

## chapter one

It all starts in the spring, which is odd when you think that spring is meant to be about growth and renewal. Mum likes spring because she loves daffodils, and she says when the little yellow trumpets start poking their heads above ground it always reminds her that sunshine is on its way. Mum's been complaining that she hasn't felt well for a couple of days. It isn't like her, but everyone at school's had this cold that's been going round. Even when she has a bad cold though, or the flu, Mum still carries on, getting up for work, pulling her pink dressing gown on and yawning as she heads for the bathroom, knowing the toilet seat will be up because she says that's what you get with two boys in the house.

This morning, she's getting ready to leave – got her nurse's uniform on already – but she's complaining of a pain in her shoulder. I start to give it a bit of a rub but,

as soon as I touch it, she winces with pain.

‘Ooh, careful, Luke, love,’ she says. ‘It’s really tender there.’

‘Call in sick,’ I tell her. ‘Say you’re not well. You’re not well.’

She gulps down a couple of paracetamol with a swig of tea.

‘They’re short-staffed as it is,’ she says, fastening her watch. ‘Half the hospital’s got that nasty cold. Hope I’m not.’

‘You want to go and see the doctor,’ I tell her. ‘The place should be crawling with them.’

‘Doctors . . .’ she scowls. Worked as a nurse for years, my mum. But she still doesn’t trust doctors. Just the word is enough to set her teeth on edge.

‘It’s probably a bit of arthritis,’ she says, as though a bit of arthritis is worth celebrating. We’re sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea. I’ll be off to school soon and she’ll be off to work. Gospel Park hospital is a huge place, and Mum is a sister on the old people’s wing, the ‘geris’, as she calls them, short for geriatrics. I’ve seen her at work with her patients. She teases them, has a joke with them, flirts a little with the old boys, has a laugh with the old girls. Their eyes burn brighter when she’s around, and little lines crinkle up their faces as they smile. She makes time for them, she’s good at her job.

‘Don’t go in today, Mum,’ I say, buttering a slice of toast. ‘I’ll call if you like.’

‘You’ve got school,’ she says. ‘I’m fine. I can’t let the girls down.’

She always calls the rest of the nurses ‘girls’ though they’re nearly all wives and mothers, and there are a couple of blokes, too. She rubs her shoulder with her right hand, but I can see her screwing up her eyes against the pain.

‘Have you done your homework?’

Typical Mum. Diversionary tactic. Still, I can see she isn’t going to stay off work today. I might just as well give up now.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Well, most of it . . .’

‘Right,’ she says, holding up Jesse’s lunchbox. ‘There’s his sandwiches. Make sure he doesn’t leave them behind, will you? You know what he’s like.’

Jesse’s my younger brother, and yes I do know what he’s like. He’s a prat most of the time. Football mad. He gets to school half an hour before everyone else so that he and a few of his Neanderthal mates can kick a ball round a yard. I wouldn’t mind but he’s not that good. He won’t eat school dinners (unlike me) because it’s a waste of his valuable footie time. It’s all he ever thinks of. It’s all he talks about. Who’s where in the league. Who’s playing who. Who’s been signed up by this or that club. Who’s past their sell-by date. Football. Who cares?

Jesse often rushes out the door and leaves his packed lunch behind. So, of course, it's usually up to yours truly to take it in for him. To be honest, I'd leave it where it is on the table to teach him a lesson. Serve him right. But Mum always asks me to take it in for him, and I can't say no to her. She knows he won't come back for his lunch if he leaves it behind. Once he's started playing, that's the only thing on his mind.

That's Jesse for you. He'd rather keel over from malnutrition than stop playing football for five minutes. You can see it when he plays. Pure concentration on his face, eyes focused on the game. There's nothing else in the world that matters – nothing, and no one.

Not like me. Sport, I can take it or leave it, and I usually leave it unless it's the tennis or the wrestling. I don't mind football when it's a big match – the FA Cup final, the World Cup, that sort of thing – but I can't sit ogling Wycombe Wanderers against Berwick-upon-Tweed for a full ninety minutes as though my life depended upon it. Not like Jesse can. Me, I'd rather sit and listen to my music. Sometimes I do drawing, you know, sketching and that, though I can't say I've much talent. I've even been known to write the odd poem. I started when my dad left. It was horrible stuff really, but Mum encouraged me. She said it would help me cope with my feelings. We didn't hear from Dad for a few weeks. No cards, no letters, no calls, no nothing.

Well, that's not entirely true. The phone did ring a couple of times, and it was obvious there was someone there at the other end of the line, listening, not daring to speak, or maybe not able to. But I could hear him breathing. Not cranky or pervy. Just desperately trying to find the right words to say and desperately failing. That's when he'd hang up.

He's in Scotland now. We get a call at Christmas, a card for our birthdays, though it's usually a week late and he always writes 'sorry it's late' in his spidery scrawl on the back of the envelope. Sometimes there's even a call if he's been watching some family pap on the telly that's triggered an attack of the guilts.

'See you, love.' Mum pulls me towards her and pecks my forehead with a kiss. But I put my hand up against her shoulder, only lightly, and now she's screwing up her eyes again.

'Mum, you can't go in to work like this.'

'I told you, Luke, I'm fine.'

There's an edge to her voice, now. It's her no-nonsense, don't-tell-me-what-to-do voice.

'I may be late tonight, love,' she shouts. 'So many people off sick at the moment with this flu bug, I may have to cover if they need me. There's stuff in the freezer for you and Jesse. Don't forget to lock up.'

She's suddenly out of the door, and I can hear the car starting up. Jesse stomps into the kitchen. He's late.

'Where's Mum?'

'Like you care.'

He gives me one of his filthy looks.

'Gone to work. Just now.'

He kicks a chair.

'She hasn't washed my kit. Why hasn't she washed my kit?'

He holds up his football stuff from Sunday's game. It's covered in caked-in, dried-on mud. The stuff that washing-powder advertisers dream of.

'Tough. Maybe she forgot. She's not feeling great.'

He rams it in his Adidas bag, grabs an apple and rushes out the door, slamming it behind him.

I hold up his sandwiches.

'Don't forget your lunch . . .'

## chapter two

If there's one thing I really hate, it's being pulled out of class. It's so embarrassing, humiliating. Everyone always thinks someone's died, or your house has been burned down, or you've been out mugging little old ladies. And that you've been caught.

Anyway, it's Cheryl Monroe from 11M who comes to yank me out. I hate Cheryl Monroe. She has that sneery look on her pug-dog face like she's picking up on a really bad smell, and she knows it just came out of your arse.

'Luke Napier. Mrs Halloran's office. Now.'

The heads swivel as though this is some weird spectator sport, and I'm the one about to be fed to the lions. I can feel my cheeks blazing like beacons. Oh God, she means me.

It's history so we've got Mr Mayer. You can see him sitting there sniffing the nicotine off his fingers from

lunchtime and dreaming of his next fag.

‘All right, Mr Napier. Off you go.’

Everyone’s staring at me, fixing me with their ‘what-have-you-been-up-to’ eyes.

I get up from my desk and Cheryl Monroe is waiting by the door. She’s trying to look nonchalant, pretending she’s chewing gum. She isn’t. We’re not allowed to chew gum in class, and although Cheryl isn’t actually in class at the moment, she’s not silly enough to be caught out by a technicality like that.

‘Put your books away, lad.’

Mayer has slipped a sympathetic, velvet-lined glove over his normally harsh tones, anticipating the mini earthquake that has demolished my home, or the sudden car crash that has deprived me of my nearest and dearest. Everyone is starting to look worried now. They’re thinking something bad must have happened for Mayer to be so nice all of a sudden. I shove my books into my bag and move towards Cheryl Monroe. She’s picking an imaginary fibre from her school cardigan now and flicking it on the floor. It’s no more real than the gum she is chewing.

I close the door behind me.

‘Come on, tortoise,’ says Cheryl in a really sarky voice. ‘Hurry it up. I’m missing art, thanks to you. Only half-decent lesson in this dump.’

Cheryl obviously feels that, at the age of fourteen, I

cannot deliver myself to our head teacher's office without her assistance. It's all part of her plan to take over the world, starting with Joan of Arc Comprehensive. I'm not impressed. Her black trainers squeak on the polished floorboards as she bounces along, happy in the knowledge that some sort of poo is about to hit the fan. She pulls up suddenly outside Mrs Halloran's office and raps sharply on the door in a strange, mannered way, like a bored member of cabin crew demonstrating the emergency procedure. Only Cheryl's display is all for my benefit. There's a muffled 'Come!' from within, and after struggling with the knob briefly, she makes her entrance and announces, 'Luke Napier' rather unnecessarily.

'Thank you, Cheryl, you may go.' Mrs H doesn't even look up. Cheryl puts her lips against my ear.

'It's that divvy brother of yours, knocked himself out. Waste of bloody space.'

Mrs Halloran finishes whatever she's writing (notes for the governors? Memos for the staff? Shopping list?), caps her fountain pen and looks up. She knows the game: I'm in charge. You'll wait. I'm the queen, you're the pawn. And it's my move. There's also an overpowering smell of perfume. I don't know what it is she uses, but it smells sickly and floral, a bit like fabric conditioner.

'Ah, Luke,' she says finally. 'Seems your brother has had a little mishap on the games field.'

I count to three.

‘Again.’

I knew that was coming. Jesse’s so accident-prone, he’s a card-carrying member of casualty these days. There was the broken nose at Christmas (it wasn’t, it just bled like it was), the sprained ankle when he slipped during ten minutes of freak snow in February, and then he cut his knee open about a month ago. Those were all football injuries. Plus there are numerous other little mishaps along the way. Still, they’ve never yanked me out of class before.

‘What’s he done this time, Miss?’

‘Seems he may have knocked himself out.’

Mrs Halloran removes her glasses and perches them on top of her concrete hair do. They won’t come down without a struggle.

‘Playing football,’ she adds, as though I might be thinking he was shot-putting or tossing the caber.

‘We’ve tried getting hold of your mother, but to no avail.’

Mrs Halloran speaks in that strange way that only head teachers and newsreaders adopt, as though their grammar is constantly being monitored.

‘She might be working a double shift,’ I explain. ‘They’re short-staffed at the moment. Her mobile will be switched off.’

‘You’d better go with him. To hospital. I’m sorry

but I can't spare a member of my staff on one disaster-stricken twelve-year-old.' She extracts the glasses from her hair, pops them back on her nose, and returns to whatever it is she's writing.

'He's eleven,' I say. 'He's not twelve until August.'

'The ambulance is waiting by the gates.' She doesn't look up. 'Chop chop.'

An ambulance. At school. How unbelievably uncool is that? I can now feel dozens of pairs of eyes burning into the back of my head as I climb up the steps to get in the ambulance. The bell's just gone for afternoon break, and a small crowd has gathered, though God knows what for. Inside, there's a paramedic sitting with Jesse. She's holding his hand and, oh no, how deeply humiliating, it looks as if he's been crying.

'Ah, is this Luke?'

I'm tempted to say 'No', and run for it, but I'm thinking of Mrs Halloran's beady eyes glued to the back of the ambulance and imagining her unleashing her bloodhounds to track me down.

'Yes. I'm his brother.'

Jesse has that 'Oh God, this hurts so much' look on his face, and his footie shirt is wet through with snotty tears.

'I'm Sam,' says the paramedic. 'We're just going to get Jesse to Gospel Park for an X-ray to make sure he's all right. Okay?'

I nod and smile in what I hope is an intelligent way.

‘He’s been knocked out for a minute or two, so we don’t want to take any chances now, do we?’

I turn to Jesse.

‘How d’you do it this time?’

Jesse grimaces, then takes a deep breath.

‘Well, Ryan passed to Dan, and Dan started running up the wing . . .’

‘The short version, Jesse.’

‘I scored. Then I ran into the goalpost.’

I can’t believe this. He’s got a great smirk plastered right across his gob now.

‘You prat.’

‘Where’s Mum?’ He suddenly looks at me in desperation, like a heat-seeking missile in search of sympathy.

‘Don’t know. They tried to get her on the mobile. Maybe she’s having a late lunch.’

It’s unusual for Mum. Normally when she gets back from work she complains that she hasn’t had time for lunch. ‘Just snatched a cup of tea and some toast,’ she says, standing in front of the fridge, scanning it for something to eat.

‘I forgot my lunch,’ moans Jesse, and I feel a small pang of guilt as I think of the sandwiches that I left on the side, thinking, that’ll teach him a lesson.

Jesse looks like he’s getting ready to snivel again. The

driver starts to put a bit of a spurt on, as if he can tell.

‘Are you all right?’ Sam asks, holding Jesse’s hand as a tear manages to escape and starts rolling down his cheek. ‘You’ll be fine, big boy like you. Bet you’ve scored a few goals, haven’t you?’

She’s distracting the patient, excellent tactic. This girl’s a pro. While Jesse starts explaining, yeah, he’s scored a few but he’s usually in defence, I have a good look around. It’s like something out of some hospital drama: oxygen canisters, first-aid boxes, red blankets. The real McCoy.

‘Have you ever had any dead people in here?’ Jesse’s big brown eyes have dried up and are wide open now. The paramedic looks slightly flustered.

‘Jesse,’ I say in a hoarse kind of whisper. I’m tempted to give him a sharp dig in the ribs, but I’m scared he might start up again with the waterworks.

‘I was only asking . . .’

‘Nearly there,’ says Sam. ‘Not far now.’

I suddenly realise it’s quite small and cramped and warm in here, and we’re going pretty fast and I don’t like the speeding motion much. For some reason known only to my digestive system (and possibly my brain), I start remembering that nasty greasy lasagne and chips I bolted down at lunchtime. Not only can I remember it, I can almost taste it. And that’s when I know I’m going to throw up.

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By the time they're wheeling Jesse in, I'm looking worse than he is.

Sam says, 'Don't you worry. I've got a clean uniform here at the hospital.' She's sponging sick off her jacket. I'd been aiming at Jesse, but I missed by a mile.

As we head through the scratched, grey double doors that swish like big rubber mats, I spot Mum's best friend, Mia. She's another nurse. As she sees me, she does a double take.

'Luke? Luke? What are you doing here?'

She looks puzzled, her hand goes to her head. I think, I could ask the same of you. She should be on the geriatric wing with Mum.

'It's Jesse,' I say, nodding my head towards his wheelchair. 'He knocked himself out playing football.'

Mia sighs. 'Not again. Is he all right?'

'He looks fine,' I say. The paramedics have propped Jesse up in a corner with a bag of cheese and onion, a can of Fanta and a copy of some crappety football magazine. He's got a big smirk on now, an I've-got-the-afternoon-off-school kind of look as he happily swigs his fizz and practically inhales the crisps.

'Can you tell Mum we're here?' I ask.

Mia looks embarrassed.

'She'll want to see Jesse,' I add, while I think, actually, does anyone really want to see Jesse? Surely not. 'She

always looks in on him,' I say. Mia knows this. She must have been through Jesse's injury stories a hundred times with Mum.

'Your mum's not on the geri ward, Luke,' says Mia. She takes my hand in hers. I know there's something up now. Nobody over thirty ever holds the hand of a teenager unless something really awful has happened. Or they're a bit dodgy, and Mia's not.

'She's been brought over here,' says Mia. 'I just looked in on her.' I can see the worry on her face. She's stroking my hand now. Oh God, I knew it was bad news.

'She's not very well, Luke. Your mum collapsed on the ward this morning.'

## chapter three

Mum's propped up in a bed, hair pushed back off her face, and she's wearing a regulation hospital nightie. God, I think, things must be bad if they've got her into one of those. She's always bringing patients' nighties home and washing them because she says the hospital ones are 'a disgrace'. From where I'm standing, I think she's right on that score.

Mum has her eyes closed. I walk up close to her and notice for the first time the little criss-cross network of lines over the corners of her eyes. She's asleep. I can tell by her light, regular breathing, but I want to reach out and touch her. She looks so weird sitting in that bed. I can't remember how many times I've seen her tucking up the old people like a mother tucking in her baby, lifting them, getting them comfortable, taking their temperatures and fiddling with the clipboards at the end of their beds.

Normally, it's while Jesse and I have been waiting for her to finish a shift. She always says, 'I won't be a minute. I just want to get so-and-so settled. Then twenty minutes later, she finally manages to tear herself away. It doesn't seem right now, seeing her here in this bed.

I pick up her hand. Her hands are usually quite cold, but this feels warm, with soft skin and bony fingers. I wrap my fingers around hers, and give them a slight squeeze, very gently. I didn't really want to wake her, I just wanted her to know I was there. Well, okay, I suppose I did want to wake her.

Her eyelids flicker into life and she opens her eyes, fixing me with a smile.

'Luke . . .'

The word hangs between us and hovers there. She lifts her hand and strokes my face. She looks sheepish, embarrassed.

'What happened, Mum?'

'I don't know, love . . .'

 Her voice trails off. 'All I remember is this terrible pain in my shoulder. It was like a red-hot poker being plunged in. I think I must have passed out. Next thing I know, I'm flat on my back in here. Who told you I was here anyway?'

I explain about Jesse and tell her how I intercepted Mia. Mum grimaces while I speak. Jesse's casualty habit has never gone down that well with Mum. 'I put in enough hours in this place,' she always says, 'without

having to come back because of you.'

'What's the matter, Mum? What's wrong with you?'

She shrugs her shoulders, and then I see her wince with pain again.

'Don't know.' She sighs. 'Nobody knows yet. They're talking about doing some tests.'

'Tests?' I've heard Mum spit the word out often enough to know that it normally means bad news. 'Tests? What for?'

Mum closes her eyes momentarily. I'd say the pain was hitting her where it hurts. There's a little smear of sweat on her forehead now, a bit like condensation.

'Go and check on Jesse for me, would you?' she says.

'Jesse? He's all right. It's you I'm worried about. What about you?'

'I'll be fine,' Mum says. 'He's only little, Luke. Look after him. He's your brother.'

'He's a bloody liability, that's what he is,' I say. 'He's in and out of casualty so often now that they're making jokes about booking him his own bed. And he's not little – he's eleven and a half.'

'But he's very young for his age.' Mum starts to try and hoist herself up.

'What are you doing?'

'I can't sit round here listening to you moaning,' she says. 'I've got to see Jesse.'

Mum starts ferreting around as if she's about to move.

Suddenly there's a nurse standing at the end of the bed.

'And what do you think you're up to?'

She's a tall, elegant black woman with her hair in hundreds of tiny braids, and she stands with her arms folded. Oh-oh, looks like there's going to be a stand-off at the Gospel Park corral.

'It's my other son, Jesse,' says Mum, wiping her forehead. 'He's been admitted to casualty. Had an accident playing football. I've got to go and see him.'

The nurse raises one eyebrow. Nothing else on her face changes, just the eyebrow. How cool is that, I think, and make a mental note to practise it at home in front of the mirror. I imagine using that one at school on Mr Mayer. 'Napier, your homework seems to have gone AWOL.' Reaction? Raised eyebrow. Genius.

'Now listen to me, Patricia,' says the nurse (nobody calls Mum Patricia – it's always Patty or Pat). 'You're not a well woman. You of all people . . .' She breaks off here and unleashes a volley of tuts in Mum's direction. 'You of all people should know that you're here to get better. And that, my dear, means doing what you're told.'

'I'm a sister too, you know, over on geris . . .' Mum's objection doesn't cut any ice.

'That's exactly what I mean,' says Sister Calder. She's close enough for me to read her name badge now.

'You stay right where you are. Ten steps out of this

ward, you're flat on your back, and whose job's on the line? Well it ain't yours!

Her eyes are blazing. I can see she's not to be messed with and Mum's picking up on the vibe too. Mum also knows she's right.

'That's all very well for you,' says Mum, not giving up without a fight. 'It's not your son in casualty.'

'No, you're right, it's not,' says Sister Calder. Her tone's softening a little. 'But I'll tell you what I'll do, shall I? I'm going into the office right now, I'm going to pick up the phone, and I'll call casualty to find out how . . .'

She leaves a gap for Mum to insert the name.

'Jesse.'

' . . . Jesse is doing. All right? But first you have to promise me to stay right here in this bed. No moving. No more getting any ideas about wandering round the wards in your nightie. Deal?'

She fixes Mum with a stern look. Mum knows she has no choice.

'Deal,' she sighs.

'Right, let's find out how Jesse is getting on, shall we?'

She turns away from Mum and throws in her parting shot.

'Funny kind of name for a boy . . .' she says, winking at me as she sets sail off up the ward.

I take Mum's hand and I squeeze it a bit. I can see she's upset.

‘He’ll be fine,’ I say. ‘He always is. I’ll go and check on him if you like.’

‘No, don’t worry, love,’ says Mum. ‘Maybe later.’

She squeezes my hand back. Her hands feel colder now. Bad circulation.

‘How was school today?’

‘Okay, nothing much happening this morning. Then this afternoon I got dragged out of class and bundled into an ambulance to escort Jesse here.’ I edit out the bit about throwing up over the paramedic. Nobody needs to know that.

‘Don’t let this interrupt your lessons,’ Mum begins. ‘Go and phone Jack now and find out if you’ve got any homework.’

Jack’s a mate of mine. Well, my best mate, really. Mum loves him because he always comes top in everything, and he calls her Mrs Napier. My other best friend Freya calls her Patty, which isn’t surprising as she calls her parents by their first names too. Mum’s right though. If anyone is up to date with the homework, it’ll be Jack. I check my watch: 5.48 p.m. He’ll have done the lot by now, I reckon, and be logging on to play ‘War and Retribution’, the latest shoot-em-up that’s doing the rounds.

Sister Calder is marching back up towards us now. She allows Mum a little smile.

‘I’ve just spoken to casualty and your son’s been

transferred to one of the children's wards,' she says. 'They're keeping him in overnight. Just as a precaution.'

'What's wrong with him?' asks Mum.

'Well, apparently he's eaten two fish pies and three bowls of jelly, so not much by the sound of things,' Sister Calder says, smoothing down the covers. You can tell she's good with the patients. 'Shall I get him to pop in and see you in the morning? The charge nurse on Churchill ward reckons he'll be able to come across after breakfast when he's seen the doc.'

Mum nods and Sister Calder strides off down the ward. 'Looks like old bossy drawers won't be letting me out of here tonight,' Mum says. 'At least Jesse's sorted for the night, anyway. Now, what are we going to do about you?'

'I'm fine,' I say. 'I've got my key. I can just go home.'

'You are not staying in that house on your own,' says Mum. 'You're not even fifteen. Anything could happen.'

I'm not happy about the way this conversation is going. I know what's coming next. I don't want to sleep on that rank mattress that Jack keeps under his bed. Not tonight.

'Stay at Jack's,' says Mum. 'Go on. Go and phone him now. Have you got your mobile on you?'

'Forgot it.'

She tuts. 'I asked Mia to bring mine over but she

must have got distracted. Get my purse out.'

Mum's looking at her locker. It's like something out of the 1950s. She's nodding her head in a way that indicates 'Get my bag out and take some change and make that call'.

That's how well I know my mum. I know what all her gestures mean. I know that when she purses her lips together tightly that means, 'Stop that now, I'm about to erupt.' Jesse and I call that one her 'volcano lips'. Highly dangerous. Tonight she has another look altogether. She closes her eyes and her eyelids flutter so gently, you almost wouldn't notice. I have an inkling this means that something, somewhere is hurting badly.

I'm down the corridor, holding my nose against the wave of antiseptic smells that are washing over me, heading for the phone. I'm confident about lying about the sleepover. I do need to sort out the homework though.

I insert the money and dial the number. It keeps falling through, making a tinny chink against the little metal scoop at the bottom.

There's an old geezer standing next to me in purple striped pyjamas, with the waist tied up with string. Only he hasn't tied it tight enough, and his todger is trying to escape, though he hasn't noticed yet. He's only a metre away, and I can smell the fags from where I'm standing.

'Lick it,' he says.

'What?'

He looks at me as if to say, you idiot. It's obviously an instruction.

'Lick the coin. Before you put it in.'

'Oh.'

I lick it. Disgusting, cold metallic taste, probably covered in superbugs.

This time I put it in and it stays. The old bloke smiles triumphantly.

A male nurse arrives and hooks him away by the arm.

'C'mon now, Bernie, you've had your ciggie. *Emmerdale* starts in a few minutes. Oh, look at you, you're all coming undone . . .'

'Always works,' he shouts over his shoulder as he's escorted away while his pyjama bottoms are yanked up.

Eventually Jack answers the phone. It always rings for ages in his house, as though they've got better things to do. In our house, as soon as it rings we all dive for it. Like we're bored out of our tiny minds.

'Jack?'

'What d'you want?'

That's what I like about Jack. Always straight to the point, never any small talk.

'It's me.'

I know he knows it's me. I'm the only person from school who ever calls him, apart from Mad Marty

Perrino and we don't want to go there.

'I'm in hospital.'

There's a pause. I can tell he's digesting this information. He's dead clever is Jack, but sometimes it's the simple stuff that catches him out.

'What's the matter? You ill or something?'

'No, not me.'

'Oh, it's that stupid knobhead brother of yours, isn't it? I heard he got pulped again on the pitch . . .'

'Yeah, listen, Jacks, have you done the geography homework yet?'

I already know the answer, but it seems rude not to ask the question.

'Yeah. Why?'

'What was it?'

'Dead easy. Glaciers and how they form. Then you have to do a diagram. Piece of piss.'

'Okay, what else?'

'English. We read some poem about daffodils and now we have to write twelve lines inspired by another flower. Only not carnations.'

'Why not? What's wrong with carnations?'

'Nothing. Only Mrs Blythe hates them, and apparently every year when she sets this homework she gets at least ten carnation poems. They remind her of evaporated milk. And funerals.'

Fine, I'm thinking, I'll do roses.

‘What did you do?’ I ask Jack.

‘Roses.’

‘Bastard! I was going to do those . . .’

‘Tough, I’ve done mine. Anyway, you can copy the geography, but I’m not writing you another poem. Try hyacinths.’

‘Why?’

‘They rhyme with plinths.’

‘Look, I’ll see you tomorrow, quarter to. That’ll give me enough time to copy the geography, won’t it?’

‘Yeah, should do. But don’t forget your poem. I’m not writing that, too.’

‘So you said. Okay, later.’

I could have told him about Mum, but I didn’t want to somehow. Anyway, he’d have been part of the deception then, and this one’s got to be all mine.

I head back to the ward. Mum has closed her eyes, but she’s not sleeping.

‘All set?’ she says.

‘All set. Back to Jack’s tonight.’

‘I must get something for Ruth when I get out.’

Hmm. I’ll have to cross that bridge when I come to it. Ruth is Jack’s mum. She and Mum are good friends. It all goes back to when Jack and I started nursery on the same day. They share a bottle of wine occasionally and start moaning about blokes, then laughing about blokes, and usually end up crying about blokes. It

normally happens when Jack's dad, Colin, is out for the night with his mates. Jack and I make ourselves scarce and watch a DVD.

'You'll be home tomorrow, won't you?' I ask.

Mum opens an eye. It's looking like a real effort.

I can see Sister Calder heading towards us now with a little pill rattling around in a plastic cup. At least Mum will get some sleep tonight.

'Course I'll be home tomorrow,' says Mum. 'They won't be keeping me in here. I'll go mad. Anyway, I'll be right as rain by then.'

But I think we both know that isn't true.