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News item from the *Portadown Times*,

Thursday, 22 March 1973:

What happened to the children? Book closes on the Brownstown disappearances

On the evening of 18th September 1972, three children from the Brownstown area of Portadown were reported missing to the police: Martin Hanna, Raymond Blair and Kirsty Metcalfe. Aged between 12 and 14, all were pupils belonging to nearby Clounagh Junior High School.

Attendance records show that the children were present in school on the day in question, but also reveal a very strange occurrence common to all three: Martin attended only his initial three classes, Raymond was present for just the first four, and Kirsty failed to attend her final class of the day.

Was this a case of three troubled children making a strange pact to collectively run away from home, or something more sinister? Were they abducted — taken out of school against their will, in broad daylight, with no shortage of people on the premises to witness such an act?

The police questioned teachers, supporting staff and pupils, but found no evidence of any suspicious persons entering or leaving the building. All three children had been getting consistently good results

in school exams, and were well liked among peers and staff; all three came from stable families who are respected in the community. Perhaps the strangest aspect of this affair is that, although the three children went missing on the same date, they each disappeared at a different time of day. Did a stranger visit the school and kidnap the children, or did they walk away of their own accord? The mystery remains, and to this day no satisfactory explanation for the tragic incident has been put forward.

Six months have passed since this chilling event, and police are finally ceasing their investigative efforts. Detective Sergeant Brian Neville at Portadown RUC Barracks commented, “In cases of this nature, it is extremely unlikely that a child will be found after *two* months, let alone six. I believe it is now time for the parents to allow themselves to grieve for their children.”

A special memorial service is being held in Clounagh Junior High School on Friday evening. This may provide some sort of closure, but it looks as if the question of what happened to Martin, Raymond and Kirsty is one that will haunt the lives of their parents forever.

M O N D A Y

2 APRIL 2001

ONE

Friends could be cruel.

That wasn't a lesson you would find on the school curriculum, but it was one that Eddie Morton was about to learn in class today. And it began with the unobserved action of a leather wallet slipping from the boy's trouser pocket and landing on the floor.

Eddie, who was fourteen years old, was rising to his feet at the teacher's request when it happened. He made his way to the front of the room, too nervous to notice something missing from his pocket.

The rest of the class, known as IY, talked amongst themselves.

"All right!" Mr Devlin said, raising his voice over the chatter. He was a rugged-looking man in his early forties, with greasy black hair and a heavily lined face that was never quite clean-shaven (Eddie always thought this made the teacher look like a criminal). "Settle down or we'll spend the rest of the period hearing *all* your essays."

No, you won't, Eddie thought. *It'll just be me who's forced to read, and I haven't even done anything bad.* But if he was honest with

himself, he felt a sense of pride. Out of the whole class, Mr Devlin had singled Eddie out as the best writer. And he was determined to be a real writer too, someday.

The noise level faded out.

Eddie turned around to face his classmates, with his back to the blackboard.

“Now, I want you all to listen carefully,” Mr Devlin explained. “Far too many of you are leaving out important details that help the reader get a sense of atmosphere. Most of you are fine with visual descriptions, but remember, there are *five* ...” He held up his hand, palm out, fingers extended.

Rebecca Steele, at the back of the room, began flapping her hand about, as if Mr Devlin was prompting her to return a friendly wave. “Hello, sir,” she chirped. “What about ye?”

There was scattered laughter.

Mr Devlin hung his head and frowned for a moment. “Remember!” he yelled, putting a plug in the class’s joviality. Then, more quietly: “There are *five* senses. What are they? Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch.” A finger disappeared for each sense.

Eddie’s eyes roved over his classmates. It felt like there were a hundred butterflies swarming in his stomach. His mouth was as dry as if Mr Garrett, the PE teacher, had just made him sprint four laps of the track. His eye landed on Dean Willis, his best friend.

Dean was sitting beside Eddie — or the empty chair to which

Eddie longed to return — peering at the floor between the two seats. He leaned over his large stomach — an act which never failed to make Eddie wince; he was sure that someday the buttons on that shirt were going to pop under the strain and launch across the room like bullets.

Any amusement Eddie felt at this quickly drained away when he saw what Dean retrieved from the floor. Eddie's hand strayed to his pocket, but the familiar bulge of the wallet's presence was gone. And the one hundred butterflies in his gut suddenly multiplied to a thousand. *Don't open it*, Eddie wished. *Please don't open it*.

Dean unfolded the wallet, and his initial look of mild curiosity turned into one of wide-eyed amazement, as he glared at the contents. He gazed up at Eddie, mouth breaking out into a huge grin.

Eddie shook his head ever-so-slightly, eyes pleading.

Dean's grin turned upside down into a mockery of pity, and he nodded gleefully.

"... Eddie!" Mr Devlin's voice slashed across Eddie's narrow focus. "Are we awake?"

Eddie realised he hadn't heard a word his English teacher had said for the last minute. "Er, sorry."

Chuckles from the class.

"Now, I don't want anyone putting him off," Mr Devlin warned. "All right, Eddie, let's hear your piece."

Everyone's eyes homed in on Eddie.

As he opened his mouth to speak, Dean passed the wallet to the

person adjacent to him, being careful to hold it under the desk out of Mr Devlin's sight.

Eddie felt panic rising within him, and he found himself unable to speak.

The faces of his classmates began to sprout with amusement, like a wave blowing from the front of the room to the back — all except Jill Morrow and Nikki Beck, who were peering down at the spot between them where they held Eddie's wallet. They grinned up at him mischievously, then passed the wallet to the desk behind.

Eddie felt a lump in his throat forming. He coughed, fought back his panic, and began to read.

One paragraph later, his classmates were trying desperately to hold back a giggling fit, and Mr Devlin looked at him as if he had grown a second head. *I guess I'm reading a little fast*, he observed.

By the time Eddie finished, at least fourteen people had seen the wallet — half the class.

“Well,” Mr Devlin concluded, “if there was such a thing as the English Olympics, you'd get the gold medal for the one hundred metres sprint.”

Eddie strode down the aisle to the back of the room. “*That is mine.*”

Gary Reid gave the wallet up without hesitation, and with an immense grin.

“What's going on?” Mr Devlin wanted to know. “Give it here.”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Sir, it’s just my wallet. They were passing it around.”

The teacher extended his arm, palm up. “I said give it here.”

Eddie sighed and reluctantly walked to the front of the room.

“Pervert!” somebody muttered under their breath.

Eddie slapped the wallet into the teacher’s hand.

Mr Devlin opened it up and looked at the contents with a blank, unreadable expression. Using his finger, he extracted a piece of paper from beneath a clear plastic flap in the wallet and showed it to Eddie. “What’s this?”

It was a photograph of Jade Rodgers, a girl from class IB, standing in her PE kit, holding a hockey stick in front of her rather short skirt. The paper was thin and the image grey like newspaper print — not a real photograph at all, but something produced by a laser printer.

Eddie shrugged, red-faced. “I dunno. I’ve never seen it before.”

The class erupted in laughter.

Eddie glared at them. “What?! You think this is mine?” He snatched the photo out of Mr Devlin’s hand and tore it up, letting the pieces fall to the floor. “There! If it was mine, would I do that?”

But this only made the class laugh all the harder.

“Enough!” Mr Devlin shouted. “I won’t have my classroom turned into a stand-up comedy show! Morton, you get back to your seat. And the rest of you, any more of this behaviour and we start talking about detention.”

Eddie sat down and punched Dean in the thigh with his knuckles. But there was enough meat on Dean for him to take it without even flinching.

Mr Devlin announced, “Now, you all know the hand-in date for your next essay is tomorrow.”

Groans all round.

“Remember, this one’s an assessment, so it counts towards your final grade, which means it counts towards where you end up next year. I want a three-hundred-word story about a *robbery*. I want to see plenty of description; I want your characters to have motive. And please, folks, if you can, try to think of something more original than a *bank* to rob. Surprise me.” Mr Devlin picked up a piece of chalk and turned to write on the blackboard.

Eddie leaned across to Dean and whispered in his ear, “I thought you were my friend.”

Dean returned the remark with a confused expression, the corner of his mouth creased in an affectionate smirk. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

TWO

Five minutes after the final bell of the day rang throughout the building, when the corridors had cleared and the exit doors had spewed out most of the six hundred pupils who attended the school, Eddie headed upstairs and made his way to Mr Sloan's office.

The door was open and the school's ICT technician sat in the cramped interior, surrounded by a hazardous amount of disused computer equipment and paperwork, everything stacked in a seemingly random fashion.

Mr Sloan swivelled on his chair to face Eddie and smiled disarmingly. "Yep?"

Eddie felt nervous. It wasn't that he was about to do anything bad — barely even mischievous — but just plain embarrassing, if this situation went the wrong way. And he'd already had his fill of humiliation for one day. "Miss Hogan wants me to print out another copy of my Geography assessment," Eddie lied. "Could you let me into the computer room?"

"Sure." Mr Sloan got up, grabbed his keys, and the both of them headed down the corridor to room twenty-five, the main computer suite. The technician turned his key in the lock and stepped inside, kicking a peg under the door to keep it from closing.

Please don't stay, Eddie wished.

“Just close the door when you leave,” Mr Sloan advised, and headed out.

“Thanks, sir.” Eddie breathed a sigh of relief and headed quickly over to one of the many PCs, being careful to choose a monitor that faced away from the doorway.

He typed in his username and password then opened up the *Internet Explorer* program. The familiar title page of the school website, *www.clounagh.com*, popped up. He clicked the hyperlink marked *Sports*, then *Hockey*. A quick scroll down the screen, and there she was, standing in her yellow and blue sports kit — vibrant colours that would sadly turn to murky shades of grey in just a moment.

He clicked the *Print* button and hurried over to the laser printer at the front of the room, foolishly worried that someone would come in and get curious. He snatched the page, barely giving it time to slide out of its own accord. *Gotcha!*

Sitting down at the desk again, Eddie put his face up close to the screen and gazed at Jade Rodgers. His heart thumped faster, partly because of the way he felt about her and partly because of how humiliated he would be if someone spotted him doing this.

She was smiling. In fact, she was smiling pretty much any time he'd ever seen her. That was one of the coolest things about her; you hardly ever saw her sulking or being nasty, like a lot of girls. Of course, there was that time she got so mad that she almost made Simon McLoughlin cry, but I guess she had good reason, since he had put

chewing gum in her hair. And then there was that other really cool thing about her — those slender athletic legs.

Eddie sighed, put his hand on the mouse and logged off. He gazed down at the fuzzy photo in his hand, wishing he had his own computer so that he could make his own printout, in colour. And besides pursuing his fantasies, there was word processing. While others were concerned with checking out the latest World Wrestling Federation news or multi-player *Unreal Tournament*, Eddie cared more about writing stories, and about the inspiring possibility of getting them published. He'd have to spend tonight writing his English assessment, he recalled, with no lack of enthusiasm.

Try to think of something more original than a bank to rob, Mr Devlin had said.

How about "The Clounagh Robbery"? Eddie mused, slipping his printout into his schoolbag. *Nobody else would think of that.* He slung the bag over his shoulder. *Trouble is, what's worth stealing here?*

Eddie sighed again, and walked across the room to the door. Once there, he suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around, gazing back into the room, eyebrows raised. He came back inside, letting his eyes travel along the four neat rows of computers.

"Twenty-eight," he counted, walking over to one PC in particular and examining a small square label on the side. "Twenty-eight *Pentium III* computers. And seven more in the library too — that's thirty-five."

Eddie felt excitement starting to bubble inside him at the prospect

that he had just hit a jackpot idea for a story. “Let’s say I could get four-hundred quid for each machine,” he thought aloud, “minus keyboard and stuff, because they’re too cheap to bother with. That’s ...”

Frustrated, he took a calculator out of his schoolbag and tapped in the equation.

“Fourteen thousand quid. *Whoa.*”

Now, I’ve gotta do this right, make it accurate. So, how’s my robber gonna get in here?

Eddie walked across to the far side of the room and leaned over a desk to push a curtain out of the way. Behind it was a window which Eddie discovered he could open only a few centimetres. *Break the glass maybe?* he considered. However, directly below was not open ground but an alcove surrounded on all four sides by an extension to the main building.

OK, scrap the ladder idea.

Eddie turned around and scanned the high windows at the opposite side of the room. Unfortunately they were too small for someone to crawl through.

Near the left-most window, right in the top corner of the room, Eddie noticed a curious device — a little white plastic box about the same dimensions as a Nintendo *Game Boy*. There was a translucent plastic panel in the centre.

Eddie stepped forward for a closer examination, causing a tiny red

light to instantly come on at the bottom of the box. He stopped in his tracks, and after waiting a couple of seconds, the light went off again.

Don't tell me this is what I think it is, Eddie feared. He took a step forward.

Light on.

He halted.

Light off.

Some kind of motion detector, Eddie deduced, *no doubt connected to an alarm system that gets turned on after school*. He put his hands on his hips, causing the light to come to life again. Scowling at the device, he said, "You needn't look at me like that. I'll figure out a way to beat you."

Eddie walked out, leaving the motion detector to its lonely sentinel's vigil.

THREE

Walking along the bottom corridor *en route* to the exit doors, Eddie saw a group of third-year girls. They rushed past the assembly hall into the foyer, dressed in sports kits and carrying hockey sticks.

Must be a match on, Eddie surmised. *Wonder who they're playing?*

As he neared the hall, he had just enough time to catch a flash of

blue and yellow out of the corner of his eye before the person coming out of the adjacent corridor bashed clumsily into him.

“Oh sorry!” the girl said, putting her hand across her mouth to stifle a laugh, as Eddie regained his balance.

He blushed, not so much from the embarrassment of almost falling over, but because of who collided with him. “It’s all right.”

Jade Rodgers grinned. “I’d better get going.”

Eddie nodded.

“Bye, Eddie.” She turned away and jogged off into the foyer.

She said my name, Eddie noticed, full of excitement. She hardly knows me, and she could have just said bye or nothing at all, but she said “Bye, Eddie.”

He felt suddenly robbed of the ability to speak, but mustered all his willpower and ran into the foyer. “Hey, Jade!”

At the door to the playground, she turned back.

“Who are you playing?” Eddie asked.

“Killicomaine,” she answered, stepping through the door.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Jade sprinted off to join her team-mates on the all-weather pitch.

You could watch the game, Eddie suggested to himself. Others will be doing that; you won’t look out of place.

Killicomaine was a junior high school at the other side of town, and a match between local rivals meant there would be more supporters

than usual — which in turn meant more of a likelihood of his classmates turning up. And after what happened in English today ...

No chance. Frustrated, Eddie headed for the exit.

FOUR

Eddie headed along Brownstown Road, happy to be away from the daily conflict that was school life for another few hours. He began whistling, unaware that he was doing it, feeling uncommonly happy.

Another uncommon thing — for Northern Ireland at least — was that the weather had become too warm for anyone to feel comfortable in a school blazer. It was April, and barely a month ago there had been a brief snowfall, but now the atmosphere was close to tropical. It was great to be able to smell the grass and plants and flowers again — scents Eddie always associated with the two-month summer break from school which he would soon enjoy. Today the sun beamed relentlessly, burning skin and raising spirits.

The real source of Eddie's delight was his brief encounter with Jade. It was a kind of ice-breaker, and now his heart grew excited by the possibility of getting to know her better — maybe eventually getting the chance to have a date with her.

Tomorrow I'll find a way to ask her how the game went, he decided, whether someone has already told me the score or not.

Eddie strolled on. Right now, just thinking about her felt like the best thing in the world. Jade would be playing hockey now and had probably forgotten all about bumping into Eddie. She was totally unaware of what a profound effect she had on him; he was crazy about her, and she knew nothing about it.

Several high-pitched voices suddenly burst into song, somewhere behind Eddie. *“Eddie and Jade ... up a tree ... K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”*

He spun around.

It was his sister Tara with two of her giggly friends, about thirty metres from him. They were first-year girls — only two years younger than Eddie — but they might as well have been another species, the way they behaved.

“Get lost!” Eddie replied.

“Get lost yourself!” Tara shouted back.

“Oh Eddie,” one of her friends called passionately, putting her hand to her heart. “Eddie, I *lovvvvvve* you!”

The other two girls erupted in raucous laughter.

“Cut it out!”

One girl pretended to sob. “Don’t you love me any more, Eddie? It’s that girl, isn’t it? That Jade Rodgers. Oh, Eddie, *you’ve broken my heart!*” She swooned, while her friends doubled up, cackling uncontrollably.

“Shut up!” Eddie felt suddenly furious. Since Tara clearly knew about the photo, then there was no question that everyone would soon

know, including Jade — which pretty much made his chances of getting a date with her a big fat zero.

But there was nothing to be done here. It was impossible to reason with vermin like these. Later, however, when Tara got home, there would be plenty of payback, oh yes indeed. And revenge would be sweet.

Eddie turned and began walking away from the group with haste.

They proceeded to follow, chanting over and over, “Eddie and Jade ... up a tree ...”

Eddie had hoped that today marked the start and finish of any trouble over the photograph, but clearly his problems were just beginning.

FIVE

The last rays of the evening sun gave the bedroom a deep reddish-gray hue. Vague impressions of posters and model cars and various items of junk rose partially out of the shadows.

Eddie lay on his stomach, elbows raised, totally absorbed in a sheet of paper. Finally thrust out of his imaginary world by his inability to make out the words on the page in front of him, Eddie got up and turned on the light.

He yawned, rubbing his tired eyes, and began pacing the room, reading over some of what he had penned.

Slade peered into the back of the van, at the rows of neatly stacked computers, feeling a mixture of guilt and hope. Fourteen thousand pounds — just enough for the operation that would save his brother's life.

“Ready to go, Dad?” Barry called from up front in the passenger seat.

“You betcha.” Slade slammed the doors shut, walked around the van, and climbed in. “I could never have done it without you, son. I would have set those alarms off for sure. We make a great team.”

In the next room Britney Spears was busy singing about how she “did it again” — and again and again and again. The song was OK, but Tara had been playing this CD at least three times every evening for the past three weeks. There was only so much a guy could take. Tonight, however, he had barely noticed until right now, because he was in The Zone. That was Eddie's term for writing a story — shutting the world out and shutting yourself into your own imagination.

He felt the urge to urinate, badly. His bladder had probably been calling out to him for the past hour, but he hadn't been aware of it. He dropped the essay, opened the door, and headed for the bathroom, thinking, *I'll kill her if she's in there.*

But he reckoned he had tortured his sister enough for one day. He had practically tickled her to death when she got home after school (there was only so much tickling the recipient could find funny), and when that only served to enrage her, he had threatened to destroy her precious CD collection, piece by piece. Westlife, Backstreet Boys, et cetera, etcetera. He broke an old Shania Twain album Tara hadn't played in over a year just to prove he wasn't kidding. She wouldn't be doing any Eddie-and-Jade-ing tomorrow, if she knew what was good for her.

Eddie had finished tormenting Tara before Dad came home from work, of course. They both had some painful memories of what it was like when Dad got angry, and neither of them were particularly eager to feel that kind of pain ever again.

Eddie flushed the toilet after him and headed back along the landing. Over the noise of Tara's stereo he could hear two voices coming from downstairs, which meant Dad had a visitor.

Normally Eddie knew better than to be curious about any of his father's business, but this time was different. It was impossible to hear what they were saying, but it was equally impossible not to perceive that both parties were raising their voices in anger.

Eddie, growing steadily worried, leaned over the banister, craning his ear. The shouting seemed to come from the kitchen, behind the closed door. He frowned at Tara's bedroom for a moment and considered asking her to turn the music down, but he knew she would only slide the volume up louder instead.

Eddie took three steps down the stairs and froze as the words, "*No! You can't do this to me!*" came from his father's lips, full of rage.

Something big was happening here, something big and scary, and Eddie changed his mind about going down. He took one step backwards, hearing the stair creak sharply under his weight.

More muffled speech came from his father's guest, then light spilled into the living-room as the kitchen door swung wide, out of Eddie's line of vision. At that very moment the visitor's voice returned to crystal clarity, and Eddie heard the tail end of a sentence that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"... that is, if you don't want your pretty daughter to end up at the bottom of the River Bann."

Frozen with fear, Eddie watched as the man strolled into view at the bottom of the stairs.

He was in his late thirties, tall and muscular, wearing a black leather jacket. His hair was cut very short and a cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth.

Don't let him see me, Eddie wished.

"You've got two days," the stranger continued. "I'll be back here Wednesday night, and you know you don't want to disappoint me." He made his way to the front door and opened it. Then he took one glance back at the kitchen and just noticed the boy out of the corner of his eye. He turned towards Eddie and fixed his gaze on him, with a grin that was wide and affectionate.

If Eddie had only looked at the man's mouth, he might have been fooled by it, but the eyes gave the game away — they were stone cold. It was a contradiction that gave him the creeps.

“Hi there, kiddo,” the visitor said.

Eddie simply stood there, unable to speak, grateful that he had just emptied his bladder in the toilet a few moments ago instead of right here and now on the carpet. He shivered, sensing gooseflesh rising on his arms, and his legs gradually turning to jelly.

The stranger chuckled, drew hard on his cigarette, then simply turned and left.

SIX

The front door of the house swung slowly shut on its hinges. *Click.*

Eddie sat down on the stairs, feeling relief flow through him. Everything seemed deathly silent — even though he could hear the constant throb of pop music emanating from behind his sister's door.

Who was that man? What did he want with Dad? Why did he speak that awful threat about Tara? And why hadn't Dad come out of the kitchen yet? The answers were down there, but Eddie was reluctant to move. Dad had been shouting, and Eddie had far too many vivid memories of what his father's temper was like at times. Best to go back upstairs, finish that essay and forget he heard anything at all. Maybe get an early night's sleep for once.

Except Eddie didn't really believe he would be able to get any sleep at all tonight, or tomorrow night, or the night after. In fact, he didn't think he would get any sleep until ...

The voice of the man in the leather jacket rose out of his imagination. *Until your pretty sister ends up at the bottom of the River Bann, and you don't have to worry about her any more, because she's DEAD!*

A horrible sense of panic swelled up inside Eddie, and it was enough to get him moving. He cast all thoughts of his father's anger aside and bounded down the stairs, across the living-room and into the kitchen.

Blake Morton, a tall, muscular man in his early forties, was sitting on a stool at the far end of the room, one arm resting on top of the refrigerator, the other bringing a bottle of beer to his mouth. After taking a swig, he looked into his lap, not noticing Eddie in the doorway.

"Dad?" Eddie whispered.

Morton spoke without raising his head, face covered with strands of greasy black hair. "What?"

Eddie thought he sensed anger bubbling under the surface, but he continued nonetheless. "Who was that man?"

Morton looked up sharply. "Did he speak to you?"

"Aye, only for a minute."

Morton put his beer on the refrigerator, got up, and strode purposefully across the room.

Eddie flinched as his father grabbed him by the shoulders.

“What did he say to you?” Morton demanded.

“Nothing! He just said hello.”

“That’s all? Nothing else?”

“That’s it, I swear. You’re *hurting* me, Dad.”

Morton relaxed his grip. “I’m sorry, son. I didn’t mean to.” He walked swiftly back across the kitchen, swiped his beer from the refrigerator and took a gulp.

“Dad, what’s going on?” Eddie asked.

Morton ignored him.

“Are you taking drugs again?”

Morton glared at his son, then a sense of shame quickly overpowered his anger. He composed himself and answered, “No. Not for two and a half years. You *know* that.”

Eddie really didn’t know, only that there were no longer any signs of white powder on the coffee table, and no strange, discomforting visitors — until tonight. But something in his dad’s tragic expression told him that it really was over; Eddie was reading in his father’s face that Morton harboured a longing for his son to be proud of him, and Eddie felt suddenly thrilled, despite the situation.

“That man,” Eddie said, “is he a drug dealer?”

Morton looked away and was silent for a moment, then he met his son’s gaze and shook his head. “He’s a loan shark.”

“What’s a loan shark?”

“He’s the man you turn to when the banks won’t give you a loan.”

Eddie wasn't sure he understood. "Why is he here, Dad?"

Morton sat down on the stool and sighed. "Because, son, when you've lived like I have, the past comes back to haunt you."

"What's going to happen?"

"Forget about it. I owe him some money, that's all." Morton gazed at the floor between his feet, the bottle in his hand quivering.

Dad didn't have much money, Eddie knew. Nothing worth talking about anyway.

"We can sell something, can't we?" Eddie suggested.

Morton's hand shook so hard that the bottle clattered to the floor, spewing beer over the tiles.

Eddie winced. "You'll sort it out, won't you, Dad? ... *Dad?*"

Morton's face was hidden in shadow, and he refused to look up. What came from his lips was a sound that Eddie had never heard Dad utter in all his life, a sound that made this the most frightening moment of the boy's existence. It was the sound of despair.

Blake Morton — the man who always gave as good as he got, and then some; the man who had solved every problem life threw at him, with brute force when necessary — was weeping.

SEVEN

Eddie was sitting bolt upright on his bed, unable to relax. The words of the loan shark kept coming into his mind.

... that is, if you don't want your pretty daughter —

Eddie covered his eyes, but of course that was no use at all.

— to end up at the bottom of the River Bann.

A tear came to his eye and he rubbed it away. This was the sort of thing that happened to other families, not to his — to people you didn't know in places far enough away that you could put them safely out of mind.

But of course there was Mum — last remembered as a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties called Angela. Then one night, two and a half years ago, a house in Oakleigh Park burned to the ground, probably through something as insignificant as a cigarette not being properly put out. A man named Bill McCauley and his lover Angela Morton died in the blaze.

For a long time after that, Eddie lived with a constant inner turmoil of anxiety, rage and depression, knowing so little about life and trying to figure out how such a terrible thing could happen. Now that he was fourteen, the only answer he had found any comfort in was that there was no answer.

Eddie was now one of a minority of people his age who had very

few illusions about life. There was no divine magic in the air protecting people from harm, and the only thing this revelation could do for him right now was make him feel sick to his stomach.

Abruptly the stereo in Tara's room stopped playing, casting an uncomfortable quietness everywhere. Eddie heard his sister moving about, probably getting ready for bed, and all he could think about were the people at his mother's funeral, shuffling about quietly and trying to maintain as much of the traditional uncomfortable silence as possible.

Tara's little cocoon of sound had protected her from all knowledge of tonight's visitor. She would sleep calmly tonight, and there was no point in spoiling it by telling her what had happened. Eddie was no stranger to making his sister cry by one means or another, but this was different.

Trying to put the whole thing out of his mind, he picked up his essay and began to read through it from the beginning. At first it was very hard to focus, then, about halfway through, Eddie's eyes widened as a curious idea struck him. He scanned through the remainder hastily — you could almost say hungrily, by the intense look that had come over his face.

Finished, Eddie put the paper down and stared off into space, lost in thought. After a few minutes he decided to get up and leave the room. Moving slowly but decisively, he walked along landing, down the stairs, and into the living-room.

The lights were off, and Blake Morton sat in the flickering glow of

the television. He was on the sofa, with a bottle of beer resting between his thighs, his eyes looking through the TV instead of at it. He had turned the volume right down.

“Dad?”

No answer, not even an indication that Eddie’s father knew his son was in the room.

Eddie spoke softly, carefully. “Dad, will you tell me how much money you have to pay that man?”

“Go back upstairs,” Morton answered.

“Please, Dad. It’s important.”

This time Morton looked at his son. He retorted in almost a whisper, but Eddie could sense the anger building. “Didn’t you hear me? I just told you to get upstairs.”

In any ordinary circumstance Morton’s tone of voice would have commanded instant obedience from Eddie, but not tonight. What he had come to say to his father right now was vital.

“Please, Dad, don’t be angry.” Eddie’s voice trembled. “I can’t help it. I heard what the man said he would do to Tara.”

Morton’s eyes shot wide open, and Eddie braced himself for a beating. Instead, his father raised a finger in front of his mouth, pursed his lips and shook his head slowly, glancing at the ceiling.

Eddie moved closer to his father and whispered, “Would he do it, do you think? Would he *really* do it?”

Eddie faintly hoped that his father would shrug the incident off as

a bit of heated banter. Instead, Morton's expression grew extremely grave, and he answered with a simple, "Yes."

Eddie's heart was pounding and his stomach seemed to tie itself in knots. A tear spilled down his cheek, and it felt as if there was a tidal wave of them ready to spill out. "We can go to the police," he suggested.

The corners of Morton's mouth turned up in a smile that wasn't a smile. "That doesn't work with these kind of people. When they don't get what they want, they hurt you. And if you try to hurt them, they have friends who will be only too happy to hurt you more."

"What can we do?"

Eddie saw tears welling in his father's eyes now. "I don't know," Morton admitted, almost breaking down again. "I really don't know."

Eddie put a hand on his dad's thigh. "Dad, tell me how much you owe him."

Morton rubbed his eyes. "Fourteen thousand quid."

Eddie gasped. The figure was almost like a special message from above, a confirmation that the idea he had come up with was the right thing to do and would work. Despite the death of his mother, some part of him could still believe in such things — at least a little bit. He recalled the words he had written earlier in the evening: *Slade peered into the back of the van, at the rows of neatly stacked computers, feeling a mixture of guilt and hope. Fourteen thousand pounds — just enough for the operation that would save his brother's life.*

"Dad, I've got an idea."

T U E S D A Y

3 APRIL 2001

EIGHT

Eddie pressed his ear against the door of room twenty-five to find out if there was a class inside. Satisfied that he was alone, he curled his hand around the handle, turned it, pushed.

The door wouldn't budge.

Eddie muttered a curse, not really surprised.

It would be no good giving Mr Sloan the same excuse today. Nevertheless, he walked slowly up the corridor towards the technician's office, thinking hard. By the time he got there, he had an idea of what he would say — something triggered by the memory of an errand he had once been asked to do.

Mr Sloan's door was open, and he was, as usual, peering into his monitor.

"Sir, could Miss Taggart borrow your key for room twenty-five? She forgot to bring hers." Eddie was extremely nervous, because this was a bold-faced lie, and if Mr Sloan somehow called his bluff, there would be serious consequences.

The technician snatched his key-ring off the desk and handed it to Eddie. “There you go. It’s the green key. Bring it back straight away.”

Eddie took the bunch of keys and walked off, breathing a sigh of relief. *What a pushover*, he thought, striding back along the corridor. With haste, he took three pieces of chewing gum out of his pocket, stuffed them into his mouth, and chewed ravenously, as though this was his first meal in two days — not that he would get much nourishment from a lump of flavoured rubber.

Eddie slotted Mr Sloan’s key into the lock and turned it. There was a satisfying click. He glanced nervously down the corridor to see if anyone was about, then darted into the computer suite, letting the door swing shut behind him.

With not a moment to lose, Eddie immediately spun around and gazed above the door.

The white box on the wall glared back at him, mocking Eddie’s presence with its red light. It was like an irritating child constantly blowing a raspberry. Finally satisfied with his stillness, the light went off.

Eddie wheeled a nearby chair over to the door (out popped the little red “tongue”), stepped up onto the seat, took the gum out of his mouth and pressed it firmly onto the box’s sensor. He rubbed hard, spreading as much of the lump over the surface as possible.

Finished, he hopped off the chair, slid it back to its original position, then stood facing the door.

The light was off.

Eddie moved his limbs in a foolish dance that would have made him the laughing stock of the end-of-term party.

The motion detector didn't respond.

"Gotcha!" Eddie exclaimed, grinning triumphantly and sticking his middle finger up at the device. Just to be doubly sure, he strolled around the room, waving his arms about, keeping his eyes focused above the door at all times.

The "child" was bound, gagged and out cold.

"Told you I'd beat you, didn't I?" Eddie mocked.

Anyone could look up and see the great big lump of sticky rubber clinging to the motion detector, but Eddie was counting on nobody's eyes straying in that direction. He himself had certainly never noticed the device until yesterday, and he had used the room countless times over the past three years. It would take a little luck, Eddie reckoned, but not much of it. This part of the job was the least of his worries.

Later he would find a way to investigate the school library for another of those devices, but now it was time to return Mr Sloan's key before the man got suspicious, and to get back to class before Miss Taggart started imagining he'd fallen into the toilet.

As Eddie left the room, he gazed over his shoulder at the four rows of computers, feeling a pang of guilt.

NINE

The school day was split up into nine periods, and the classes generally changed rooms after each thirty-five-minute lecture. Eddie spent these precious few moments after each bell rang scanning the corridors for more of those motion detectors.

The whole school had a strange texture about it today, as if Eddie had never set foot in it before. Every time he paced down a corridor, gazing along the walls and ceiling, he felt as if he didn't belong here — that he was an impostor.

Thus far, Eddie had found no sensors in the corridors, but he spotted something important that had slipped his mind — something that would not catch him in the act but would certainly give the police a field day later: a closed-circuit television camera, designed to record his every movement.

There were two of them. The first one wasn't a problem; it was mounted in the foyer and pointed at the main entrance doors of the school, spying on a very small amount of the interior. Its purpose was merely to allow the office staff to see who was coming and going, and stop them if necessary — like when somebody enters the building with a whopping great flame thrower (something which was not entirely unheard of in this world).

The second of the two cameras did pose a problem. It pointed

directly along the main downstairs corridor. There were no computers behind these doors, but there was one particular room, foremost in the camera's field of vision, that Eddie needed to check out: the caretaker's store. On an errand for a teacher some time ago, Eddie had noticed a huge rack full of keys on the wall of the store — so many keys that it looked as if there could be one for every room in the school. And of course it made sense. Part of the caretaker's job was probably to check everything after school and lock the place up tight.

Eddie came to a standstill right outside the door, which was open just a crack. His breath stopped in his throat as it occurred to him what a blunder he was making. Later, the police would check the videotape and they would find a boy standing staring at the very door behind which important keys were stolen. Mind racing, Eddie quickly reached up and knocked the door, pretending to be looking for the caretaker. He hoped the man would be elsewhere in the building right now, because his mind had gone blank, and his gaping, speechless mouth would no doubt later be viewed as suspicious.

Thankfully there was no response.

Eddie turned and strolled off past the camera, taking care not to even so much as glance upwards out of the corner of his eye. His heart hammered as he began to realise just how close he had come to ruining everything. If he had waited another few seconds in front of the camera, he might as well have been writing a confession note to the police. Any longer and he may have had to quit the whole operation and

come up with another plan — or leave his sister to a cruel fate. Eddie shuddered.

Somehow he would find a way to deal with the camera. And more than that, he would have to check the store for a sensor. Who would have imagined robbing a school could be so complicated? Anyway, he had the rest of the day to figure out a solution. Right now the corridors were empty and it was well past time to get to class.

Eddie sprinted up the stairs and headed along the upstairs corridor, past Mr Sloan's office, past room twenty-one, twenty-two ... Outside room twenty-three, a class known as IB was lined — or rather scattered — along the corridor, waiting for the teacher to arrive. As usual there was a lot of noise and playful horsing around, which Eddie ignored, concentrating instead on the walls and ceiling, paranoid that he might have missed something on his previous reconnaissance.

So focused was Eddie that he didn't notice the schoolbag that lay in his path. His left foot unwittingly slipped into one of the straps and his right toe clipped the bag itself, sending him off-balance.

Eddie fell flat on his front, much to the delight of the other pupils. They crowded around him, laughing and jeering.

He quickly rose to a sitting position and glared at the class, feeling pure bright rage rush up out of his heart. Here he was, doing his best to deal with a life-threatening situation, and all they wanted to do was hold him back and mock him. All those grinning faces, so carefree, so content — God was up in his heaven, and all was well with the world, hurrah.

Gazing from face to face, Eddie spotted Jade Rodgers among the crowd. A lump formed in his throat, as he witnessed her giggling at him just like the rest, and the image of her that he treasured in his heart began to crumble.

It was the last straw. He had had no sleep the night before; he had been a bundle of nerves all day, and he couldn't take it any more. At that very moment Eddie cared about nothing and nobody. He leaned back, rested the palms of his hands on the floor, stared at the ceiling, and let out a gut-wrenching roar which echoed several times along the corridor.

When the reverberations had finished, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Something in Eddie's tone had communicated a very solemn message to everyone — that Eddie was not well, that he was perhaps a very short distance from putting you in hospital.

Someone several metres behind Eddie broke the silence. "Whoa! King Kong lives!"

Eddie spun around in time to see Stuart Todd beating his chest like a gorilla.

Nobody dared to laugh. They were all looking very worried, like this was dangerous new territory best left unexplored.

Stuart was not part of this class, but belonged to JB. He had stumbled upon the scene in the last few seconds, probably on his way to the toilet — or to the bike-sheds for a smoke. He was a thin boy with a severe acne problem and an even more severe attitude problem.

Eddie sprung to his feet. He crossed the short distance between himself and Stuart, hearing doors opening as curious teachers leaned out to investigate the noise. Eddie wanted to lash out, and here was someone happy to oblige.

Stuart's grin lasted right up until the very moment that Eddie's fist connected with his face. Maybe he thought Eddie didn't have it in him to be a tough guy — something which was ordinarily true. *You just picked the wrong day*, Eddie thought.

Stuart's body performed a brief arc through the air before he landed square on his back with a loud thump. After a moment's disorientation, he felt his cheek, then gazed up at Eddie, not quite believing his eyes. His stunned expression quickly transformed into anger, and he rose awkwardly to his feet, muttering and cursing about what manner of awful things he was going to do to his assailant.

Somewhere up the corridor a teacher started bellowing, but in this circumstance it seemed like a voice calling from far, far away.

Eddie stood his ground, meeting Stuart's gaze with equal fierceness, not caring about what was happening or how far this might go.

Stuart twisted his face into a snarl and drew his fist back.

Then a very strange thing happened. The boy's expression softened into one of puzzlement, then puzzlement changed to concern, and concern evolved unmistakably into fear, complemented by a noticeably whiter skin-tone.

Stuart's eyes focused, not on Eddie, but on something beyond Eddie's shoulder.

Eddie spun around, not knowing what to expect.

But there was nothing there — nothing except the twenty-something pupils of IB. Beyond them a few faces peered out of a classroom. The only thing remotely out of place was a woman at the far end of the corridor, heading their way. She was attractive, in her mid-twenties, had curly blond hair, wore a green business suit with dark tights, and deep black sunglasses covered her eyes. She wasn't any teacher Eddie recognised, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. The glasses did make her look like quite an uncommon character, but there was nothing remotely menacing about her presence; if anything she was just plain sexy.

Eddie looked back at Stuart.

The fear had vanished as quickly as it had come, and now Stuart was scratching his head and rubbing his eyes, looking extremely bewildered.

Eddie's anger had also somewhat subsided in those few eventful moments. "What's wrong?"

Stuart glanced at him hatefully and cursed. "What's it to *you*?"

The woman in green was closer now.

Stuart turned and walked away in the opposite direction, without another word.

The stranger passed by Eddie without a glance, as far as he could tell — which wasn't far considering the sunglasses. But she was certainly very disinterested in the drama of the past few minutes.

Eddie breathed deeply, regaining some control of himself.
Everyone from IB was staring at him with very sober expressions.
His eyes picked out the girl of his dreams.
Jade looked away from him.

TEN

Eddie wasn't long in the classroom before a second-year boy arrived with an ominous request. "Could Mr Lyons please speak to Eddie Morton?"

When Eddie arrived in the foyer, the headmaster was waiting, with his arms folded across his chest and a cold, angry expression on his face. Mr Lyons was a stout man in his fifties, with a bald head surrounded by forests of curly white hair which sprouted comically over his ears. But he had never looked less funny than right now.

Stuart Todd showed up a few seconds later, ambling along with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

The principal remarked on how surprised he was to find this boy as the victim instead of the attacker. To Eddie he gave a longer speech, in a much louder voice, about how shocked and disappointed he was; how Eddie was heading down the wrong path, one that ultimately led to the dole office or a prison cell.

He didn't ask any questions about Eddie's motive, much to the

boy's relief. All Eddie had to do was stand there, wincing as his ears absorbed the impact of the man's booming voice. The headmaster debated sending him home for the rest of the day, and Eddie realised that he had come very close to blowing his whole operation a second time.

After an enforced apology and a handshake between the two boys, the ordeal was over, and Mr Lyons ordered them back to class.

Some time later, Eddie was able to work out a straightforward but risky solution to the problem of the CCTV camera outside the caretaker's store. It involved staying in the foyer after school. Should anyone enquire, he was waiting to be picked up by his dad — a simple, thoroughly believable lie. He could probably hang around till 5pm if it came to that, and no one would bat an eyelid.

As it turned out, his stay lasted a mere fifteen minutes. At 3pm all three women who worked in the general office walked out, carrying their coats and handbags.

Eddie glanced through the glass panel on the office door and peered up at the spot where he knew two television screens were mounted. As he had hoped, they were now switched off. No doubt there was a tape still running, but that was where his next step came in.

The corridors reeked of the smell of bleach, which meant the cleaners were already at work. None of the workers were in sight, but they could come around any corner at a moment's notice, so Eddie would have to be fast.

Inside the assembly hall was a long pole with a hook on the end, used to open and close the high windows. Eddie brought it out into the corridor, stood directly under the security camera, and raised the pole above his head.

The camera appeared to be on a swivel-mount, and Eddie was able to turn it ninety degree with ease, so that it stared at the corridor wall. He was relieved he didn't end up having to bash the electronic spy into submission, and make a lot of noise in the process.

After returning the pole, it was time for a quick wander around to find out what the caretaker was doing and, when the coast was clear, to check the store for a sensor.

And sure enough it was up there in the corner, mocking him with its little red light. But not for long. As before, a piece of gum did the trick.

Eddie walked away feeling a great, but certainly not complete, sense of relief. The complicated part was over; he could take it easy for a while. Then he would face the most dangerous part of all.

ELEVEN

At precisely 5.02pm Eddie crossed the point of no return. The moment arrived in the form of a sound — the dim clunk of a key turning in a lock. Next, Eddie heard the tapping of footsteps

outdoors, fading and fading until all that was left to listen to was his own breathing. He was utterly alone. And there was no turning back now, because he was locked in. Clounagh Junior High was no longer a school but a prison.

Eddie felt a wave of fright come over him. He wanted to rush over to the window and bang it furiously before the caretaker reached his car. He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths in an effort to calm himself down. There were plenty of windows and plenty of heavy things that could be thrown at them, if it came to the point of panic, he assured himself.

The place where Eddie had chosen to conceal himself was the stage of the assembly hall. A few months ago, pupils taking part in the school musical had sung and danced up here, and the set pieces hadn't been taken down. There were four high walls made of painted cardboard, two at either side of the stage, each forming a thin aisle which was angled away from the hall itself to hide the off-stage cast — and right now, to hide one lonely schoolboy, sitting in the shadows.

The silence was eerie. What made it worse was that Eddie had a lot of time to kill. And what made it intolerable was that darkness was on its way; there might be four hours of daylight left, but the coming of the night was unstoppable.

In an effort to take his mind off his situation, Eddie opened his schoolbag and took out *Z for Zachariah*, the novel his class was reading in English — a story about a girl who survives a nuclear war. It was

one of the precious few enjoyable books he had been forced to read at school.

That was all right for an hour or so. Then, feeling hunger pangs, Eddie opened his lunchbox and tucked into the cheese and ham sandwiches that he had left uneaten — he had been too consumed with anxiety to have had any appetite at midday.

Eddie took his mobile phone out of his blazer pocket and pushed a couple of buttons to activate the *Snake* game that was built in. It occurred to him that he had left this device switched on the whole time he was hiding, prior to the caretaker leaving. If someone had phoned ... *Well, they didn't*, Eddie reflected. *So there's no need to worry about it. You got lucky again, and here you are.*

Eddie guided his rapidly growing digital serpent around the little screen again and again for about half an hour. *Snake* was fun, but there was only so much of it you could take in one sitting. He gazed at his phone, wishing he could just dial Pizza Palazzo down town and tell them to deliver a big fat number eleven to Clounagh Junior High School. The thought of all that cheese, tomato, bacon, pineapple ... Eddie groaned.

He wanted desperately to get up and go for a walk around the school, despite the place's ever deepening creepiness. Anything was better than this waiting. But it just wasn't safe. Someone might see him — perhaps a man out walking his dog on the playing fields, or some kids hanging out in the playground with their skateboards.

Eddie began scanning through the contacts list on his phone. He thought of an idea that would kill another few minutes, and decided it was safe enough to try. He pressed the call button and held the phone to his ear.

A few moments later Dean Willis introduced himself with, “Yo.” Eddie could hear the familiar explosion noises of Dean’s favourite computer game, *Quake III: Arena*.

“Hi, Dean. What you up to?” Eddie enquired.

“Well, I *was* beating this idiot from New Zealand to a pulp, until you showed up.”

“New Zealand?”

“Sure, what’s so weird about that? It’s only the net. Global communication and all that lark.”

“That’s cool.”

“You know, we could play this against each other, from our own houses, if you would hurry up and get yourself a PC.”

“Easy for you to say, you spoilt brat.”

Dean chuckled. “Hardly! Hey, you’re not still sore about that business with the photo, are you?”

“Aye. And you didn’t even apologise.”

“What! I did you a favour.”

Eddie snorted. “Oh right. Explain that one to me.”

“If you want to go out with a girl, what you do is make sure everyone knows you fancy her. Then *she’ll* know. And if she’s interested, she’ll find a way to let *you* know.”

“Of course, you’re speaking from your extensive dating experience here,” Eddie mocked playfully.

“Well, I am certainly not speaking from my extensive butt.”

Eddie burst out laughing. That was one of the cool things about Dean Willis — no matter what you said, you just couldn’t offend the guy. Dean’s large body was an obvious target for the verbal abuse of his peers, but unlike others of his size he was always able to give as good as he got. Eddie had seen self-professed tough guys homing in on Dean like vultures, only to walk away red-faced, ears ringing with home truths about how pathetic they were.

“Hey, look, I’ll make a deal with you,” Dean announced. “I’ll tell you I’m sorry if you don’t get mad when I call you a pervert.”

“So you think I’m a pervert?”

“Nah, I’m just kidding. Besides, with the new poster I’ve got up, I’m hardly one to judge.”

“Who is it this time?”

“Well, I took that wee photo off the school website and blew it right up. Jade Rodgers, full colour and *life-size*.”

“*You’re a liar*. You haven’t.”

“Have so. And surely this is another good reason for you to get yourself a computer.”

“I don’t believe you. Your mum would kill you.”

“Of course she would. That’s why I’m selling it to you. Ten quid.”

Eddie chuckled. “You know, if you were telling the truth, I almost *would*.”

“And who could blame you? After all, she has great legs.”

“I *had* noticed.”

“Well, Ed, I have to go. This New Zealander is shaming me big-time. Talk to you later, OK?”

“OK, see ya.”

Eddie put the phone away and lay down, using his blazer as a pillow, irritated by the hard wooden floor underneath him. He thought of Jade, imagining the both of them standing outdoors in the sunshine. She was wearing cut-off jeans and a skimpy tank-top that showed her waist. Her arms were around his neck; his hands were around her middle, resting on the warm skin at the small of her back. The fantasy made Eddie feel both happy and sad at the same time.

TWELVE

Eddie recalled an occasion some four years ago when he had spent several hours at Craigavon Area Hospital, in the Casualty waiting room. Tara had sliced her hand on a piece of glass — nothing too serious, just in need of a few minor stitches. In fact, the little girl who was then seven had spent most of the time dancing around the other people in the room, barely paying her blood-covered hand any attention at all. The waiting had been excruciatingly tiresome, with nothing to do but leaf through boring magazines for grown-ups. But it was nothing

compared to this. Reclining on the school stage for the past five hours had felt like undergoing some cruel and unusual torture.

Eventually the shadows around him grew reddish as the sun made its crawl to the other side of the world. By the time his watch read 9.15pm, Eddie decided that it was safe to emerge. He stood up, knees popping with the inactivity, put on his blazer, grabbed his schoolbag, and headed off the stage via the side exit, feeling his way along with his hands where shadows prevented him from seeing.

School had felt strange earlier in the day, but the feeling was ten times as strong now. All the lights were off, and everywhere Eddie looked was shrouded in darkness. Rays of moonlight shone in through the windows at a very acute angle, giving a vague impression that this was still the familiar geography of Clounagh Junior High School, not some strange and foreboding building. The shadows could have concealed anything — maybe horrible black rats that would come scuttling along the corridor with huge glistening fangs, their sleep awakened by the squeaking of Eddie's shoes on the recently polished floor.

Stop it! Eddie scolded himself, regretting every horror film he had ever watched. He breathed deeply, taking in the smell of the floor polish — grateful that at least one of his senses was willing to give him something familiar.

The caretaker's office was thankfully a very short walk away. Despite his fear, Eddie stayed focused on the job at hand. First, a quick glance above. His eyes, now well used to the dark after his interminable wait, made out the shape of the CCTV camera. It was still pointed

at the wall, his handiwork having gone unnoticed. All he needed now was just a little more of this good luck he had been consistently having today. Just one more tiny piece of it.

Eddie reached for the door handle, turned it, pushed.

The only movement came from Eddie's lips as he swore vehemently. Why did the caretaker have to lock his own door at night when he never locked it all day?

Was this the end? Eddie wondered. When he was this close to winning, had he hit a brick wall that he wouldn't be able to break through? *Well, he thought, this isn't made of brick, and "break" is really the operative word, isn't it?*

An open cloakroom area on the opposite side of the corridor afforded a couple of metres of a "runway," so Eddie made use of it. He sprinted forward, then brought the sole of his right foot up to connect with the door at the last moment.

An almighty boom reverberated along the corridor, but the door remained stuck fast.

Come on, Eddie urged himself. You see this in the movies all the time.

He tried again, and this time felt a sharp pain in his knee. Wincing, he sat down on the floor, hoping he wouldn't end up having to hop around the corridors on one leg.

After rubbing his knee for a few minutes, Eddie got up with renewed determination. "You won't stop me," he told the door. "If I

have to break every bone in my body getting past you, then that's what I'm gonna do." And with that he rushed towards the door with all his might, shoulder first, mouth twisted into a snarl.

The wood around the lock gave way with a crunch, and Eddie's momentum propelled him into the room. He let out a yell that was one part exhilaration and another pain, as his body collided with a table at the far end of the store. He slid into a nearby chair, groaning and holding his aching stomach.

When recovered, Eddie gazed up at what he had come in here for — the key rack. He scanned the forty-something keys and snatched one marked 25 and another REAR FOYER. There was nothing for the library, which was room nineteen, but a key marked MASTER looked suspiciously relevant in that regard. Wasn't a master key something that was used to open lots of doors? He took it, feeling hopeful.

Fingerprints! Eddie suddenly realised. *You should have worn gloves, you dummy.*

Well, as long as he didn't leave the keys behind when he left, he could destroy them later. And besides, if the police were going to trace him, didn't they already need to have his fingerprints on some kind of criminal record file or something?

Eddie left the room and headed upstairs. There were more windows along the main corridor of the upper floor, and that meant more light, but somehow it was just as spooky as ever. Eddie could see right down to the very end of the corridor, about a hundred metres distant.

In his mind he pictured a woman standing down there. She was wearing a white dress that billowed in a non-existent wind. Her skin was every bit as pale as her clothes, and her eyes stood out wide and full of hunger. She raised her arms as if to embrace. And when she started moving towards Eddie, she glided, not walked.

Eddie shook himself and kept going, hearing the sound of his own heartbeat over his footsteps.

He inserted the relevant key into the lock of room twenty-five and heard a satisfying click. There was no point entering the room yet, so he headed back up the corridor. Once he arrived at the library, he tried the master key.

Click.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Eddie entered the room.

The library was one area of school that had a unique odour, one that right now served to remind Eddie of the many good times spent here hunched over a novel or surfing the internet. The smell was a mixture of old books and healthy plants — a pleasant ambience.

Eddie closed the door behind him, shutting out the menacing atmosphere of the corridor. He glanced up at the motion detector on the wall. Sure enough, no one had noticed his earlier handiwork; the gum was still in place and the little red light was in a deep sleep.

The library was located at the very front of the building, on the upper floor, and featured immense towering windows. These allowed you to peer out over the huge lawn and beyond that to the rooftops of

Portadown town centre. Right now the windows helped illuminate the room with the glow from an outdoor security floodlight.

Eddie walked past the bookcases and desks — places he had often sat which now looked unfamiliar to him. Seven computers formed a row in front of the windows. Eddie walked around them and stood with his face against a pane of glass. It was not impossible to be seen, but highly unlikely.

For once the sky was free from clouds, and the stars shone bright and majestic. Gazing at them had a calming effect. There was the frying-pan shape of The Plough, the only constellation Eddie knew how to recognise, glowing at him from light-years away.

Somewhat closer, about a mile distant, the tower of St. Mark's Church rose above the surrounding haze of light from the town centre. The gothic architecture was stunning, especially at night, where it appeared to glow with unearthly beauty. But of course, it was only an illusion of divinity created by lights on the ground that pointed up at the building.

“If you're there, God,” Eddie prayed, against his better judgment, “help me to do this. I know it's wrong, but please help me anyway. Because of Tara.” It was the first real prayer he had spoken in a long time, and saying it felt like rubbing sandpaper across his heart. He didn't much believe in God, mostly because of what happened to his mother, but right now he wanted to believe more than ever.

The faint whirr of traffic could be heard coming and going along

Brownstown Road, the headlights of vehicles zooming from left to right and right to left. All those ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. Eddie felt an immense yearning, and it was enough to bring tears to his eyes. Adjacent to the road were houses, many of them illuminated from within, looking very warm and cosy. The scene was a mere hundred metres in front of him, but to Eddie it seemed like a far-away world to which he might never return.

THIRTEEN

The lights behind the windows went off one by one at random intervals, as the occupants of the houses retired to their safe, warm beds. Now that there was much less traffic on the roads, the bells of St. Mark's Church rang out with acute clarity — twelve strikes signifying midnight.

It had been another tiresome wait since entering the library, but at least Eddie could move around. Better still, there was a wealth of books with which to occupy himself. He wished he had brought a flashlight along, but still, it wasn't impossible to make do with the glow from the outdoor floodlight. A book which he might have passed by without a second thought on another occasion, *The World's Greatest Robberies*, made fascinating reading for a while, until he came across numerous vivid accounts of people who got caught.

At eleven minutes past twelve, as Eddie was impatiently pacing up and down the floor, a flash of bright light suddenly illuminated the whole library for a split second.

The very same thing had happened an hour ago, and it had merely been a car doing a U-turn at the entrance gates of the school. Nevertheless, hearing the sound of an engine, Eddie raced for the edge of the window, his heart thumping. He hid his body behind the curtain and peered out.

A white Ford Transit van raced up the driveway towards the building.

Eddie almost cried out, not with alarm but with exhilaration, because Dad had arrived, and Eddie would no longer be alone.

Halfway up the driveway the headlights went off and the van completed its journey in the pale glow of the moon. As the vehicle went out of sight around the side of the school, Eddie took to his heels and dashed out of the library.

The school, from a bird's eye view, was vaguely U-shaped, with the playground occupying the centre of the letter. This was ideal for tonight's purpose, because it meant the van could be parked completely out of public view.

Eddie bounded down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time, ignoring the dull ache in his knee. He arrived in the foyer just as the van came to a standstill in the playground, right outside the glass doors.

Eddie pulled the key marked REAR FOYER from his pocket. He was almost unable to insert it in his excitement.

Blake Morton climbed out of his van, dressed in black jeans and a black sweatshirt, in stark contrast to the van's exterior; he couldn't have owned a vehicle with a worse colour, but who could have predicted he would end up using it for this purpose?

Eddie got the door open, allowing cool air to rush inside, carried on the peaceful night breeze. It felt like being set free from a cage.

Morton stepped indoors, looking left and right, surveying his surroundings. It was a place he had only been inside about twice a year, for parents' evenings and Christmas carol services.

Eddie had the mad urge to hug his father, but held back. Hugging just wasn't something they did any more. Besides, they had work to do, and do quickly. "Let's go," Eddie said, turning away.

A hand gripped his shoulder tightly, spinning him back around. Morton gazed into his son's eyes and spoke with uncharacteristic softness. "This is awful, you know. I never in a million years imagined dragging you into something like this."

Eddie shrugged. "It was my idea."

Morton closed his eyes briefly. "And that worries me. I just ..." There were tears forming. "I don't want you to turn out like ... like me, do you understand?"

Eddie didn't allow himself to nod out of courtesy. He felt his own eyes filling up. "You're not a bad person, Dad."

Morton laughed and shook his head. “You don’t know the half of it, son.”

Eddie said nothing.

Morton shook himself, took a deep breath and clapped his hands together. “So, did everything work out OK with the sensor things you were talking about?”

Eddie longed to tell him all about today’s adventure, but there was no time right now. “Aye, everything’s cool. Be careful about *that* though.” Eddie pointed at the CCTV camera, which was craftily shrouded in shadow. “It’s pointing at the main entrance doors. As long as we stay out of that area we’ll be all right.”

“OK. Lead the way, son.” Morton ruffled Eddie’s hair, sending a burst of gladness to the boy’s heart.

They made their way up the stairs and along the corridor to room twenty-five. All of Eddie’s phobia had vanished; walking in the dark with someone beside you was a totally different experience to going solo.

On entering the computer suite all they could see were the dim rectangular outlines of the PCs, until Eddie opened the curtains a fraction, letting in the moonlight.

“Leave all the wires behind, and the mice and the keyboards,” Eddie instructed. “They’re not worth anything. All we take are the computers and the monitors.” He felt a surge of pride. It had taken a lot of hard work to get this far, and a lot of luck, but they were going to make it.

Morton peered through a glass panel in a side-door that connected this room to an adjoining one. “Hey, there are more computers in here,” he announced, taking hold of the handle.

“I know, but they’re —” A vital piece of information dawned on Eddie at that moment. “*STOP!*” he yelled.

Morton quickly took his hand off the door, as if it had tried to bite him, and turned to face his son.

If Eddie had reacted a split second later, the whole operation would have been ruined. He put his hand to his chest, relieved. “I didn’t fix the sensor in there,” he explained.

Morton looked incredulous. “Why not? It’s another goldmine in there.”

“No it’s not. There’s nothing but a bunch of ancient Apple Macs. You probably couldn’t even sell them for scrap.”

Morton looked sideways and winced.

Eddie chuckled, then put a hand over his mouth in case it made Dad angry.

“What?” Morton looked back at his son, puzzled.

“Nothing,” Eddie replied, but what he thought was, *This is the first time I’ve ever given you a telling off, Dad. And I even lived to tell the tale.*

They got to work, first leaning over the desks and pulling out all the cables. Morton was able to carry three PCs at a time, neatly stacked in his arms, while Eddie brought one monitor, which was heavy and awkward enough for a fourteen-year-old boy.

Back and forth they went from the room to the van, Eddie feeling so good he almost started whistling. His mood didn't last, however. The more empty the room looked, the heavier Eddie's heart grew.

Eighteen minutes later, with the task completed, Eddie took one long last gaze at all the bare desks strewn with wires and keyboards. He imagined Mr Sloan's wide-eyed, incredulous expression as he opened the room tomorrow morning. He thought about all his friends' sour faces when they were told that there would be no more computing — and, in particular, no more internet access — for some time to come. This room was one of the best places in school, far more interesting than sitting in a normal classroom with a pen and paper. And Eddie was destroying it for everyone.

However, now was not the time to be overcome with guilt; they had only completed part one of their operation. It was time to deal with the library.

Only seven computers this time, and the room was situated right beside the stairway to the foyer. Easy pickings.

As Eddie came out through the library door carrying the final PC, he discovered Morton gazing intently along the main corridor.

“What's wrong?” Eddie asked, with some anxiety, approaching his father.

Morton pushed him gently back, so that Eddie couldn't look down the corridor, and put a finger to his own lips. “Listen.”

Eddie could hear a very faint whirring noise coming from an

indiscernible distance. The sound hadn't been there before, Eddie was sure of it, because they would have heard it even louder over at room twenty-five. His heart began thumping.

“What is it, do you know?” Morton whispered.

Eddie put down the computer and considered. After a moment his eyes lit up. “Hey, there's an elevator down there. Do you think — ?”

“Does it maybe go on automatic or something?” Morton asked, keeping his eyes firmly peeled.

Eddie shrugged.

“I think maybe we should just keep — *NO!*”

Eddie almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of his father's booming voice.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Morton sprinted down the corridor towards the source of the sound.

“Dad!” Eddie shouted after him. It had all been going so well, and in the space of a moment, everything was enveloped in a curtain of confusion and terror. Eddie was sure of only one thing — it was better to be with Dad than to be standing here on his own. He bounded after his father, imagining all manner of horrors chasing after him and more waiting ahead.

Morton darted right, into a small inlet beside the central stairwell where the lift was located.

Panic gripped Eddie at losing sight of his father, and he ran harder. *Don't let anything happen to him!* he prayed over and over again.

When he reached the stairwell, he found Morton frantically pushing the call button on the lift.

“Dad, what’s *happening?*” Eddie cried.

Morton ignored him and ran a few steps down the stairs. He leaned over the railing so that he could see the ground floor section of the elevator, then looked sharply up at his son. “Eddie, how many floors are there?”

Eddie was confused by the simplicity of the question.

“*How many floors?!*” Morton shouted.

Eddie snapped to attention. “Two.”

Morton moved halfway down the stairs and gazed at the ground floor, looking like a panther getting ready to spring on its prey.

“Dad,” Eddie called, “you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

Again Eddie’s father ignored him. Moments turned into minutes, and Morton’s posture relaxed a fraction. “What *is* this? He has to come out somewhere.” He turned to Eddie. “You’re sure there’s no other place this lift can go? Like a basement ... or rooftop?”

Eddie thought for a moment. “I’ve been in the elevator before — that time Dean sprained his ankle and couldn’t use the stairs. I remember two buttons. Just two, I’m pretty sure ... Dad, why did you run? Did you see somebody?”

Morton nodded. “Darted back into the lift before I could catch him.”

“What did he look like?” Eddie asked, but what he really wanted to know was, *Did he have horns or fangs or glowing red eyes?*

“Too dark,” Morton answered. “Must be a teacher working late, I suppose.”

“Can’t we just get out of here?” Eddie pleaded.

Morton shook his head. “I’m worried he got a better look at me than I got at him.”

“What are you going to do?”

Morton raised a finger to his lips, walked back upstairs, and approached the lift. Putting his face right up to the door, he called out loudly. *“Hey, you in there.”*

No response.

“I just want to talk; work something out.”

Eddie felt a sudden chill at his father’s choice of words, knowing they held a more sinister meaning.

Again, silence.

“You can’t stay in there forever.”

But of course whoever it was could certainly hold out until morning — an experience no worse than Eddie’s earlier ordeal.

Morton tried pressing the call button again, but it was futile. “He must have pressed some emergency stop button that’s jammed the whole thing between floors.”

“Let’s go, Dad. We’ll never get him out.”

“We’ll see about that. Find me something to hold these doors open.”

Eddie went into room twenty-five, which was nearby, and looked

around. He didn't like being alone in this strange room, even if Dad was only a few metres outside. It had been tolerable before, but now it felt as if anything could jump out at him from anywhere. Eddie grabbed the nearest chair and got out.

It suddenly occurred to him that the elevator door was key-operated, and tonight he had access to every key for every lock in the building. But Morton had already managed to get his fingers into a tiny gap at the edge of the door. That was the hard part, and now he forced the door the rest of the way open with relative ease, revealing total darkness within. He used his feet to push the chair into position, then relaxed, letting it brace the door.

A flashlight was a dangerous item to use in these surroundings, but right now it had become essential. Morton fished it out of his pocket and shone its beam down into the lift shaft.

“Holy ...” Morton finished the sentence with a whispered curse.

Eddie grew agitated. “What is it?”

Morton turned to look at his son with eyes that shone with awe.

“Dad,” Eddie said, “what did you *see*?”

“Come and look.”

Eddie squeezed into the doorframe beside his father and let his eyes travel downwards.

Morton shone the beam into the shaft again.

Eddie gasped, the sound of his voice reverberating below as though some mocking creature lurking in the dark was trying to imitate him.

All he could see was a bunch of metal cabling and four cramped walls. What made the sight so shocking was not so much what he *could* see but what he *couldn't*. For there was no sign of the bottom of the lift shaft, only a mysterious darkness that might have stretched to infinity for all he knew.

FOURTEEN

“What are we going to do, Dad?” Eddie asked.

Blake Morton had been pacing back and forth for the last few minutes, lost in thought, while his son sat with his back against the corridor wall.

“This is too weird,” Eddie reflected. “We should call the police. We haven’t really done anything wrong. Not if we explain why we —”

Morton grabbed Eddie by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. He leaned forward, putting his face very close to his son’s, and looked at him with a kind of angry desperation. “Listen to me,” he instructed. “If there was ever a moment in my life that I needed you to believe in me, it’s now. You understand?”

Eddie swallowed hard and nodded.

Morton gripped Eddie’s shoulders tight and spoke very gravely. “If we tell the police, your sister is going to die. Do you want that?”

Eddie, quivering, shook his head.

“If I’ve learned anything over the years it’s that these people are never to be underestimated. They don’t make empty threats. They’ll take Tara away and slaughter her. Do you want her to end up like your mother?”

Tears spilled down Eddie’s cheeks. A horrifying question occurred to him. Was Dad implying that Mum’s death hadn’t been an accident — that she had been murdered? Eddie’s eyes searched his father’s face.

Morton nodded once, slowly.

Eddie’s eyes opened wide with shock.

His father relaxed his fierce grip. “So I don’t want any more talk about the police. Agreed?” He stuck out his hand.

Eddie took hold of it limply in his own.

Morton pumped his son’s hand once and, satisfied, resumed his pacing.

Some minutes passed, which Eddie spent resting against the wall with his mouth agape and his eyes unfocused, looking like a patient from a mental institute. All this time he had thought Mum’s death was an accident, but it was murder.

“I think we’ve stumbled onto something big here,” Morton announced finally.

Eddie snapped to attention, forcing his thoughts away from his mother.

“I mean, just think about it,” Dad continued, pointing at the elevator shaft. “A thing like this doesn’t appear out of thin air, as if by magic. The shaft was built by whoever put the lift in here. And it’s not like it

could have been done in secret. This is a school, for crying out loud. There are people here all the time.”

“Not in summer,” Eddie corrected.

“True enough, but one person can’t build an elevator shaft. There had to be a team involved. And they had to have permission from the people who run the school.”

“You mean Mr Lyons, the headmaster, knows about this?” Eddie clarified.

Morton spread his hands. “I don’t see how he *couldn’t* know.”

Eddie shuddered when he thought about how Mr Lyons had looked at him with that cold anger earlier in the day. This revelation certainly put the plump old principal in a whole new and sinister light.

“But why?” Morton queried. “Why build a basement — if that’s what it is — so far underground? We don’t even know how deep it goes.”

Eddie thought hard, but could come up with no answer.

“And that bloke,” Morton continued, “the one who spotted me — what was he doing here at this time of night?”

Eddie got to his feet. “You know, all evening when I was waiting, the school was dead quiet. I’m sure I would have heard somebody come into the school, no matter what door they used.”

Morton’s eyes widened. “You mean ... like he was already in here, *all* the time? Like he’s *living* under the school?”

Eddie hugged himself. “Dad, let’s get out of here. I don’t like this at all.”

Morton cursed and looked at the building all around him. “What kind of a place is this I’m getting my kids educated in?” he exclaimed.

As if in answer, a loud clunk erupted from the lift shaft, startling both of them. The noise was followed by the soft whirr of the elevator carriage in motion.

Morton looked sharply at Eddie. “Get out of sight,” he whispered. “This guy didn’t see you the first time, and I want to keep it that way.”

Frightened, Eddie darted out into the main corridor, and hid behind the railing.

Morton grabbed the chair that was holding the elevator door open, allowing it to slide closed. He stood to one side, with his back against the wall, holding the chair like a baseball bat, ready to swing. He glanced at Eddie, then rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Get out of sight *now*,” he snapped.

Eddie quickly crawled along on his hands and knees until the railing ended and the corridor wall began. He sat behind it, now completely out of sight, his back against the concrete and his knees drawn up to his chest.

The whirring grew gradually louder, seeming to go on for ever. In moments of tension it was common for minutes to feel like hours. But this was no ordinary elevator; who could tell what great distance the carriage might have to travel in order to get back up here from whatever mysterious dungeon lay far below.

Eddie could hear the sound of his breathing coming in sharp gasps,

and he tried in vain to control them, hoping he wouldn't give himself away.

Not long ago, everything had been going so smoothly that almost all of Eddie's apprehension had vanished. Now he was gripped by a horrible sinking sensation. Something they couldn't possibly have accounted for had happened, and now they were no longer in control. Sitting here in the stillness of the corridor, he felt like he was surrounded by chaos — that the floor underneath him could open up and swallow him whole. He was almost overpowered by the impulse to get up and run as fast and as far as he could.

Clunk!

Too late now.

It was awful not being able to see. Eddie balled his hands into fists and held them to his temples, picturing in his mind a dark figure coming out of the elevator, and Dad swinging the chair in an arc, slamming it into the figure's abdomen.

Instead of the thump of metal against muscle, Eddie heard a simple exclamation from his father's lips, full of dread: "Oh my —" A noise like the brief *whoosh* of a Bunsen Burner being ignited, only ten times louder, cut off the remainder of the sentence.

Then there came a thud that had to be a body falling to the floor — but whose?

Eddie covered his mouth, almost hyperventilating. He desperately wanted to call out for his father in panic, but somehow he was able to keep his head.

He heard footsteps, a hissing noise — not like a snake, but the sound a body might make being dragged along the floor. But whose body?

Eddie felt the truth in his heart, and started sobbing. His father was being taken away from him — by whom and to where, it was impossible to know. Sheer terror made him pull himself together, before the sounds coming from his throat gave him away. He wanted desperately to look, but couldn't.

The sound of the footsteps changed to a more muffled tone, and Eddie had the mental image of the figure moving into the elevator, which meant he would be out of sight. Eddie dared to crawl alongside the wall and peer through the bars of the railing.

The elevator door was open wide, spilling light into the corridor. Curiously the bulb was dim, only about a quarter of its expected strength, but still bright enough to illuminate Blake Morton's legs on the floor of the corridor. The upper half of him was already inside the lift, out of sight.

Eddie opened his mouth to scream, but nothing would come out. He could only watch in shocked silence as his father's thighs, knees, ankles and feet disappeared, inch by inch, dragged out of sight by some mysterious figure whom Eddie had not once glimpsed.

The door slid closed with a soft thump, striking despair to Eddie's heart.

That awful whirring began again, loud at first, then getting softer, until eventually there was no sound but Eddie's weeping.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note

Just what on earth is going on under Clounagh Junior High School? Why has Blake Morton been kidnapped? How will Tara escape the clutches of the loan shark? And what exactly did Stuart Todd see in the corridor that scared him so badly? One thing's for sure, Eddie is not about to walk away in defeat.

I hope you'll stick around for the rest of the tale. And really, we're only just getting started. Drop by www.darrylsloan.com and find out how you can buy *Ulterior* in paperback. Every copy sold raises money for the BBC Children in Need appeal.

Have fun!

Darryl Sloan, 31 May 2002