEY PARR

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Lesley Parr, 2023
Illustrations copyright © David Dean, 2023

Lesley Parr and David Dean have asserted their rights under the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author
and Illustrator of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-4777-1; Waterstones: 978-1-5266-6530-0;
eBook: 978-1-5266-4778-8; ePDF: 978-1-5266-4776-4

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters

For Angharad



CHAPTER ONE

THE THREE OF US

It's surprising how many people in a small town will believe there's a wild cat on the loose. Up the valley, in Blaengarw, loads have seen it, but no one has real proof.

Funny that.

Jinx thinks it's true – but then, he would. He's over by the old brick shed on the other side of the waste ground with Tam, collecting stuff to build a bike



ramp. But I'd rather bomb around, spraying little stones into the air when I spin into skids.

This place, this scruffy, gravelly patch of land covered in rubble and pallets and anything else that can be dragged here, is where most of us Ponty kids hang around after school. I know everyone and everyone knows me. I never used to mind that, because I never really thought about it. But it's different now. Because everything's different now.

I try to perfect a wheelie, hit a stone, lose my balance and land on my side, wheels spinning. Just as Catrin comes over the top of the hill, hood up against the wind.

She runs over. 'Jason! You okay?'

'Yeah,' I say, rubbing my arm. Good job my parka's nice and thick.

'If you want to ride on one wheel, why don't you get a unicycle?' she asks, holding out a hand, but I get up without taking it.

'Choppers are cooler.' I grin, checking my bike for scratches.



All around us, kids shout and play. Some younger ones run past with their coats buttoned at the top like capes, yelling the *Batman* theme tune; on a tower of old car tyres, a girl's pretending to be a teacher, bossing her friends around; most of us older ones are on bikes. It's better than the park; that's got flower beds and benches and grown-ups.

This is just for us. This is ours.

'Why are you so late anyway?' I ask Catrin.

'Flipping bus broke down,' she says. 'Again. Wish I could walk to school like you.'

I look down the road, behind her. 'Where's Rhodri?'

'Left him outside Harwell's, drooling over the Airfix kits. Mam's going to tell me off, but I've got tons of homework.' She lifts her satchel, like she's trying to prove there are loads of books inside. 'Little brothers are a pain.'

'I bet that's what Richie says about me.'

'He's doing his best, you know.'

I shrug. 'Suppose.'

Catrin shuts up. That's the great thing about her.



She knows not to give me the look, the *I'm sorry your mam and dad died and your brother has to look after you* look. I get it from everyone else; teachers, Auntie Pearl, even Jinx and Tam sometimes. That's me; Jason North, the Ponty Orphan.

I hate it.

Jinx rides over and Catrin goes kind of stiff. They've never got on. Jinx has this thing about me, him and Tam being 'the three of us', so he doesn't give her a chance. And Tam's Tam – all for a quiet life – he never chooses sides. But Catrin's been my best friend since her family moved in next door when we were tiny. Everyone knows it.

'You're bleeding.' Jinx looks down at my knee. 'Give me a look.'

'No, you weirdo!'

'Hey, guess what?' He points to some kids chalking hopscotch on the pavement. 'We were just talking to them, and there's been another sighting of that wild cat. A man from Craigwern got a photo of its tail.'



I raise my eyebrows. 'Its tail?'

He waves Tam over. 'It's true, isn't it, about the cat in Blaengarw?'

Tam pulls up next to us, blocking out the low winter sun – he's massive, Tam is, gets it from his rugby coach dad. 'Yeah,' he says. 'People reckon it's too big to be a pet.'

'They all say that though.' I turn to Catrin. 'You agree with me, don't you?'

She screws up her face. 'To be honest, Jason, I'm not sure. I mean, why would all those people lie?'

Jinx claps his hands together, then holds them out in a *See what I mean?* sort of way. 'Exactly!'

Hang on ... Did he just agree with Catrin?

He looks into the distance, eyeing the mountains above the houses. 'Imagine if it was here instead of Blaengarw. We'd find it. Easy.'

Catrin scuffs her shoe on the ground and smirks. Jinx's too busy scanning the fields to notice. 'It's a puma or a jaguar, I bet you.'

'I know what type of cat it is.' They look at me like



they're surprised. I lean forward, my eyes going from side to side like I'm watching for spies. 'Imaginary.'

Catrin laughs and walks off. 'See you after, Jason.'

Jinx watches her go. 'Why does she have to come here anyway? Everyone knows the waste ground is for Ponty kids.'

I shove him.

He glares at me. 'Leave off, Jase, mun!'

'She is a Ponty kid though,' Tam says. 'She just goes to the Welsh school, that's all.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'And you don't own the waste ground. If you did I'm pretty sure you'd ban those two.'

Another bike flies past us, the rider and person on the back screeching and shouting like maniacs – Gary Hall and Dean Bolan. They bomb out on to the road, not even stopping to check for traffic.

Tam turns his bike. 'Last one to the ramp has to marry Mrs Fletcher!'

I jump on my Chopper, no way I'm getting there behind Jinx.

They've built a really good ramp out of an old door



and some bricks. Tam has the idea of laying corrugated iron in front of it so when we ride over the top it just about shakes our brains out.

‘We could come back tomorrow and make it a full assault course,’ he says. ‘I reckon my father will let us have some old training equipment we can make into jumps.’

‘Brilliant!’ Jinx checks his watch. ‘Let’s get it higher now, before it’s too dark. I’ll fetch more bricks.’

‘Can’t,’ I say, turning my handlebars. ‘Got to get home.’

‘All right.’

They never argue any more, never try to persuade me to stay out longer. Because they know I have to make tea.

Standing on the pedals, working them hard, I ride up the hill to my house.





CHAPTER TWO

THE KNOCK AT THE DOOR

It's not easy to chop a potato by candlelight. I've cut my finger twice. Finding a plaster in the messy drawer isn't easy either, but I've washed the blood off the chips. Richie won't know. I'm trying to make this candle last, like he said I had to, but how he expects me to do that, I don't know. Not without sitting in the dark.

On my own.



Waiting for him to get in from work.

I thought the blackouts would at least mean no homework. No such luck, and the way Richie goes on about wanting me to have better choices than he has, he'd probably set me some himself anyway.

He's stricter about it than Mam and Dad ever were. He used to do my sums for me then. And he was fun. Now he keeps on about being my *guardian*, so I have to do what he says. I preferred him when he was just my brother.

I do all the fractions first, glancing up at the clock every now and again. He's late. It's nearly six. Where is he? We have to cook tea at six on the dot, because that's when the power comes back on. I sneak the last Bourbon out of the biscuit barrel to keep me going, then turn over the page, dreading the decimals I know will be there.

The key rattles in the lock, the front door opens and closes, dragging over the loose bit of carpet we never find time to fix. Richie appears in the kitchen doorway, arms wrapped around himself, foot jiggling



up and down like he's twitchy about something. I suppose it's work again.

'All right?' He squints through the gloom. 'Done the chips, have you? Good boy. Won't be long now and we can get the pan on. Sorry I'm late.'

'Where've you been?'

He washes his hands in the sink; in the dark window, his reflection frowns. 'Talking to Dai Dep. Work stuff. Nothing for you to worry about.'

I was right then. I still worry though. Less work means less wages, and we were only just making the mortgage payments, even before the three-day week. It's all because there are miners' strikes, and something going on in the Middle East which I don't really understand, but it means the government can't get enough coal and oil to run things so they're cutting the power and making some people work less days.

He reaches into the bowl, pulls a slice of raw potato from the water and takes a bite.

'Aww, Jase, mun, you haven't got all the skin off! Again.'



‘You try peeling spuds in the dark,’ I say. ‘Anyway, it won’t matter once they’re fried – more goodness in the skin, isn’t it?’

‘Whatever you say.’ He reaches into the fridge for a pack of sausages. There’s a buzzing and a flicker and the kitchen light comes on. Soon, we’re tucking into bangers, chips and marrowfats.

‘How was school?’ he asks, taking another slice of bread from the tower between us. We always have lots of white sliced; it’s cheap and fills you up.

‘All right. Same as usual. Boring. Oh, but!’ I bite my chip butty. ‘Jinx said—’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full.’

I chew fast and swallow. ‘You sound like ...’ But I can’t finish the sentence. The word gets stuck.

‘I sound like her, don’t I?’ He speaks quietly, as if the words will break if he says them too loud. He reaches inside his jumper. He does it all the time, without thinking, and rubs his thumb over the St Christopher pendant Mam and Dad got him for his eighteenth birthday.



I nod.

He smiles. It's not real. He takes a big breath, leans back in his chair. 'So, come on then, what's Jenkins said now?'

He always calls him Jenkins, not Jinx. Probably because Dad did.

'You know that big cat people say is up Blaengarw?'

Someone bangs on the front door so loud we jump.

He pushes his chair back. 'I'll get it.'

I pack more chips into my fat butty and take another bite. Lovely.

Richie's speaking low and fast. 'I told you not to come here.'

I get up to see who's there. It's Snook Hall – what the hell's he doing here? Richie steps on to the pavement and closes the door behind him.

This can't be good.

I rush down the passage and press my face to the wood, trying to listen. I can't catch much, but I do hear 'tonight', 'not a request' and 'money'.



What the hell is going on?

The door clicks open, just a bit, and I leg it back down the passage and into my chair. When Richie comes back in, he's got his coat on. He leans over the table piling chips, peas and a sausage on to a slice of bread, then puts another one on top.

'Got to nip out. Won't be long.' He ruffles my hair like I'm five. 'You'll be all right for a bit, won't you?'

I stare at him.

'That was Snook Hall!'

'Leave it, Jase.'

'*Snook Hall*, older brother of Gary, Jinx's mortal enemy.'

'Don't be so dramatic, mun.'

'What did he want?'

'Nothing for you to worry about. Got to go. You can tell me about that big cat when I get back, yeah? We'll wash up together – all tidy for when you-know-who comes tomorrow.'

Aunty Pearl, as if I could forget. But I'm not letting him change the subject.



‘Snook mentioned money – you don’t owe him, do you?’

‘It’s nothing like that.’

I stand too. *‘Tell me.’*

Richie reaches across and puts his hand on my shoulder. ‘Forget it, eh?’ His voice is softer now. ‘Your big brother’s got everything under control.’

Then he’s gone, leaving me here with a sick feeling.

I can’t stand this. I need to know what’s going on. I slam my knife and fork down and run out of the house. I catch him before he reaches the corner of our street. He spins round when he hears my feet thudding on the pavement.

‘Jason! What the ... ?’ His face changes – goes from surprised to worried. He looks like Dad. ‘Where’s your coat?’

‘Where’s my coat? Is that all you can say?’

‘It’s cold.’

I stare right at him. ‘I might be thirteen but I’m not stupid. I’ve had to grow up fast, remember.’

Richie runs a hand through his hair. He looks down



at his feet, then up at me from under his eyebrows. He blows out a long breath.

I'm hopping on my toes now. 'I'll follow you. You can't stop me. I'll—'

'Jesus, Jase, okay!' he says, eyes darting everywhere. 'Not here though, eh?'

He takes his lumberjacket off and puts it on me. We walk through the streets, just sort of wandering. He eats his booty and I wait. Even though it kills me, I wait for him to speak because I can't push it. Not now.

'I made a bad choice,' Richie says, tapping his chest where the St Christopher is. 'A really bad choice, and now it's got worse.'

My mouth goes dry. 'What sort of choice?'

'I stole diesel from the depot.'

'You *what*?'

'To sell to Snook Hall.' Richie blinks and looks into the darkness towards the mountain. 'Not much but it was tidy money. He said it was a one-off and it paid for that last sack of coal we had. But then Snook



wanted more from me. See, his gang was looking for a welder. To help patch up all the cars and parts they've been stealing.'

My brother. A thief.

I swallow. 'And you said yes? Are we that poor now?'

'Honestly, Jase?'

'Honesty would be good, yeah.'

But he looks like a nervous little boy and suddenly I'm not so sure I want the truth.

Richie puffs out his cheeks. 'I don't think we can make the mortgage this month.'

He shoves his hands deep in his pockets, his shoulders all hunched like the weight of the world is on him, which I suppose it is, and my heart aches for him, and for me.

What a mess we're in.

'I was worried about my wages going down and got myself in a bit of a state. I wasn't thinking properly.' He holds his hands up. 'No excuse, I know! But Snook's crafty, they were never bothered about diesel,



the plan all along was to hook me in. Have something to hold over me. So they started making threats—'

'Is that why he came round?'

Richie nods. 'And to get me to do extra tonight or they'd make sure everyone knew I stole the diesel. Then I'd have no wages at all.'

'How much do we need for the mortgage?'

'Each repayment is twenty pounds. I've got about half that.'

'And if we don't get it?'

'We'll have it. You've got to trust me, Jase.'

Only the tips of my fingers peek out from the sleeves of his jacket. I can't stop staring at them. 'But ... if we don't, we can't stay together, can we? If we have no house. Social Services, they'd make me live with Aunty Pearl.'

'I reckon, yeah.'

'But ...' The words stick in my throat, so I do a little cough. 'If you go to jail, we won't be together either.'

'I'm not going to jail.'



‘How can you—’

‘It’s just till we get over this three-day-week nonsense. Get the mortgage paid on the first, and hopefully by next month things will be different.’

Does he really believe that?

‘I know this sounds twisted, but I’m doing it for us.’ He smiles, but it’s sad. ‘Now, give me my jacket back and clear off home, eh? I shouldn’t have told you ...’

‘I didn’t really give you a choice, did I?’

I put my arms around him and squeeze really tight. He squeezes back.

‘It’ll be all right,’ I say. ‘We’re in this together now.’

He lets go and holds me at arm’s length. ‘No, Jason. We’re not. Not this. This is my problem and you can’t tell anyone else. Not Catrin, not the boys, no one.’

‘Course I won’t,’ I say, already knowing it’s a lie.

In bed, cwtched up under the blankets, I point my torch at *Look-in* magazine, but it’s hard to flick through the pages with gloves on. Richie told me to use the Calor Gas heater and stay downstairs, but I’m



not wasting fuel. With my bobble hat on as well, it's not too bad. I lean my head back on the pillow and stare at the ceiling. I didn't think things could get any worse after Mam and Dad died, but here I am on my own in the dark while my brother is out breaking the law to keep us together.

The 1st is next week. St David's Day – usually a good day. Except now it's mortgage day, a day to dread.

For someone who has to be the grown-up, Richie's doing a really bad job of it.

And I've never felt more like a useless kid.



CHAPTER THREE

THE BEAST OF BLAENGARW

‘Jaaaaason! Jaaaaason! Jaaaaason!’
I leave my Sugar Puffs going soggy in the bowl and go out the back where Rhodri’s waving something over the garden wall.

‘It’s a Tiger Moth!’ He wobbles on the old milk crate he uses to see into our garden and makes the Airfix plane zoom around in the air. ‘It was in the war.’

‘It’s great,’ I say. ‘Can I hold it?’



'Yep.' He hands it to me. 'See the two cockpits? The pilot goes in the *back one!*'

'Wow.' I hand it back. 'Where's your sister?'

'In the kitchen. Shall I fetch her?' I expect him to get down and go inside but instead he bellows another ear-splitting shout. 'Caaaaatrin!'

Nothing.

'Caaaaatrin!' The back door opens.

'God, all right! What is it now?' she asks, coming to the wall.

Rhodri grins. 'Your boyfriend wants you.' He jumps off the crate and runs up the garden, through the back gate on to the lane, making aeroplane noises all the way.

'Wally.' She pulls a face. 'Take no notice.'

'I'm not,' I say. 'His new plane's good.'

'I wouldn't know, he won't let anyone near his models, except you.'

'What you doing?'

'Colouring. I've got some new felt tips. You can use them if you don't press too hard.'



‘Not now. Got to go food shopping, fancy coming?’

‘Gwyn’s or Co-op?’ She pushes her hair behind her ears, showing the scar by her left eye.

I look away. ‘Gwyn’s.’

‘I want to pick up my magazine, so yeah.’

We call Gwyn’s the corner shop, but it’s at the end of a terrace really. It’s a funny shape, with the door right on the end so there’s always a squeeze on the pavement. And it gets really busy on a Saturday morning; kids spending pocket money, old dears gossiping, men looking at papers, weighing up the betting odds. Next stop the bookie’s, then the club to watch the races over a pint.

Dad never did that. He used to take me and Richie for walks up the mountain. *Let’s get you out of your mother’s way*, he’d say. *Give her a bit of time to herself*. Mam loved it because she had some peace and we loved it because we had Bloke Time. Even when I was tiny, we called it that. Me and Richie used to say we’d always have Bloke Time. Even when we were grown up and Dad was old, we’d push him



around Ponty in a wheelchair.

But that'll never happen now.

Jinx and Tam are outside Gwyn's. Their heads down, reading *The Herald* – the local rag. What are they doing with that?

'Jason!' Jinx says, waving a page in front of my face. 'Look at this!'

I push it away. 'I can't look at anything if you shove it right at me. What's in there that's so interesting anyway?'

Tam grins down at me. 'Money.'

'What?'

'A reward,' Jinx says, his eyes all daft and goggling like a cartoon person. 'Look!'

I take the paper and they crowd round me. Catrin's immediately pushed out, so I elbow Jinx out of the way so she can see too.

BIG CAT SIGHTING REWARD

£100 for clear, exclusive photo

See bottom right for Terms and Conditions



‘And?’ I say. ‘What’s it got to do with us? The cat – if it exists – lives up Blaengarw. That’s miles away.’

‘Yeah, but we could go,’ Jinx says. ‘Between the three of us it’s just under thirty-three pounds fifty each; I worked it out. Imagine what we could do with thirty-three pounds fifty, what would you buy? I’d get ...’

I want to say about six weeks’ mortgage, but I don’t.

He keeps on, ignoring the fact we don’t even have a camera, getting stupidly excited about trekking up the valley, finding a wild beast and being in the paper, but I’ve stopped listening. It’s all right for him and Tam, their families have money – they’re not rich – no one around here is rich – but they have enough so their kids can dream about spending prize money on treats. They don’t have to think about food shopping and boring, boring bills.

And they don’t have to worry about dodgy blokes like Snook Hall knocking the door.

‘Oh, look out,’ Tam mutters.

Gary Hall and Dean Bolan are crossing the road



towards us, doing that stupid, swaggergy walk they think makes them look tough.

‘Oi, Jinx-boy! Lend us three p,’ Gary says. ‘I need matches.’

Jinx stares at the paper as if he hasn’t heard. He’s always nervous around them, which I get, because they pick on him the most, but he’s safe with Tam here. Which is weird, as Tam’s never had a fight in his life – just the size of him is enough for Gary and Dean to not push things too far.

‘Gone deaf or what?’ Dean pokes him in the back.

‘I haven’t got any money left,’ Jinx mumbles.

‘Leave him alone,’ I say.

Catrin’s eyes flick from me to Dean. Tam, as usual, just folds his arms and says nothing.

‘What’s this then?’ Dean leans over my shoulder.

‘Oh, the Beast ... my uncle saw it last week.’

‘Yeah, right,’ I say.

‘You calling him a liar?’

I shrug. ‘Well, if he can prove it, he gets one hundred quid. There’s a reward in here.’



‘*What?*’ Gary whips the paper out of my hands and reads the page. ‘We’ll have this, thank you very much.’ He folds *The Herald*, puts it under his arm and they go off down the road.

Jinx glares at me. ‘Why’d you have to go and tell *them?*’

‘What difference does it make, Jinx?’ I say. ‘There *is* no flaming cat.’

Catrin follows me into Gwyn’s and pretends not to notice when I stock up on the reduced, dented cans.

It’s not far, but the bags are heavy so we have to keep stopping. At the end of our road, a woman’s coming towards us, trundling her tartan shopping trolley.

‘Fletcher alert!’ Catrin whispers. ‘Pretend we’re deep in conversation, she might not try to talk to us then.’

Fat chance of Ponty’s biggest stirrer doing that, but I say, ‘Okay.’

Which, of course, means that now we can’t think of a single thing to say before Mrs Fletcher reaches us.



‘Been shopping, have you?’ she asks. ‘That’s what I’m doing now. Getting the bus into town. Better shops in town, see.’ She stretches her neck to look in my bags. ‘Those spaghetti hoops – half-p cheaper in Tesco, they are.’

My fingers close around the handles of the bag, blocking her view. ‘Only cheaper if you’ve got a bus pass, isn’t it? Otherwise the fare cancels it out.’

Mrs Fletcher’s lips go tight. ‘Well, I’m just trying to help.’

‘Anyway.’ Catrin pulls herself up very straight. ‘We like shopping at Gwyn’s.’

‘I’m only saying. Must be hard for Jason and Richie being on their own.’

Catrin pulls on my sleeve and we try to get past, but Mrs Fletcher hasn’t finished. She puts on a simpering look, leaning down, talking in that fake-gentle voice people like her always use to show the world they care. ‘How are you, boy? Is it getting any easier? How long’s it been now? Eight ... ten months?’

My stomach twists into a messy knot, my throat



feels tight. I need to get away.

‘We’re going now,’ Catrin says, her voice strong and hard, like steel.

Mrs Fletcher doesn’t even look at her. She leans closer, her voice soft but her eyes hungry, like she hopes I’ll break, start crying in the street, so she can go and tell all her friends down the bingo about the poor, sad boys whose parents died in that car crash on Emmerson Road and how she’s such a good neighbour, looking out for us. ‘Dreadful business, both of them going like that. You must miss them something awful. I remember when our Billy got knocked down ...’

Catrin gasps.

Billy? Billy was her *dog!*

Hot and cold waves ripple all over me. If I stay here I’ll explode. I drop the bags, push past the stupid woman and run, fast, up our street, past our front door. I keep going, across the next road. Brian Carter’s workshop is dead in front of me, the metal shutters down. I don’t slow, let myself slam into them, shoulder



first, and crumple to the ground. Breathing hard. Seething hard. Hating Mrs Fletcher with all my might.

I wrap my arms around my legs and press my head into my knees, hot tears soaking through my jeans. I don't know how long it is until I hear footsteps. Someone stops in front of me. I open my eyes, move my head slightly and see blue-and-white trainers. Catrin doesn't say a word, just sits down next to me. For one weird second, I think she's going to put her arm around my shoulders but all she does is sit right up close. And I let her.

After about ten minutes she says, 'You don't usually let Mrs Fletcher get to you.'

I finally look at her, turning my head to the side and wiping my cheeks. 'Billy, mind!'

'I know,' she whispers.

But Catrin's right. As usual. It's more than that. It's the horrible feeling I've had in my chest ever since Snook knocked our door. So I tell her about Richie and Snook's gang and she listens. Then we don't say



anything for a while, and it feels okay to have said it all. Good, even. Because, with Catrin, I can admit I'm scared witless.

She plays with her shoelaces, pressing the little plastic ends into her palms, making marks. 'My mam's going to kill me.'

'Why?'

Her face scrunches up. 'Because of what I said to Mrs Fletcher.'





CHAPTER FOUR

AUNTY PEARL

Richie's trying not to laugh, I can tell. 'She called Mrs Fletcher a *what*?'

'You heard,' I say, passing him a clean, wet plate. 'And the old bag went straight next door and I don't think Catrin's going to be allowed out again till she's thirty! Anyway, shut up, mun, Aunty Pearl will hear you.'

We look at the ceiling, knowing she's upstairs, scrubbing the bath like a mad woman. She's not our

real aunty, she's Mam's godmother. Catrin's aunts are young and trendy, and she loves them babysitting her and Rhodri. Aunty Pearl is more like a grim old nana.

But Richie's still grinning. 'I didn't think little Catrin Rees knew words like that.'

'It's not funny,' I say. 'She won't even be able to speak to me over the wall. Remember when we were six and we took those flowers off that grave? It'll be like that.'

'Took?'

'Okay, we robbed them – but only to give to Catrin's gran!'

He finishes drying the plate and puts it in the cupboard, sniggering to himself.

'Stop laughing!' I snatch the tea towel and flick him with it. 'We *meant well* –' flick – 'and Catrin's gran was landed! –' flick. We play fight, until he surrenders. And it feels great, like things used to be.

But the feeling goes away fast when Aunty Pearl appears in the kitchen doorway, face like thunder; big



and terrible in the brown checked overalls she wears
to *keep her clothes nice*.

‘We’re only messing about,’ I say quickly.

‘So I see.’ She folds her arms. ‘Aren’t you a bit old
for that, Richard?’

He looks at the floor and tries to hide his words in
a cough so only I can hear. ‘Apparently not.’

‘Don’t, Rich,’ I mutter.

Sometimes it’s best to keep quiet and let her get on
with it, but he can’t seem to do that.

‘I’ve tidied your bedroom, Jason,’ she says. ‘Got rid
of those old magazines in the box next to your bed.’

‘*What?*’ I sound a bit shrieky. ‘I was reading them!’

‘Oh, don’t be silly, they’re out-of-date. The ones at
the bottom had 1971 written on them!’

‘That’s because I *collect* them!’

‘We’ve asked you not to go in our bedrooms, Auntie
Pearl,’ Richie says, his voice whispery, like he’s trying
to keep his temper. ‘Where are they now, his
magazines?’

‘In the outside bin. But I really can’t see what the



fuss is about.’ She starts emptying the washing machine, not looking at him.

‘No,’ Richie mutters. ‘You really can’t, can you? Don’t worry, Jase, *I’ll* get your magazines.’

Aunty Pearl gasps. ‘Out of the bin?’

‘Yes, because that’s where you put them. Without asking.’ He stops on the back doorstep. ‘Then I’m going to watch *World of Sport*.’

She turns to me. ‘I hope you never speak to your elders like that.’

‘Richie’s all right,’ I say.

She raises her eyebrows and makes her lips really small as if I’m simple and she’s the wise woman of the flaming valleys.

‘It’s time he grew up and started shouldering his responsibilities.’

How much more grown up does she want him to be? Mostly it feels like a thousand years since Richie North could be anywhere near irresponsible, the cool kid everyone wanted to be mates with. But he’s doing his best – we both are. If she stopped judging



and picking and sniping for five minutes, she'd see that.

'We look after each other,' I mumble.

'That's just it though, Jason. A thirteen-year-old boy shouldn't be looking after his nineteen-year-old brother. He's the man of the house now.' She closes the washing-machine door. 'And if the state of the bathroom was anything to go by, I don't think he's doing a very good job.'

The bathroom? She really doesn't get it.

'We look after each other,' I repeat, firmer this time.

Aunty Pearl huffs, grabs the wash basket and goes out to the line.

But I know what she's getting at. She *wants* him to mess up. She's been circling like an old buzzard for months, saying I'd be better off with her. Making out like he's completely rubbish at being my guardian. And she treats me like a little kid. Always fussing over me, blaming Richie for things, even when it's my fault. Like the time I got a really low mark in my spelling test; she said Richie could have helped me

learn my words. And when Jinx accidentally split my head open with a skimming stone and I had three stitches; she reckoned Richie should *keep an eye on the company I keep*.

God, imagine if she knew the company *he's* keeping! She'd never understand that he's doing it for us. If he went to jail, it'd suit her just fine. Then she could be right.

I kneel on my bedroom floor, putting the magazines back in the right order. Why does she have to mess everything up? Stupid, interfering old bat. The muffled voices downstairs get louder, only the odd word drifting up to me until ...

'The boy has holes in his clothes!'

Aunty Pearl's off again.

'He fell off his bike yesterday.' Richie fumes. 'Kids do! We've got a patch for it. You make it sound like he's walking around in rags!'

I go and twty down at the top of the stairs, holding on to the banister like prison bars.



‘Don’t say *kid*, Richard. He’s a boy, not a baby goat.’

‘*Oh my God!*’

‘All I’m saying is ...’ Her voice stays calm. ‘You need to think about the future – for both of you.’

‘*I. Am.*’ Richie’s nearly shouting now. ‘It’s all I flaming well think about! The future! And bills! And making sure Jason’s okay! And – oh forget it. Why am I even trying to make you see? What’s the damn point?’

Oh no, that’s a Class A swear word to Aunty Pearl, that is. She’s chapel.

‘Well, Richard, you need to think a bit harder, good boy. Don’t – don’t you dare walk away when I’m speaking to you.’

The back door slams. I rush to my bedroom and go straight to the window to see Richie pacing the garden, clenching and unclenching his fists. She won’t follow him out there. The last thing Aunty Pearl would do is row where the neighbours could hear. She says it’s common.

I slump on to the floor. Flipping Aunty Pearl.



Always thinking we need her help. Well, me and Richie are fine without her.

Except ... we're not fine. Not really. And we can't fix it on our own.

I look up – at the mountains all around our valley and the road which leads to Blaengarw.

Maybe we don't have to fix it on our own.

I've got mates. Good ones. Mates with a wild idea and just the right mix of stupidity and determination to pull it off.

