

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

FACULTY OF ARTS

Problems of representation/representing sex, drugs and alcohol in contemporary
British young adult fiction

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ABSTRACT

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There is an ongoing debate into whether contentious issues, such as sex, drugs and alcohol, should be contained in young adult fiction (YAF). In this debate, the popular press most often represents the view that children, including young adults (YA), should be protected, and thereby remain innocent, thus characterising the inclusion of sensitive topics in children's fiction (including YAF) as an unacceptable assault on that innocence. Conversely, and as explored in this thesis, there are others, especially authors and academic critics (including myself) who suggest that fiction is an ideal place to explore such issues because of the nature of the vicarious experience it offers.

This thesis is presented in two parts. The first is the creative aspect which is a YA novel entitled *Ham & Jam*. This is the story of four students on a school trip. They embark on a mission to save a young Afghan girl who had been trafficked and was being sold for sex. The novel developed out of the research undertaken for the second aspect of this thesis which is a critical exploration into how the contentious issues of sex, drugs and alcohol have been represented within YAF since 1996.

Using Melvin Burgess's novel, *Junk* (1996) as a starting point, and his representation of sex, drugs and alcohol as a benchmark, a selection of British contemporary realist YAF from 1996 and for each subsequent year up to, and including, 2010 were compared critically and culturally from the dual perspective of writer and reader. The cultural research involved understanding society's perception of these contentious issues by examining current statistics and government reports. The results of which were used as a form of *narrative system*, enabling me to critically compare the representation of sex, drugs and alcohol in YAF with this 'perceived' reality.

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, VANESSA HARBOUR,

declare that the thesis entitled, Problems of representation/representing sex, drugs and alcohol in contemporary British young adult fiction, and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published.

Signed:

Date:.....

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Ham & Jam

Working title

PhD Submission

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Chapter 1

Ben

The girl just stared at him.

‘What?’ Ben mouthed at her through the coach window but she didn’t reply.

Her staring made him feel uncomfortable. It was as if she had crawled inside him, sliced him wide open with an eight inch knife, and ripped her way into his soul.

Her stare seemed to pick him out with pinpoint precision. It was as if she knew him, but how could she? He knew nothing about her except that she was a girl standing on the corner of a street in a strange city in a foreign country. And that she was looking at him, Ben Williamson, trouble maker and gang member, on a coach crawling through the streets of Caen on a school trip.

Despite being abroad Ben knew she still looked out of place. A gash of red lipstick across her face masked childish lips. Her thick black hair tumbled down her back. The tight t-shirt she wore emphasised barely-begun breasts. She was a child, dressed like a Barbie doll, masquerading as a teenager.

What he did understand though was what was written in her eyes. It was fear. Not a spider-in-the bath sort of fear but true, gut-busting fear. Of life and the future. Ben had seen it before. You didn’t live on the estates without knowing and understanding that sort of fear. But what could he do? He turned to Thea who was sleeping next to him and tried to wake her.

‘Thea, Thea, look at this girl,’

She grunted and turned away, ‘Gerroff Ben, I feel sick. Leave me alone.’

He turned around again and looked at the corner but she'd gone. He couldn't see her anywhere. She'd just melted into the mêlée. He'd lost her. Perhaps he had imagined her.

Ben leant back into his seat. It was cool in the coach with its air conditioning and tinted windows. He stretched his legs out a bit more but he felt twitchy and he wanted to move. The journey was too long and the image of the girl's face appeared every time he shut his eyes. He looked out of the window to take his mind off her.

He saw a group of people sitting outside a café at tables adorned with ashtrays and menus. They were drinking wine or coffee, most were smoking with packets of cigarettes strewn across the tables. Everyone seemed to be talking rapidly, semaphoring their conversation with exaggerated waving hands. Next door to the café was *Boulangerie Patisserie Raison Sarl*. Ben silently mouthed the words, letting them roll round his mouth like a boiled sweet. There were baskets of freshly baked baguettes all standing to attention in one window and multi-coloured macarons and luxurious gateaux in the other. There was a queue of people waiting outside. The food looked good. His stomach grumbled and he remembered how hungry he was.

Ben twisted around trying to make sure he could remember how to get there, looking for landmarks. In the distance a large castle stood guard. It was perched high on a grass mound. He looked back at the shops; *Xavier Fleurs* was next with its window full of colour. Then next to all the flowers was *Boucherie Saint Sauveur* where racks of meat were stacked, an abattoir's altar. These were all things Ben could see at home but they looked so vibrant and full of life here. At home they seemed colourless and tired. A tribe of American tourists in loud shirts chatted and clicked cameras inanely, old D-Day soldiers, their memories secure in

the medals emblazoned across their chests, marched along the pavement; there was even a waddle of nuns in white headdresses walking in penguin-like formation. Ben saw it as a film set, the people a parade of extras.

He looked back at Thea. Despite the long trip there was not a dyed blonde hair out of place and her face was perfectly made up to make the most of her smooth caramel skin. Ben knew her because they'd sort of gone out for a while when he was 13. She'd let him have a fumble of her tits, which was more than a lot of girls would do then. He smiled to himself at the memory and wondered if she'd notice if he had a quick fondle while she was asleep. He let his hands hover above them.

'Don't even think it!' said Thea.

He folded his arms and looked out of the window again. How did she know he was there? Her eyes were shut. Girls must be born with 'boy-dar' so alarm bells ring the moment any male is within a foot of them. It wasn't fair. She wasn't doing anything with them.

He lurched in his seat as the coach shuddered to a halt outside *Le Havre Hotel*.

Ben stood up and started pushing past everyone, 'Come on, get off.' He just wanted to get out. He'd had enough.

At the front of the coach Mr Cooke, head of history, stood up. He wiped the sweat off his face with his hand then held it up. His bow tie was all twisted and his thin blonde hair was darkened by sweat and stuck to his head despite the air conditioning.

'Ben Williamson, stop pushing, we'll all get off in good time. Just be patient, will you?' He turned to go down the steps, 'Everyone, single file then wait next to me on the pavement.'

Tosser! thought Ben. What does he know?

Sam Jones tried to push his bulk in front of him, his Arsenal shirt barely containing his fat middle.

‘Pack it in Jones, you fat git. Wait your turn,’ said Thea.

Thea thumped Ben on the back, ‘For fuck’s sake I so need a piss. Get out the way will you, Ben?’ She started pushing him.

Mr Cooke’s orderly discharge rapidly fell into disarray. An eclectic mix of teenagers bundled out onto the pavement with a chorus of ‘Ouch!’ ‘Gerroff!’ ‘That was my hand stupid.’ ‘I’m dying of thirst Mr Cooke, quick get me water.’

Ben stood waiting. His 6'2" athletic frame meant he towered over most of the other students. His board shorts hung below his waist whilst his loose t-shirt billowed in the faint breeze. He was startled by how bright everything was after the tinted world he’d just come from. Life on the coach might have finished, but life here was going on all around them without interruption. Just like they didn’t exist. He turned slowly around getting his bearings. Across the street, the traffic on the main road ground to a halt. Cars blaring loud music while impatient drivers pumped their horns. People bustled by unaware of the students tipping onto the pavement. A group of scantily clad girls flirted their way past, smiling at the boys. Ben automatically smiled back. The girls giggled and one of them said something to him. But their foreign tongues jarred at Ben’s already aching head. The heat of the late afternoon sun wasn’t helping. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be here now. It was totally strange.

Ben thought of his friends back at school, *St Jude’s*, it was like any comprehensive school in an area full of fighting estates. He hadn’t told any of his friends where he was going. He looked at his phone to make sure it was still off.

He didn't want them ringing him. Anyway he couldn't deal with 'requests' from here could he?

He could never tell them why he really wanted to come on this trip. They'd never understand that he really enjoyed history. It just wasn't cool to like something like that and he knew it. His older brother, Dan, was fascinated with the Second World War. That's why he was here, for Dan. He was sure if he could tell him about the places they went to Dan would stop being so angry all the time. It would give him something else to think about other than... Ben's thoughts were interrupted by a squawking girl.

'Sir, Sir,' one of the girls with a scratchy voice was going on and on, 'I've got no signal on my phone. How can I text with no signal?' She was showing everyone her mobile in case they didn't believe her. Ben rolled his eyes, everyone knew it would roam and then find a signal. Stupid bint.

Mr Cooke ignored her. A look of total resignation slid across his face.

'You will all get what you need shortly. Brittany we'll sort your phone out too, that is, if you get your act together and listen to me.'

Ben looked up at the hotel. It was a concrete block that stood four storeys high. The ground floor windows and doors had white canopies. Above that there was nothing, just a facade of grey with blank windows. Apart from the canopies he might as well be at home.

'Is this it?'

'What did you expect, *The Ritz*?' said Mr Cooke drumming his thin piano playing fingers on his folded arms.

'It's just a base Ben,' said Ms Brodie, who was the other history teacher. Her hair was loosely piled up on top of her head. She wore jeans and a white shirt that didn't look at all dishevelled from the journey. 'It doesn't need to be glamorous,

just clean and functional, and it's close to the centre of Caen, which is full of vitality. Give it a chance, Ben.'

Ben looked around again. He couldn't see much sign of vitality, just some more manky buildings and a lot of restaurants. His disappointment grew and settled like a lump of concrete at the bottom of his stomach.

'Right, pay attention', Mr Cooke wiped the sweat off his face again.

'Everyone get in to their room pairs.'

Ben swung back and looked straight at Mr Cooke, 'Room pairs?'

As if it needed reiterating, Thea repeated, 'Room pairs?'

Ben ran his hand across his shaved head. His baldness highlighted his dark skin and handsome chiselled features. He was good looking and he knew it.

'Yes Ben and Thea. Pairs. If you and Thea had been at the last meeting about the trip, you'd both have known who you're sharing with and which groups you're working in.'

Mr Cooke ran his finger down the paper on his clipboard and then grinned, 'Ah yes of course...'

But before he could continue, a boy with a mop of blonde hair walked up to Ben and held out his hand, 'Hi roomy!'

Ben knew who, or rather what, Matt Atkinson was. He was the biggest geek in the school. He looked the boy up and down and cringed. Matt looked pathetic with all the buttons of his polo shirt done up. His jeans were held high with a belt. Ben turned to look at Mr Cooke.

'No fucking way.'

Thea started to roar with laughter.

'Oh yes, and Thea, you're with Amina.'

Ben looked across at a slight girl wearing a hijab. There was not an inch of skin showing from beneath her tracksuit bottoms and long sleeved T shirt, apart from a scrubbed face which was flushed red now and hands that gripped her rucksack so tightly that her stretched knuckles were white.

Ben pushed Thea, 'Who's laughing now?'

Chapter 2

Thea

‘You’re frigging joking aren’t you? Ben and I will corrupt the geeks, you know we will.’ Thea looked at Mr Cooke shaking her head and in the vain hope he’d relent but one look at his emotionless pale eyes meant she knew he wouldn’t. Her slicked-back, dyed-blond hair didn’t move an inch. It just glinted in the afternoon sun. Thea Jenkins never ventured outside without perfect hair and makeup.

Mr Cooke ignored her. ‘When your name is called, one of you needs to collect the key for your room from Ms Brodie.’

Ms Brodie started to hand the keys out as names were called. Mr Cooke read the list ending with, ‘Ok Ben and Matt in room 8 whilst Thea and Amina are in room 18.’

Ms Brodie tried to calm things down as she handed the keys to Thea and Ben, who were still seething. ‘You’ll be fine, you won’t be in your rooms much and you might just get on.’

Before they could reply, Mr Cooke stepped in between Ben and Ms Brodie, pushing her arm out of the way. Thea could see Mr Cooke’s pulse throbbing at the side of his eye and two red stains spreading from the centre of his cheeks.

‘Don’t blame me or her!’ said Mr Cooke. ‘It was the Head’s decision who would share with who. And you’re sharing with Matt. It’s happening, get used to it.’

Mr Cooke stared at Ben almost daring him to say something more; then in typical teacher style, Thea noticed, he had a further swipe at Ben.

‘Just remember, if I’d had my way you wouldn’t be on this trip. In my opinion you don’t deserve it,’ Mr Cooke looked at Ben and Thea. He turned and

walked away appearing to compose himself, then he returned and stared at Ben again. Thea could feel the tension between them.

Mr Cooke said, 'So please, just for me, step out of line so I can send you home faster than you can scratch your backside.' He looked around at the others before looking back at Ben. He leant forward and Thea heard him whisper, 'You know I do like to be proved right.'

Thea almost felt sorry for Ben, Mr Cooke really had it in for him, it was like a vendetta. The teacher didn't believe that it wasn't Ben who'd keyed his car. Having said that, maybe Ben deserved it a bit; he could be a prat particularly when he was with his crew.

Mr Cooke turned back from Ben to the rest of the group. Thea really didn't want to share with Amina so she simpered, 'Sir, I don't want to share with a terrorist.'

The soft voice hid the venom of her words but Mr Cooke had heard them clearly enough. The other students stopped what they were doing to see what Mr Cooke was going to do.

'Thea Jenkins, if you say something like that again Ben Williamson won't be the only one going home. You'll be suspended. Amina is a Muslim, not a terrorist. It might do you some good to be with someone who's sensible and well behaved. Instead of a....'

The sentence hung in the air. Everyone knew which words Mr Cooke had missed off.

'Now everyone knows who they're sharing with so please collect your bags and go to your rooms. Meet in the reception area in an hour's time.' Mr Cooke swung his rucksack onto his back, 'Come on Ms Brodie I'll show you where our rooms are.'

There was a cacophony of moaning and groaning while everyone found their bags and traipsed off to their allocated rooms. They were accompanied by the chattering of suitcase wheels being pulled along towards the hotel.

Ben caught Thea's arm, 'Look, look at that girl.' He was point to a girl with a man on the pavement opposite, 'I saw her when I was on the coach. I think she's in trouble.'

She looked where Ben was pointing. It was a very young girl with a man, but he didn't look like her Dad. He wore a long SS-style leather coat and was sweating in the heat, which made a livid scar down his unshaven cheek stand out. His hard black eyes looked empty. He held the girl's arm so tight that his knuckles were white. Thea knew Ben's gut was right, the girl was trapped.

'Poor kid, what do think he is going to do with her?' asked Thea.

'Dunno, I don't like it though,' said Ben.

'Yeah I know what you mean, but like what can we do?'

Ben shrugged his shoulders 'Nothing I suppose, but it's not right.'

And to emphasise the point he left Thea wondering whilst he strode ahead towards the hotel. Thea knew he wasn't going to wait for Matt. She laughed to herself, Matt was really going to cramp Ben's style, but she certainly wasn't going to let Amina stop her. Like Ben, she'd made sure she picked up their key so she could get in the room first.

She started to follow Ben who walked through the door of the hotel. Matt scuttled behind him trying to catch up but instead he got a face full of glass door. He slumped to the floor and there was a trickle of blood coming out of his nose. Thea couldn't help but laugh again as she watched Mr Cooke and Ms Brodie run towards him.

'Matt, are you alright?' asked Ms Brodie.

Thea slid past the commotion and headed for her room. When she walked in she found that the whole room was bright yellow. The walls were yellow, there were yellow pictures, yellow curtains and yellow bed linen. But she didn't hang around looking at the decor, she wanted to unpack and make sure that all her clothes had plenty of space. Amina should've moved faster if she wanted room for hers.

Chapter 3

Matt

Matt bounded into their room. A tangle of limbs and bags, he tripped over like an over-enthusiastic puppy. He knew he looked stupid with tissues hanging out of each nostril, like tampons but he didn't care. He was sharing a room with the coolest of the cool.

The two boys grunted acknowledgements. Neither boy mentioned the incident with the door downstairs. Matt threw his rucksack on the floor. He looked in the bathroom first. It was very clinical but looked ok. Matt spotted the bidet.

'Oh a bloody bidet, I hate them. It seems so wrong squirting water at your arse like that.'

Matt knew Ben was determined to ignore him.

'I'm having the top two drawers,' said Ben. 'You can have the bottom two for your stuff when you unpack.'

Matt looked at him and raised one eyebrow. His polo shirt was still done up to the neck but now covered in blood. 'Unpack? Why do I need to unpack? Are we having a room inspection then? Is this the army or worse still, is my mum around?' Matt laughed at his own joke.

'Just don't touch any of my stuff. Just remember where it is. And don't mess with it, if you know what's good for you,' said Ben.

The Star Wars' theme tune started to echo around the room. Matt fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. It was the latest iPhone. Matt liked gadgets. He looked at the screen.

'Oh shit, it's my Mum. I told her not to ring.' Matt sat straight up on the edge of the bed then pressed the answer button. 'Hello Mum. Yes I'm fine. No I haven't got a cold. Just a bit of nose bleed. No, I walked into a glass door. Didn't

see it, typical, huh! Yeah I'm fine. No I don't need to go to hospital. Mum, please, give me a break. I'll ring you if I need you. Bye.'

He could hear his Mum still talking as he switched the mobile off.

'The TV is digital. Do you want to find the porn channel?'

'Sure,' Ben said pushing the drawer closed.

'Sick,' said Matt, hoping Ben would be impressed by his gang slang but there wasn't a flicker of recognition from him. Matt sighed and took the remote, he switched on the TV then started trawling through channels looking for porn.

'Come on then, where is it smart arse?' said Ben.

Please be there, thought Matt, this might be my way of getting on Ben's good side. And with that thought, a display of entwined naked bodies appeared on the screen. Matt could feel a boner developing immediately. He swung round and lay on his stomach. He didn't want Ben to see. But he was too late.

'You got a boner then?'

Matt didn't answer. They both watched the mock orgy. Both boys' heads tilted in unison as the bodies writhed and they tried to get a better look at the huge fake boobs and shaved pussy. But suddenly it stopped just before one of the girls was about to go down on another. A message in French came up instead.

'What?' said Ben, jumping up. Matt noticed his attempts at bravado were diminished by the desire to see more, 'Where's it gone?'

'We have to pay to see more. Have you got a credit card?'

Surely you must have a credit card, thought Matt. But by the look on Ben's face Matt knew he was wrong.

'Course not, don't be stupid.'

Matt was disappointed, 'Oh I imagined you would, well you're meant to be a gansta, or a er... drug dealer, aren't you? Anyway, I could use my Mum's credit card.'

Ben punched the bed, 'For Christ's sake, banks don't just give out credit cards.'

A noise of crashing dustbins interrupted them. They looked out the window and could see a chef shouting at someone, Matt could see a small figure disappearing round the corner of the hotel.

'Bet that was someone scrounging for food,' said Matt. 'Right, when are we getting out of here, look there's a fire escape we can go down.'

Matt was pointing at the iron staircase that wound its way down the back of the hotel.

'That's my way out, find your own. You're not coming with me,' said Ben

Matt turned to look at Ben, 'Why not? Why can't I use that fire escape? You can't stop me.'

Ben obviously hadn't expected his decision to be challenged. He stood up to his full height which was good few inches taller than Matt.

'Oh yeah? You are not coming with me, you're a geek!'

Matt turned away.

'Thanks! Like I don't know what everyone thinks of me. But for fuck's sake no one knows me here, so I can be what I want.' He looked back at Ben, he felt defiant for a moment. But Ben was not impressed by Matt's plea, he snorted.

'You really think it's that easy? I can tell you that it takes more than a trip away to become someone else. Just shut the fuck up! There's no way you're coming with me when I nick off.'

Ben pushed past Matt.

‘OK, I’ll do it on my own then.’

Matt followed Ben out of the door.

‘Don’t follow me.’

‘I’m not following you, I’m going to see Mr Cooke like we’re supposed to. Not my fault it is in the same direction you’re going.’ Matt strode ahead of Ben instead and turned. ‘Better?’

Ben grabbed Matt. ‘How about you show me some respect. Just remember who’s the boss round here so let me lead the way to Cookie’s meeting.’

Ben pushed him hard against the wall then walked on. Matt stood straight and sighed; he knew this was going to be a long trip at this rate. Ben, for all his hard reputation, was also actually a pain in the arse.

Chapter 4

Amina

‘What are you looking at?’ snapped Thea making Amina jump. She realised she’d been staring at her whilst Thea unpacked and did her make-up.

‘Sorry, I was just looking.’

‘Well fucking don’t, I didn’t say you could. And Terrorist, just so you know, definitely don’t touch any of my stuff. If you want to live, that is?’

It’d taken Thea a lot longer than Amina to empty her holdall. There were so many pots of creams and lotions, and more make-up than Amina had seen in the whole of her life. They were now spread out across the top of the chest of drawers, pushing the tea stuff out the way. A whole shop-full of clothes was hanging up in the wardrobe too. There was definitely no room for any of Amina’s. How could anyone need so many clothes for a four day trip?

It was a good thing it was a big room. Much, much bigger than Amina’s one at home and to have her own bathroom was absolute bliss. No smelly brothers to share with. The atmosphere in the room between the girls did not match the bright colours of the clothes and make-up.

Amina turned to look at the small pile of clothing on her own bed. In comparison with Thea’s rainbow colours, Amina’s couldn’t be duller. She picked them up and refolded them. It didn’t take long. All the tops had long sleeves and she only had trousers to wear. They were all black or navy. They even looked dull against the yellow duvet cover. She had nothing that could help her blend in. Make her like everyone else. There certainly wasn’t any make-up or anything in her suitcase that could be used to change the way she looked. She was not allowed to

do that. It was forbidden. She looked back at Thea and knew it would be down to her to try and break the silence between them.

‘I have a name. It’s Amina.’

‘Whatever! You’re a terrorist and always will be to me. Just because we have to share a room doesn’t mean I have to speak to you or be nice to you. You just don’t exist, bint.’ Thea flicked blusher across her cheeks.

‘Do you know what a bint is?’

‘Yeah, it means slag.’

Amina took a deep breath, ‘No it doesn’t, and actually it is the opposite of that. It’s Arabic for a girl who hasn’t had children yet.’ She immediately regretted saying this.

‘Well that confirms it. You must be a terrorist. You know what Arabic words mean, only a terrorist would know that.’

Amina let her head drop. This school trip was meant to be different. But what was the point, no one would ever see beyond her hijab and her religion. Certainly Thea wouldn’t. Amina looked up at her; Thea, now focussed on the mirror, put on even more make up. She watched and wondered what it felt like to paint your face like that. Wafts of delicate perfume kept tantalising Amina’s nose as Thea opened and closed various pots. She started to trace her finger around her face in the same way Thea did. She touched her eyelids, then outlined her lips with her finger, filling it in with pretend lipstick. Was it like putting on a mask, or did it feel like having hijab on? Could you hide behind the paint?

Thea caught sight of Amina in the mirror.

‘What the fuck are you doing now? Taking the piss?’

‘No, I was watching to see how you did it.’

‘Fucking freak!’ Thea started putting mascara on now.

Amina walked into the bathroom and started splashing water onto her face trying to wash away the grime of the journey. She looked at herself in the mirror and pretended to put make-up on again. She wanted to try it and see what she looked like. Amina had so many questions she wanted answered. But there was no point in asking Thea.

She rubbed her face hard with a towel trying to wipe away the sense of misery that was threatening to overwhelm her. She fingered the hijab, pulling it back into place and watched the moon like face that was peering back out at her and asked.

‘Is this all I will ever be?’ The moon face didn’t reply so she went back into the bedroom.

‘Are you coming down to that meeting?’ she asked Thea.

‘No!’ Thea’s reply was so violent, it appeared to shatter Amina’s question before it had truly left her mouth.

Amina still wouldn’t be beaten, she tried one more time.

‘OK, I’ll tell you if there’s anything you need to know. Do you want me to bring you any food back?’

Thea didn’t answer, so Amina left the room. She shut the door quietly trying to avoid any more of Thea’s wrath.

Ben joined the stairs just below her, shortly followed by Matt. Ben looked up when he heard someone behind him. Amina was sure she saw a moment of panic flit across his face until he saw it was only her. When she drew level with him he said:

‘Hey Terrorist, what’ve you done with Thea? You blown her up?’

Somehow, it didn’t sound so bad when *he* called her terrorist. Amina looked straight at him and replied:

‘Not yet, I’ve left her strapped to her a chair with a ticking bomb attached to it.’

For the briefest of moments Amina suspected that Ben didn’t know whether to believe her or not. He half smiled as she watched a thousand different emotions reflected in his eyes. She let a silence hang between them before she grinned broadly, and then, skipped ahead of them down the rest of the stairs to the reception area. She felt a secret thrill trickle through her body at her boldness. Matt and Ben came down the stairs shortly after her.

Amina could see Ms Brodie and Mr Cooke waiting for them. Ms Brodie was shuffling papers together and then handing them to Mr Cooke. He was still dressed as he always was. The only concession to the trip was a short sleeved shirt, his bow tie was still firmly in place, if rather twisted.

On the other hand Ms Brodie had embraced the idea of being away from school. She’d changed into a floaty dress with tiny straps so her shoulders were exposed. Amina wasn’t convinced a teacher should look like that. Her parents would think it was improper showing that much skin. She shook her head trying to empty their voices out of it. Ms Brodie could wear what she wanted.

Chapter 5

Ben

‘Right,’ said Ms Brodie, ‘Are we all here?’

‘I’m not,’ said Sam Jones. Ms Brodie gave him a withering look and the rest of the students groaned at his corny joke.

‘Well I thought I was funny.’ He thumped his mate Dave who was as thin as Sam was fat and, surprisingly, supported West Ham. ‘Why didn’t you laugh, it was funny.’ Dave just shrugged his bony shoulders.

‘Where’s Thea, Amina? Didn’t she come down with you?’ asked Mr Cooke

‘Is she not here?’ said Amina as Ben watched her look around, ‘Oh, I think she’s coming.’

Bet she’s being a stroppy cow thought Ben as he caught Amina’s eye and grinned. He felt satisfied that he was right when he saw Amina go pink. He knew she was lying.

‘We’ll give her a couple of minutes,’ said Mr Cooke, ‘and if she hasn’t turned up, will you go and get her, Ms Brodie? You know which room she’s in.’ Ms Brodie nodded as he continued, now reading off his clipboard. ‘Tonight we’re all going to eat in the hotel so we can get an early night. When you go into dinner you’ll find packs on your tables that’ll give you the work to do at each visit.’

Someone behind Ben said ‘Whoopee!’

‘Ben shut up and listen,’ Mr Cooke didn’t even take a breath before he continued. ‘In the morning we’ll visit the airborne sector including the Pegasus Bridge where there was a tremendous battle. You will be able to see bullet holes left over from the fighting and get a sense of what it was like. After a brief lunch we will go to the Museum of Peace here in the town, and then you can also have a

good look around town. We're booked into a different restaurant tomorrow night. It's called *Le Dolphin*, but I'll give you the details nearer the time.

Mr Cooke took another piece of paper from Ms Brodie.

'The day after we will go to the beaches . . .'

Mr Cooke was interrupted again, but this time by a general buzz of excitement which was expressed by Matt.

'Do we need our buckets and spades? Can we go swimming?' said Matt.

Mr Cooke looked at Matt and sighed, 'Matt, I expect that sort of stupid response from Williamson, not you.'

'Fuck you,' Ben said under his breath and then so Cooke could hear him, 'That's not fair I haven't said anything.'

Ben turned on Matt 'Why don't you just shut the fuck up.'

Mr Cooke ignored Ben and carried on, 'Not the beach, we are going to THE BEACHES where the Allied forces landed on D-Day. This will be preceded by a trip to the war cemetery. You can see how many lost their lives fighting for the freedom you have now, though I could imagine them wondering why they bothered, looking at you lot.'

'Charming,' said one of the other lads.

Mr Cooke gave all the students a searing look, 'Remember this is a history trip not a holiday. We'll meet here for breakfast at 7.30am sharp. I want to leave the hotel by 8.30 '

There was a bleating of 'Sir!' Ben watched Ms Brodie go towards the stairs. There was going to be trouble. Ben knew Thea, and he knew she would blame Amina whatever the truth was. He'd keep an eye on the terrorist though. He liked her sense of humour.

Ben tuned back into Mr Cooke who was telling everyone that for the meal tonight they were to sit in the groups they would be working in for the whole of the trip.

‘Ben and Matt, you’ll be with Amina and Thea. . .when she gets here.’

When their names were called people shuffled off towards the restaurant until Ben, Matt and Amina were left standing there with Mr Cooke waiting for Thea.

‘Right, when Ms Brodie brings Thea down you may come and join us. Don’t forget there will be packs telling you what your projects will be on your table.’ He turned and left to join the others.

Ben looked at Amina and Matt. Matt was smiling at her but Amina was too busy looking at the stairs. He felt sure she was thinking the same as him – Thea was not going to be happy about this. Then there was the distant sound of shouting that was loud enough to come over the piped music.

‘I think Thea is on her way, don’t you?’ said Matt to no one in particular. ‘I hope so, coz I’m starving and those smells are killing me.’

Behind him Ben noticed a small man walk in and go up to the reception desk, his suit was as shiny as his slicked-back hair. He nudged Amina, trying to distract her from Thea’s imminent arrival.

‘I thought France was supposed to be the centre of style!’

Amina looked and smiled but it didn’t last as her face fell when there was more shouting on the stairs. His ploy hadn’t worked. His stomach announced its objection to waiting any longer as it rumbled loudly.

‘I’m Hank Marvin,’ said Ben. Amina looked at him blankly. ‘Hank Marvin, starving,’ he explained.

‘Oh,’ went Amina. There was no time to say anything else as they could hear the slap of Ms Brodie’s flip-flops announcing her arrival accompanied by Thea,

who was now wearing the smallest skirt and top ever. It barely covered anything. Ben wondered why she bothered. He saw Amina look down at her own clothes and tug at her hijab. Thea stared at Amina with gunmetal eyes.

‘Don’t look at Amina like that; it was nothing to do with her.’

Thea bristled, ‘What? You siding with the terrorist now?’

Ms Brodie stepped in. ‘Right, that sort of talk can stop right here. Now into the restaurant and let’s eat. I’m starving.’ She led the way and the small unhappy group started to follow behind.

They crossed the foyer towards the restaurant and Ben became aware of the man who’d come in earlier. He walked towards them and Ben watched in amazement as the man aimed straight for Amina. He barged into her and almost knocked her off her feet. He then stopped and looked Amina up and down. He didn’t apologise, instead he spat on her before he turned and left the hotel. It happened so fast, one minute he was there spitting, the next gone.

Ben knew his mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish. He kept looking between Amina and the closed door. He felt torn between chasing the man and looking after her. She tried to smile at him.

‘It’s ok.’

Matt handed her a crisp white handkerchief, ‘Here.’ Ben only ever used tissues, if not his sleeve. He didn’t know people still used handkerchiefs. He saw her flick it open, undoing the precise ironing and got a whiff of softener, the smell of clean washing. Clean and neat, just like Matt. Gayboy, he thought angrily.

‘What the?’ Thea was shaken out of her mood by what she’d just witnessed.

Ben saw Amina finger her hijab and then with amazement he watched her as she unwound the long headscarf in one easy movement then pulled off the

smaller, tighter scarf, both of which formed her hijab. Her hair tumbled down her back, Ben noticed how like a black velvet curtain it was. So smooth.

‘What are you doing?’ said Thea.

‘I’ve had enough of it. This is the first time ever I haven’t had someone there to make every one of my decisions for me.’ She folded the two parts of the hijab up neatly and put it under her arm. ‘I want to see who I really am. And not have people barge into me, spit at me or call me names just because of what I’m wearing.’

Ben and Matt grinned at her in approval.

‘You’ve got hair,’ said Thea, she leant towards her and touched Amina’s hair, Ben wanted to do the same. But Amina flinched and Thea snatched her hand away.

‘What did you do that for? Anyone would think I was going to hit you.’

Amina went pink.

‘Sorry, you took me by surprise. No one outside my home has seen my hair. It feels really strange.’

Matt interrupted, breaking the mood, ‘Please can we talk about this at the table? I’m very sorry Amina that you’ve been molested by a gobby frog and you’ve felt the need to disrobe, but I’m going to fade away if I don’t eat. These smells are just torture to a person on the edge of starvation.’

‘Good idea, Matt. I’d rather eat than talk about it anyway,’ said Amina.

Ben walked ahead and led them to the only table left in the room. He took a look around before he got to the table. It wasn’t often he got to go to a restaurant. There were paintings of the D-Day Landings on the walls and huge pot plants in the corner.

The room was full of tables, all covered with starched, white table clothes. There was hardly enough room for the waitresses to pass by. Ben could see they didn't like school groups. No one stopped eating or even turned to look when they came in. They were unaware of Amina's encounter with a small man and his spit.

Ben looked at the food on the tables of the other students. He wasn't too impressed by what he saw on their plates. There were some green, wilted leaves and they all seemed to have the same. Please, not just a salad, he thought. Not after those wonderful smells. I want something to fill me up not just rabbit food.

Chapter 6

Amina

Amina was surprised and rather relieved to see Thea almost smile at her when they sat down. Maybe Thea wouldn't make her life too difficult after all.

Matt picked up the file and pulled out numerous different coloured sheets of paper. There were questionnaires that needed to be completed for each place they were visiting. Typed on the top of a red sheet of paper was the title of a specific and unique project, which they had to investigate.

Matt read from the red sheet, 'Find out what it was like for soldiers the night before D-Day. Where were they? What did they do and what did they feel like?'

'That's crap, how are we going to do that? Surely we need to be in England to find out what it was like?' said Thea, drumming the table with her fingers. 'See we didn't even need to come here where people speak a strange language and eat weird food. We could've stayed at home.'

Amina quite liked being away from home, even if she did get spat on. This place with all its otherness was a good place for her to be. There was no parent there to control her.

'Come on Thea, cheer up, we could be at school, at least there's no one around to tell us what to do,' said Ben. Amina looked across at Mr Cooke and Ms Brodie who were deep in conversation. Ms Brodie was twirling her hair round her fingers while she talked. Mr Cooke was sitting very upright, barely looking at Ms Brodie, he just played with his food. He was pushing a tomato round and round his plate. He looked very bored. Ben saw where Amina was looking and said, 'They don't count, and I can run rings round them anyway. I'm determined to make the most of this trip.'

‘Me too!’ said Matt. ‘And we can make stuff up for the project. They’re not going to know are they? Plus my great gran was a WRN near there and I know some of her stories.’

Ms Brodie appeared at their table. Her dress floating behind her. There were even more strands of hair hanging round her face now.

‘Is everything OK here?’ she looked very concerned and nodded at Amina.

All four laughed. Amina answered her question.

‘Yes everything is fine, thank you; we’re just discussing the work you’ve set us.’

Ms Brodie let out a visible sigh but still didn’t look totally convinced by the sudden ending of hostilities on this table.

It had been such a fight to go on this trip and Amina intended to make the most of it. She looked across at Mr Cooke who was watching her. It was him who’d convinced her parents that she would be ok and that it was important for her education to go. She waited to be told by him to put her hijab back on. She knew that would be what her parents would want. But all he did was nod at her and smile. This was a totally new experience and she almost felt giddy with the prospect of so many choices. Amina shook her hair feeling the air get to her scalp and once again the thrill of an unknown and barely recognised freedom radiated through her.

When she looked back at the table she noticed Ben was smiling at her, she smiled back. That was the polite thing to do after all. Thea didn’t seem to agree and hostilities were resumed when she snapped, ‘What’s all the fuss? So the rag head’s taken the rag off, doesn’t stop her being a terrorist.’

Ben and Matt stared at Thea, looks of total disbelief plastered across both their faces.

‘What?’ Thea shifted in her seat trying not to look at Amina now.

Matt just shook his head, ‘You’re pathetic.’

Ben looked from Thea to Amina and then back again, ‘For once I agree with the geek.’

Any further dialogue was prevented when the waitress finally placed the food in front of them. Amina’s heart sank. It was a plate of green leaves, tomatoes, cucumber and some Roquefort cheese with vinaigrette. What she really wanted was a curry or a big plate of pasta.

‘Don’t we get a choice?’ said Matt, he put his hand up as if calling a waiter. ‘Where’s the menu? Why tease us with those wonderful smells and then serves us this?’ The waitresses ignored him.

Mr Cooke shouted around the room, ‘Set meal for everyone tonight. It takes into account everyone’s needs. Matthew you need to remember we have students with lots of different dietary needs. You’ll be able to choose tomorrow, it was just easiest tonight, so stop whinging.’

Matt looked deflated. The other waitress appeared with a basket of warm rolls. The four of them snaffled two of the rolls each as if they’d been starved for a decade.

Matt picked at the salad that was set down in front of him. ‘It’s rabbit food. OK for you girls I suppose, slimming food.’

‘What do you mean it’ll be ok for us? Are you saying the Terrorist and I are fat?’ Thea snapped again.

Matt tried to defend himself, ‘No, no that’s not what I meant, just girls are always watching their weight and moaning about it. So I assumed. . .’ He stopped mid sentence. ‘Oh forget it!’

‘Well don’t. I can’t imagine you have met a huge number of girls so don’t ever make fucking assumptions about me. You know nothing about me. As for her,’ Thea jabbed a fork in Amina’s direction, ‘Who knows. You never see her body. She may be huge under all those clothes.’

Amina watched Thea slam the fork into a tomato and the juice squirted across her plate onto her T shirt. She wanted to laugh at the justice of it.

‘Fuck! See what you made me do now. Tossler!’

Amina offered Thea Matt’s handkerchief but she pushed it away, ‘I don’t want that, it’s covered in gobshite.’ The more Thea tried to wipe off the juice the bigger the stain got. ‘This is a crap place with gross food. I want a Mack-i-dees.’

‘Oh for Christ’s sake!’ Ben turned on Thea, ‘Give it a rest will you, we’re all tired and hungry, your whinging and bitching is getting boring.’

Thea stared at Ben, it was pure daggers.

Despite the moans everyone devoured their rabbit food with gusto. But nowhere near as quickly as the rolls were consumed.

‘Oh these are awesome,’ said Thea.

Amina agreed, ‘And they’ve got cheese going through them.’ She split the roll open in case anyone hadn’t noticed.

Matt stuffed a whole one into his mouth and said, spraying bread everywhere, ‘They are the best rolls ever.’

‘Yuck,’ said Thea, ‘that’s gross.’

‘For Christ’s sake Matt, didn’t your parents teach you any manners?’ said Ben, tearing his roll to pieces. ‘Or were you brought up in a zoo.’

Matt tried to speak again but Ben stopped him. ‘Just shut the fuck up until you have finished eating.’

‘They are much better than British rolls,’ said Amina who was even happier when dessert came. It was her favourite. It was a pink concoction in a tall glass. Bits of real strawberry were mixed in with strawberry flavoured ice cream or *glace* as the waitress called it. It tasted delicious as the ice cream melted in her mouth.

As she was eating her pudding, she saw Matt move his hand slowly to the centre of the table. It was covering something. When she looked up he was looking round making sure no one else was looking. When he was sure no one was, he lifted his hand revealing a small clear plastic bag containing some off-white powder.

She couldn’t stop herself, she gasped, ‘What’s that?’

‘I want some fun on this trip so thought I’d share.’

Amina stopped mid-spoonful and looked at the small bag. It looked like icing sugar.

‘See Ben, I’m not the geek you think I am!’ said Matt, who seemed very pleased with himself.

She’d never seen stuff like that before, except on TV and the videos they saw in the PSHE classes on drugs. She had no idea what it was, she just knew it had to be illegal. She felt a twinge of curiosity deep in her stomach and the bold girl from the stairs wondered what it would feel like to take some.

Matt continued ‘You’re not the only drug dealer at this table.’

Everyone stared at the packet for what seemed like an age, everything around them seemed to stop. Amina knew it could only have been seconds but it felt like forever.

Ben moved first. He snatched the plastic bag off the table and hid it. He looked round to see if anyone had seen but they hadn’t so far.

‘What the fuck, Matt? What are you doing with Charlie? How did you get it?’

Ben’s words were like a verbal slapping. His eyes were hard and angry. Amina watched the two boys aware that Mr Cooke was now looking.

‘Ssh,’ she said, ‘Cooke’s watching.’

Matt looked at him and tried to laugh. He then spoke to Ben through a strained smile.

‘Give it back.’ He held his hand to Ben, ‘I thought you knew about drugs. It isn’t Charlie, it’s meow meow– mephadrone – you know, the legal drug.’

Amina listened fascinated. She didn’t remember it being mentioned at school, ‘Legal?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ Matt was still staring at Ben with his hand held out, ‘I just bought it over the Internet using my mum’s credit card. She hasn’t a clue what I get up to on the computer. I’ve memorised her numbers and security codes, it’s easy.’

Amina took this in, breaking up the last bit of her roll absentmindedly. Her Mum didn’t even have a credit card, and Dad did everything to do with money. ‘How does it make you feel?’ she asked.

‘Just coz it’s legal doesn’t mean it’s safe,’ said Ben as he looked at Matt. ‘You shouldn’t have brought it here.’

‘Get you, Mr “I never do anything wrong.” You’re about as pure as that powder probably,’ said Thea. ‘We all know what you do and get up to. People die doing those things too but it doesn’t stop you, does it?’ She turned and smiled at Matt, ‘Good for you Matt, I’m up for trying it.’

Matt blushed whilst Amina’s mouth spoke independently of her brain, the bold girl was back, ‘I am too.’

‘It helps you lose weight because it stops you feeling hungry too. Not that either of you need to of course,’ Matt blushed. Thea and Amina raised their eyebrows at him.

‘Mmm,’ said Thea, ‘thought you would’ve learnt from your earlier comments to shut up about weight.’

‘It’s also supposed to have the same results as e or Charlie. But they,’ Matt cocked his head at the teachers’ table, ‘can’t do anything about it.’

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea,’ said Ben shaking his head and still holding on to the bag.

Thea laughed, ‘Coming from you, that’s hysterical. What’s with you? Has coming over the sea made you into an angel?’

Ben pushed his chair back and stood up and so did Matt. The screeching of the chairs attracted attention from the other students. There was a sudden change to the room’s noise level. Cutlery was held still and heads swivelled to see better.

Amina could see that Ben’s body was taut, his fists clenched. Would he punch Matt? Instead he looked round, and Amina was surprised to see not anger reflected in his eyes, but fear. Ben wasn’t ready to fight, he was ready to flee.

‘Give it back, Ben,’ said Matt.

Mr Cooke appeared at their sides. ‘Everything all right here?’

Amina flushed even though she hadn’t done anything wrong. There was the sound of chairs being scraped back as more students turned around to get a better view, anticipating at least a row, if not a proper fight.

‘I’m just going to the loo,’ said Ben.

‘Me too,’ said Matt.

Mr Cooke stepped between them. ‘I don’t think so. I think you can wait until Ben comes back. Now, go, Ben.’

‘What?’ said Matt, ‘We’re not children.’

Mr Cooke just looked straight at him. Matt withered and fell into his chair while Mr Cooke stood over him until Ben returned. The sweat patches under Mr Cooke’s arms were getting noticeably bigger. Amina saw that Matt was sweating too. Not surprising, she’d never heard Matt speak to a teacher like that. What was the matter with him?

When Ben came back and sat down, Mr Cooke said to Matt, ‘Ok, off you go.’ He stepped out of Matt’s way.

‘S’ok,’ Matt mumbled. ‘Don’t need to anymore.’ He focused on stirring his melted ice cream instead.

‘There’s a surprise,’ said Mr Cooke who looked at Ben and then back again at Matt. ‘Matt, don’t get into anything stupid.’ He walked back to his table and once out of earshot Matt asked,

‘What’ve you done with it?’ asked Matt. Ben looked up and Amina noticed the fear had gone. His eyes were black with anger when he snapped.

‘It’s currently making the French drains high.’

‘Bastard. You owe me for that.’ Matt’s cheeks were flushed with anger.

Ben flicked his hand dismissing Matt as if he was an annoying fly, ‘Yeah, yeah, whatever.’

Amina took a deep breath, she knew the next few days were going to be the biggest roller-coaster she’d ever been on.

Chapter 7

Matt

Matt slammed the door to the bedroom and followed Ben and the girls in.

‘Your room is as blue as ours is yellow,’ said Amina. ‘I don’t think they have much imagination.’

Matt really didn’t care about interior decorations. The meow meow had been his way of proving he wasn’t a geek. His way of being accepted, and Ben had ruined it.

Ben was in front of him. Matt grabbed Ben’s shoulder and swung him round to face him. He wanted to tell Ben exactly what he thought of him. Instead when he saw Ben staring at him, his anger just melted away through the bottom of his trainers. He remembered who he was, or more importantly, who Ben was.

Ben turned his head and stared at Matt’s hand which was still on his shoulder. Matt knew he should let go but he couldn’t, moving didn’t seem an option.

Ben looked back at Matt. His eyes were hard.

‘Take your hand off my shoulder,’ said Ben, his voice was quiet but there was an edge of steel to it and when Matt still didn’t do what he was told Ben shouted, ‘Now!’

Matt was frozen with fear. He’d started something he really wished he hadn’t and didn’t know what to do. What if Ben pulled a knife on him? Matt knew he was a member of a gang. He could do anything to him. He willed his hand off Ben’s shoulder and took a deep breath as he said, ‘Sorry.’

It was too late. With one easy move Matt found himself pinned against the wall by the throat with Ben's face right up against his. Matt found it difficult to breathe and Ben's eyes looked like they were going to pop out. He was so angry.

'Are you really sorry or are you just saying it, you complete and utter fucking twat?'

Ben pushed harder against Matt's throat. Matt tried to speak but he couldn't. He could see the girls over Ben's shoulders. They were both wide eyed with fear.

'Perhaps I should make you show me how sorry you are. Or maybe I'll tell you why I'm so pissed with you' He lifted Matt, who felt his feet come off the floor, by his throat. 'I am pissed with you coz if you got caught, I'd have fucking been sent home. No one would've believed you brought the stuff, even if you told them. They'd blame me. It's always me.' He lifted Matt slightly higher, 'You saw what Cooke was like. You know what he said to you. I'm not letting some little shit of a geek ruin this trip for me.'

Matt tried to speak again but couldn't. His lungs screamed for air. Everything was beginning to go black. Matt heard Amina scream. Everything sounded like he was at the end of a tunnel.

'Ben, let go of him now. He can't breathe. His eyes are rolling. You're going to kill him. Stop!' Thea screamed.

Ben let go of Matt suddenly as if Matt's skin had scalded him. He slipped to the floor spluttering and choking as he gasped for air. Thea bent down to him. Matt could smell her perfume through his coughing. He caught a glimpse of her boobs and forgot about nearly dying. They looked so smooth and welcoming. Perfect mounds that just needed to be touched. Before he knew what he was doing

his hand once again moved of its own accord and slipped inside her T Shirt. Thea didn't react immediately. She just looked down and then back at Matt.

'Take that hand out of there before I slap you. I don't care if you were about to die, move it!'

It was Matt's turn to move like he'd been scalded.

'Sorry,' he mumbled.

'I take it you're ok now?' she asked Matt, then turned to Ben without waiting for an answer. 'Sometimes Ben, you are a complete and utter twat. Who the hell do you think you are?'

Ben's anger seemed to evaporate. He ran his hand across his shaved head. The hardness in his eyes had gone, to be replaced by fear. He looked deflated, 'I promised I wouldn't be sent home.' He sank onto the bed. 'I promised, ok?'

The irony of the situation didn't escape Matt as he tried to swallow. He was desperately trying to be bad, and Ben was doing everything he could to be good.

The only sound Matt could hear was the flutter of the curtains as the wind blew through the open window. There was an awkward silence. No one knew what to say to make everything ok again. It all seemed surreal, like the last five minutes had all been in slow motion whilst the world outside carried on as normal. Amina sat with her mouth hanging open.

Thea broke the silence hanging between them all, 'Oi Terrorist, shut your mouth, you might end up eating a fly otherwise, and that might be against your religion.'

Matt looked at her arm, which was still resting on his arm. It was smooth, mocha coloured with a hint of cream. It looked like it would have a downy feel; Matt could see tiny blonde hairs on it. It would be as soft as her boob. He wanted to stroke her, but he knew that wasn't a good idea. Once burnt and all that. She

looked like an angel to him, but he knew she was brewing something else. Like a witch taunting their victim. It didn't take long for him to hear what it was.

Thea sat back on her haunches, 'Of course how silly of me, you lot think nothing of blowing people up and killing them, so the odd fly wouldn't matter would it?'

Amina shut her mouth and looked out the window. Matt knew that must have stung but Amina never defended herself or her religion. Maybe she felt if she did Thea would be worse and the viciousness would be unbearable. Matt found it difficult to understand but despite her nastiness Matt was totally besotted with her.

He watched Thea take control. 'Right enough of the macho crap, let's get out of here. Are you coming, Terrorist?'

Once again Thea's mood swung all over the place and he was surprised to hear her invite Amina, considering what she'd just said to her. He liked Amina, but not as much as he liked Thea. He knew he didn't have a chance with her and certainly not with Ben around. Everyone knew they'd been an item on and off for years.

And as quickly as the chink in Ben's facade exposed itself, it was closed again and the old, hard, arrogant Ben was back. It was like the last few minutes hadn't happened. Thea pulled Matt off the floor and they sat next to Amina on the bed. Ben got off his bed and was walking up and down. There was tension emanating from every part of his body. Matt was sure it wouldn't take much to make him explode.

'Yeah come on, let's go. We can go via the fire escape. Geek, you coming too?' Ben half smiled at Matt.

Matt returned the look remembering the earlier conversation. What he wanted to do was to tell him to bog off and what a complete tosser he was. He actually said, 'Yeah, I'm coming.'

Matt knew he could never do confrontation properly. That's why he would never be the teenager he wanted to be. He was hopeless and he knew it.

The foursome clambered out of the window and tiptoed down the metal stairs. They had to keep stopping as the wind caught curtains floating out of open windows. Any moment Matt was sure they were going to be caught. When they got to the bottom, the smell of rotting food from the bins was almost overwhelming in the end-of-day heat.

'That stinks,' said Amina, putting her hand over mouth and nose.

Ben did the same, 'It's rank!'

'Like your breath,' said Thea, punching his arm.

Matt waited for him to explode. But he just looked back at Thea and grinned. Matt was finding it very hard to understand out how Ben worked. One moment he was trying to kill him and the next he is inviting him to join them. How is anyone supposed to understand Ben? As he walked with the others, Matt wondered where the nearest police station was, and even, what the sentence for attempted murder was in France, just in case.

When they got free of the hotel, they found the streets were bustling with people heading out for dinner or just wandering around taking in the sights and sounds and even smells of this French town. Matt loved the atmosphere. There were restaurants and other hotels surrounding them. Back in England he'd never been allowed out like this. His parents were convinced he'd be murdered or start taking drugs. Matt looked up at the castle towering above them. He couldn't even go out with his friends. But then he never let them know who his friends were

otherwise they'd have insisted on meeting their parents. They'd want to decide if they were 'suitable' to be his friends. It'd be the whole 'What do his parents do?', 'Where do they live?' scenario. Like that made any difference. They were so over-protective.

He pushed through the throngs of people with the others. His senses were being bombarded from all sides. He could hear music, laughter and loud voices surrounding him. Delicious smells wafted out to greet him when they walked past the open-fronted restaurants where plates of food were being put on the tables. These tables were full of people enjoying a life in vibrant colours. He revelled in this new sense of freedom. He found the novelty of walking around with no supervision was like a drug in itself. Matt felt high on it. He was happy.

He looked at the others. Amina was wandering along with an inane grin too, obviously feeling the same emotions as him. But Ben and Thea just strolled casually, totally at ease with their surroundings and no apparent sense of awe at being on their own. Matt wished he could feel like that. Though he wouldn't want Ben's temper, or Thea's come to that. He stroked his neck, it was still quite sore.

Matt spotted something on the wall. He looked up to see what sort of shop it was. It had a green flashing cross, it was a Pharmacie.

'Look at this,' he pointed at the coin operated machine. 'They sell condoms on the street. You need never get caught without. How great is that?'

The others looked and laughed with him. Thea pinched his arm and said, 'How often have you been caught short then, Matty?'

Matt flushed red. He was a virgin and he was sure she knew it.

Thea didn't wait for an answer instead she got ahead of them all then turned around and skipping backwards, she said, 'What are we going to do then?'

Matt was impressed how even though she wasn't looking behind her she managed not to crash into anyone on the crowded pavement. He knew he couldn't do that. He'd just fall over or bump into someone.

'Go to a club?' he said. This was another item on his list of things to do.

Thea laughed at him, 'What looking like that? I don't think so.'

Matt looked down at his buttoned-up polo shirt, still covered in blood from earlier, and jeans that were held up high with a belt. He grinned.

'What's wrong with my style? It's cutting edge, I'll have you know.'

'Cutting edge? Yeah, you keep telling yourself that,' said Ben.

Matt shrugged his shoulders, 'Ok.'

'Why don't we get some alcohol?' said Amina. Ben, Thea and Matt stopped and stared at her. She looked startled,

'What? What have I said wrong?'

Laughing, Ben grabbed her hands and swung her round in a dance.

'Nothing, we just didn't expect you to say something like that.'

Passers-by laughed at the two of them when they twirled round. 'Like the idea though, Terrorist, what do you reckon, Thea?'

Matt interrupted, 'Shall I nick some?' He fancied the idea of stealing some alcohol. It would be something he could tick off his list of bad things to do. He knew he sounded like an over enthusiastic puppy but still he continued. 'It must be easy, everyone does it.'

'Jeez what are you talking about now Matt? Why can't we buy it?' said Ben.

Matt felt like a deflated balloon. Why did Ben need to ruin everything he wanted to do?

‘I thought it would add to the excitement. You may need to remember some of us around here have never lived. And you flushed away my last bit of excitement.’

Ben grinned at him, ‘That’s true. But you need to think this through, Bro. I’m not deliberately trying to spoil your fun. You just need to think about it a bit more. Being bad isn’t all about doing illegal things. It’s more of a . . . a . . .’

Thea interrupted, ‘An attitude!’

‘Yeah, that’s it, it is a fucking attitude,’ continued Ben.

He put his arm round Matt’s shoulder, ‘Rule number one, it’s easier to steal money to buy alcohol with than it is to steal alcohol. Don’t you agree?’

Matt listened to that, he could see his point and nodded. Maybe being bad wasn’t so straightforward.

‘Rule number two: you are breaking the law anyway by drinking it, why do you need to break another one?’

‘I suppose.’ He wasn’t sure that what Ben was saying was right but he wasn’t going to argue. Note to self, thought Matt, on the basis of self-preservation, don’t rile Ben.

‘We need a supermarket,’ said Thea looking around.

‘I saw a Spar on that corner over there when we drove up,’ said Amina.

They walked up the street towards the supermarket. On the other side of the road and before the castle were tram lines. None of them had seen a tram before. They watched with fascination when it trundled passed. Matt noticed cars trampling down the street the wrong way oblivious of everyone and everything. They sliced by any unsuspecting tourist, who happened to look the wrong way, their unforgiving horns blaring. There was no patience for the unfamiliar foreigner here.

‘We need to go on one of those trams before we go home,’ said Matt. ‘I want to look in the castle too. It looks so huge and old, towering over the city.’

Thea started to sing ‘Warning! Warning! Geek alert!’

Matt’s face flushed. That was the last thing he wanted them, or rather her, to think. He knew he’d been a prat to say those things out loud. Why didn’t he learn to just shut the fuck up!

But then Ben surprised him when he said, ‘It is not a geek thing Thea. I’d quite like to do those things too,’

Matt wasn’t sure if he really meant it or was just trying to make up for trying to kill him earlier. But before he could work out the answer, a man with a young girl pushed him and Ben out of the way.

Ben stopped and hissed, ‘It’s her.’

‘Who?’ said Thea looking around.

‘Over there.’ Ben pointed at a small group on the corner of the street. The man and the very young girl had joined another man who looked just like the man who had spat on Amina even down to the shiny suit with greased-back hair. He kept wringing his hands whilst he walked round the girl. Matt watched, something about them was wrong. But nobody did anything. No one tried to help the girl. The crowds on the street just walked round them. Men strode past with their heads held high, whilst women loaded with carrier bags or talking into mobile phones stepped aside. They all took a look at the girl. They looked concerned but didn’t interfere. Instead they put their heads down pretending they hadn’t seen anything and just walked on.

‘I saw her when we were on the coach. I felt sure she was in trouble. That man was forcing her somewhere even then,’ said Ben.

The man with the girl was gesticulating and talking loudly in a language they didn't recognise. The girl just stood there whilst the other man still walked round and round her. He looked her up and down like she was a piece of meat. She looked tiny and the adult's clothes she was wearing seemed to emphasise her childishness. Matt saw her turn her head and look across at them. He heard Ben snap in a breath. Her face was a picture of total desperation.

'He's selling her for sex,' said Amina.

'What?' said Ben

Matt looked again at the girl. He knew she was dressed like a prostitute but surely she was far too young. 'She's not old enough.'

'That's what they like. He can get a high price for her virginity,' Amina continued. 'She's being forced into this. I wonder where her parents are. She looks foreign.'

'That makes me feel sick,' said Thea.

The foursome stepped in the road to avoid a group of American tourists who were taking photos of the castle.

'We should stop them,' said Ben. 'They can't do that to her.'

'And how precisely are you going to do that? Be real!' Thea grabbed Ben's arm. 'What are you going to do with a young girl? In case you'd forgotten, we're in France on a school trip. You can't just sneak her home in your suitcase you know.'

They stepped back on the pavement and Amina backed Thea up, 'Plus that bloke doesn't look like he'll just hand her over. She's obviously his source of income.'

'Oh for fuck's sake, it sucks!' For the second time that day Ben looked beaten.

The man in the leather coat was shouting even more loudly now, but at her this time. The other man walked off. He was attracting even more attention from passers-by. The girl looked down and seemed resigned to her fate. He stopped shouting, grabbed her arm and pulled. Matt could see why there was a sudden need to disappear. There were police coming out from a side street. The girl lost her footing but he still kept dragging her, not giving her a chance to stand up again properly. Her knees scraped along the floor and she started crying.

Matt couldn't take it any longer, no one should treat anyone like that. He ran forward and shouted. 'Oi, stop. Don't do that! You're hurting her!'

The man didn't even hear Matt he just disappeared into a mass of people. He turned to where the police were. Ben appeared by his side grabbing at him.

'Idiot! What do you think you're doing?'

'But you said...' replied Matt. 'We could tell the police.'

'I know I did but you could make things worse for her. God knows what would happen to her if the police got hold of them.' Ben sighed, 'Leave them be, let's go and get the alcohol.'

Ben's actions didn't reflect his words though. He kept staring back at where the girl had been while they walked off. Matt wondered if Ben was hoping that she would magically return and he could rescue her like a knight in shining armour. The girl seemed to have really got to him. They walked on towards the Spar, no one talking, and the memory of the girl faded to the backs of their minds as they started to think about the alcohol they were going to try and get. Vodka, that's what I want, thought Matt, some of the hard stuff. I want to get bladdered.

'Right, here it is. Thea and I will go in and get it. You two wait here,' said Ben.

‘Oh come on, why can’t I go in?’ Matt felt put out and started to push his way towards the door. Ben seemed to think he could always tell him what to do and he didn’t like it. His irritation, however, melted away the moment Thea took his arm, it felt like thousands of small electric shots flying up to his heart. He inhaled her perfume again when she leant towards him. He was in ecstasy. Who needed drugs when you could have Thea’s touch?

‘Matt, be sensible, you don’t want to be arrested, do you? Look at you,’ Thea ran her finger up and down his shirt making his heart miss several beats, ‘There is no way you look eighteen. Ben and I know what we’re doing. We’ve done it before. You’d just attract attention, Babes.’

Matt would have felt very disgruntled by this if it hadn’t been for the fact that Thea was still holding his arm, and he was holding his breath. He nodded praying she wouldn’t let go of his arm.

But she did.

‘Right we’re going to need some money. A couple of Euros each don’t you reckon, Thea?’

Amina and Matt handed Ben the money, then he and Thea left Amina and Matt standing on the pavement.

‘What should we do?’ asked Amina, she pushed her loose hair behind one ear. ‘Create a distraction?’

‘I’m not sure. This is all weird, isn’t it? But I do like the freedom. It’s so good not having my Mum saying, “Be careful, there are lots of bad people out there,” you know?’ At that moment, Matt’s phone sprung into life. Star Wars was echoing around him again.

‘Oh no please– God, is she psychic?’ he looked at the screen and his worst nightmare came true. ‘It’s my Mum. Again!’

He pressed the accept call button. 'Yes Mum, what do you want?'

He could see Amina watching him while he listened to his mother going on and on at the other end.

'No Mum, I'm fine. The food is good. The hotel is clean. But please stop ringing me. It's embarrassing. No one else's Mum is ringing them. Yes, I know it's because you care. But please just trust me.'

The loud voice at the other end started again.

'We're just outside the hotel, we've just eaten. Yes, I'm with the teachers. No you can't speak to one of them to check. Please give me a break. Oh sorry Mum have got to go I'm being called.' He didn't just hang up. He switched it off.

His face was red. How am I supposed to have a normal life with a mother like that? he thought. He grimaced at Amina.

'I know I shouldn't have done that.'

'Of course you should,' said Amina. 'I'd have done the same. That's why I told my parents we weren't allowed mobile phones.'

'Wish I'd thought of that.'

Amina lent against the window and laughed, 'My brothers told me what to do. They are a pain but they can give some helpful tips on how to get away from Mum and Dad.' She bent one leg up resting her foot on the bottom of the window, 'My Mum and Dad would go mad if they knew I was with Ben and Thea. They'd probably think I'd come back tainted and unclean. Maybe even pregnant. Now that would be funny, seeing their faces if I told them that.'

She paused and then as if remembering for the first time she flicked her hair and laughed, 'Imagine what they'd do if they knew I hadn't got my hijab on!'

'You realise if they ever find that out, you'll never be allowed out of the house again. In fact we'll both need to be scrubbed with bleach when we get back.'

If my parents knew what I was doing, they'd be out here to get me.' Matt looked at his phone as if it might tell on him. 'Shit I hope they don't contact Cooke. Or worse, what do I do if they decide to come here when they can't get through to me on the phone? Perhaps I should switch it back on.' Matt was beginning to panic.

Amina said, 'Don't worry, I'm sure they won't.'

At which point Ben and Thea returned giggling.

'Come on. Let's go, quick,' said Ben. He was looking around to see if anyone was following them. 'I thought they were going to ask for ID for a minute then.'

'I know! My heart was slamming. Right where are we going to go to drink this?' said Thea. She opened her bag, showing two bottles of wine.

Matt was disappointed it wasn't the vodka he'd hoped for, 'Just wine? It's not exactly wild is it?'

'Yup just wine, we couldn't take the risk. Not till we know what this place is like.' Thea hooked her arm through Matt's again and walked off with him. He said a silent prayer of thanks to any god who happened to be listening, no longer caring what they were going to be drinking, or where for that matter.

'I think we should go back to the hotel.' Thea continued, 'They might check rooms tonight. It'd make Ol' Cookie's day if he could catch us out and he'd definitely have an excuse to send you home, Ben.'

Ben nodded in agreement as he dodged a woman pushing a buggy. 'He'd love to send me back.'

'This isn't quite the wild time I'd anticipated. I thought it'd be more crazy. I hoped you'd both lead me astray. Not keep me on a tight rein. It's like being at home,' said Matt.

'Oh stop sulking,' said Amina. 'Just enjoy.'

'Agreed,' said Ben. 'Come on.'

'I could always ring your parents to come and get you,' Amina punched his arm.

'Ow! You wouldn't,' said Matt

Amina grinned.

'She will if you keep whinging and can't you just tell she has brothers with a punch like that,' said Thea laughing. 'Come on let's get back.'

Chapter 8

Matt

When they got to the boy's hotel room Thea got out the wine bottles and took the cups that were there for tea. She opened the screw top pouring some into one of the mugs and handed it to Matt.

'Go on you can go first. We all know you're desperate to be bad. Knock it back.'

Matt threw his head back letting the acid fluid strip the skin off the inside of his throat. He coughed and spluttered as he choked. This didn't taste like the wine he was occasionally allowed at home. It was like drinking sandpaper.

'That is seriously crap wine. Couldn't you buy something decent?'

'Sorry, Sir, you didn't give us enough money and we didn't have your Mum's credit card with us, so we couldn't get Champagne,' said Ben.

Thea handed Amina another mug but then hesitated,

'Are you sure you want to do this? I know you've taken the rag off but isn't alcohol against your terrorist religion?'

Matt watched surprised by Thea's sensitivity. Amina just grinned.

'Yup you're right, but I need to know what I am missing.' She took the mug and smelt it, screwing up her nose, 'Does it have to be a mug though? I don't suppose we've a glass?'

They all looked at Amina like she was mad and Ben bopped her on the head with a pillow, 'Oh who cares.' She took a very tentative sip from the mug then looked around smiling, until the taste hit her and she started to grimace. 'I thought it'd be sweet. Not taste like that.'

She hung her tongue out of her mouth trying to get rid of the taste. Matt tried to take her mug, 'If you don't like it, I'm quite happy to drink it.' But she hugged the mug tightly to her chest.

'Oh no, not yet, I need to try it again.' She took another, larger sip this time then shook her head, 'Yuck. It still tastes horrid.' She looked around in a daze and continued, 'But I like the way I feel.'

'You can feel it working already, Amina?' said Thea.

'Oh yes!'

Ben and Thea laughed at them both and took it in turns to take a slug out of the bottle.

'Obviously it is having a very quick effect on her. I think we may be accused of leading them astray,' said Ben. 'I don't think this was in Cookie's plan.'

'You washed your bum yet? I did, it was cool,' Amina randomly announced to the world whilst waving her arms around.

'Oh you didn't! I was going to keep some cherries in there so I could eat them in the bath, I saw it once on a film,' said Thea. 'I can't do it now. Yuck!'

'We're just leaving it in peace, aren't we Ben?' said Matt, looking directly at him. He was sure that Ben had never been abroad and wouldn't know what a bidet was. He was right. Ben just shrugged. An innocent abroad. Matt remembered his Mum saying that once. It seemed to fit Ben now. A bit of ammunition for later if needed. The cool gangsta bro wasn't real.

'Come on, give me more wine,' said Matt.

The wine disappeared rapidly and mainly down Matt's and Amina's throats. Matt knew they were both being very giggly and looked flushed.

He saw Thea look at Ben and wink, 'I know, let's play spin the bottle.'

Ben groaned, 'You can't do that to them, that's mean.'

But Amina shouted, 'Yeah, yeah ... let's ... b-b-but how do you play it?'

Matt was astounded, 'Have you never played it before? Even I have!' He threw himself back against the bed. 'I don't believe it. Someone more sheltered than me! Hallelujah!'

'Good point,' said Thea, who then explained the rules.

They sat in a circle and Thea put the empty bottle in the middle of their very small group.

'This isn't going to work, there's too few of us,' Ben was still moaning.

'Shut up, Ben, and spin it,' said Thea.

He spun the bottle with so much force it spun round and round and round. Matt felt the room begin to swim. Eventually it stopped pointing at Amina.

'Truth or dare?' said Thea.

'Dare.'

'Right Terrorist, go to the window and flash your bra to the world.'

Amina looked panic stricken.

'Come on,' said Matt, 'you said you wanted to play.'

She gave them all a rather lopsided grin and then got up and tottered towards the window. The others started clapping and chanting, 'Amina. . . Amina. . .'

Matt could see Amina's face was bright red but she grinned as she slowly started to lift her sweatshirt until her bra was just exposed. She faced into the room. He knew she'd forgotten about the window bit.

'What's that?' asked Ben. 'That's not a bra, where's the lace?'

Matt looked at what Ben was looking at. He tried to get closer so he could get a better look. It was a bra like he'd never seen before, or certainly not in his

porn mags. However he didn't care. It was women's underwear on show. He wanted a good look if he could.

Thea was rolling around on the floor laughing when Matt said, 'Ben I think Amina likes to pretend she's not a woman so straps them down. Is that all you've got?'

Amina looked down and nodded. Thea stopped laughing suddenly and got up. Matt couldn't quite work out what just happened. There was tension in the room and she seemed to feel the need to protect Amina.

'Terrorist pull your top down now. Matt you're being a perv staring like that,' said Thea. She pulled Amina's top down, 'It's ok. Now come on, it's your turn to spin the bottle.'

Her spin was pathetic only just making one full circle. It finished pointing at Matt.

'Truth or dare?'

'Dare too,' said Matt. He had nothing to tell the truth about.

Before anyone could say anything Ben jumped in, 'Kiss Thea, on the lips, with tongues.'

Matt panicked. He'd never kissed a girl before, only the back of his hand or the pillow. And Thea shot an evil look at Ben.

'No way, that's gross,' she said.

'You can't back out, the game was your idea, and we made Amina show us her strapping,' replied Ben, laughing and thumping the bed.

'Yeah, yeah, come here, Thea.' Matt lurched forward towards her. He couldn't believe this was about to happen.

'Don't slobber on me,' said Thea. She seemed to be trying to slide out from under him but Matt pinned down her so she couldn't escape.

Amina giggled, 'They look funny.'

Matt realised quite how drunk Amina was. He hoped she'd be ok. His concern didn't last that long though. There were far more important things on his mind. Now don't blow this Matthew Atkinson, he thought. Every bit of drunkenness seemed to drain out of his body and he felt back in control. Take it slowly, don't dribble. Please let me do it properly. He pressed his lips gently against hers and then slowly slipped his tongue inside her mouth, exploring and tasting. Thea resisted at first then welcomed him in and started meeting his tongue movements with hers. He could taste the wine they'd drunk. Matt wondered if he was doing it right. It felt good and she hadn't bitten his tongue or anything, so he couldn't be too bad. He could feel every vein in his body was trembling and dancing with pleasure.

The room fell silent. The kiss lasted for quite a long time, a lot longer than anyone, particularly Matt, had anticipated.

'Ok, ok, enough, stop eating her, Matt.' This was Ben, but Matt didn't want to stop and neither, it seemed, did Thea.

A banging at the door stopped the pair abruptly however.

Matt looked at Thea, she seemed equally shocked. She wiped her hand across her mouth but didn't say anything. Matt couldn't work out whether she'd liked it or not. What he did know was that he *loved* it and wanted to do it again and again and again. . .

'Come on, open up. Room inspection.'

Ben silently signalled that the bottles should be hidden under the bed. They turned the mugs back upside down by the kettle.

‘Just coming,’ said Ben, Matt couldn’t take his eyes off Thea. He could hear Ben’s voice like it was in a different room. Reality hit him with a clout when Amina flicked him with a towel.

‘Ouch, that hurt.’

‘Well come on, stop being pathetic, we’ve got to look natural, not like we’ve been drinking or anything.’

Thea was busy finding her bottle of perfume in her bag. When she found it she started spraying it around.

Matt sat back against the bed. There were all sorts of images racing through his head. Had the past couple of minutes really happened? Had he really kissed Thea? Had she really kissed him back? He was oblivious of everyone racing round him until Thea was there in his face spraying the perfume round him.

‘Gerrof, I don’t want to smell like a pansy.’

Mr Cooke walked in. His eyes swept the room and took in the scene. His lip curled as he managed to snarl, ‘What are you girls doing in here? It smells like a tart’s boudoir.’

Thea looked offended, ‘No it doesn’t, it’s my best perfume.’

‘We were just talking about work, Sir,’ said Matt trying to sound innocent.

Cooke looked at Matt who knew he was very flushed but met his limpid eyes and held them. He knew he had to brave this one out. It was Mr Cooke who looked away first.

‘Mmmm, just remember I’m watching you all.’ He turned and looked at Ben, ‘You in particular.’

Cooke slipped back out of the door. When they heard him walk away down the corridor Amina and Ben mock fainted and then started giggling helplessly on the bed.

Thea was very quiet; she just held Matt's gaze.

Chapter 9

Thea

Thea lay in bed, looking at the ceiling and counting the swirls in the artex. There were none of the familiar things of home surrounding her here. Even half her make-up and clothes. . . oh and her shoes. . . were missing. It'd been so hard to decide what to pack for four days. Thea liked to have choice. There were none of her posters on the walls either. The only pictures in the room were very yellow, like the walls. Not a place you'd want to wake up with a hangover, Thea thought.

There was a gentle breeze coming through the open window and she could smell freshly baked bread. It was delicious. A less pleasant smell was emanating from across the room. It was the distinct whiff of last night's alcohol that floated from the other bed. Thea wished last night was more of a blur. Why did she let it happen? Matt had kissed her and she had let him. She had *liked* it. He was surprisingly good. She pulled her duvet right up to her chin and closed her eyes tightly. But the images wouldn't go away. She could still feel his lips and tongue where they'd caressed her mouth.

She rubbed her lips, trying to erase the feeling. There must be something wrong with her. Matt was a geek! He wore his polo shirts buttoned up. His jeans were held up beyond his waist with a belt. For goodness sake, he carried a handkerchief. No one normal did that. It was all wrong!

But that kiss. . . she ran her fingers over the outline of her mouth remembering his touch again. Shit!

'You awake?' It was Amina.

'Yup, Terrorist. How are you feeling?'

Amina groaned, 'My head hurts and I feel sick. Can I ask you something?'

‘What?’

‘Is it my imagination or did I lift my top up and show the world my bra?’

‘Not quite the whole world - just Matt and Ben. And it was less of a bra more of a bandage. Haven’t you got anything better?’

Amina covered her face with her hands, ‘I’m not allowed. My Dad—’

‘Your Dad? That’s just creepy, your Dad deciding what bra you can wear. My Dad’d rather die than think about my underwear.’

‘Are you sure I did that? It wasn’t a dream?’

Thea sat up, ‘What are you worried about? At least you weren’t kissed by Matt the Geek!’ She could see Amina’s bed shaking, ‘Are you laughing?’

Amina’s head popped out from under her duvet, grinning.

Thea groaned then chucked her duvet off and headed towards the bathroom, ‘Bagsy me first. Retribution for laughing at me and wearing a stupid bra.’

‘Fine by me,’ Amina held her head. ‘Any way I think my head may fall off if I stand up.’

‘Don’t go back to sleep, we’ve got to be down for breakfast in quarter of an hour. I don’t want them thinking I’ve done something awful to you and they send me home.’ Thea laughed.

‘Euurrghhh...breakfast...euurrghhh’

‘You need to replace the fluids, you’ll be dehydrated. You must drink. It’s the golden rule of hangovers.’

Thea stood in the shower letting the power of the water pummel any weird thoughts out of her. She couldn’t have liked being kissed by the geek. It must be a mistake. She’d get over it. She switched the water from scalding hot to freezing cold and back again for punishment. Thea rubbed hard with the sweet smelling

soap in the hope it would wash the feeling of the previous night off her skin.

Hopefully Matt was more pissed than Amina and wouldn't remember. But Ben would, and Ben'd make sure Matt remembered and that she never forgot. Thea groaned and made the water freezing cold again.

When she finally got out of the shower she walked into the bedroom. Amina had got as far as sitting on the edge of the bed.

'Look I know you feel shit but I saw you looking at my clothes and stuff yesterday. I wondered if you wanted to borrow something and maybe a different bra? Might make you feel less crap.'

Amina looked up at her, 'It's ok I'm fine with what I've got.'

'No you're not. You said you wanted to try stuff. Borrow some of my clothes and feel privileged, I don't make that sort of offer to many people. But of course if you don't want to...'

'I do, but is there a catch?' Amina was now standing. Thea could see the reticence in her face.

'No, I really do mean this.' she winked at Amina, 'I'm not always a bitch you know. Go and have a shower and I'll find some stuff. We can put some makeup on too if you want.'

Amina nodded and headed towards the bathroom. Very slowly.

Thea opened her wardrobe and looked at the multi coloured clothes, she let her fingers dance across the fabrics while she tried to decide what Amina should wear. She loved clothes. She looked up and down the wardrobe and then opened the drawers where she found what she was looking for. A bright orange strapless top which would highlight Amina's hair and her green eyes. Thea stopped in her tracks. How come I know her eye colour? I never notice things like that. She shrugged and laid the orange top and a pair of very brief shorts on her bed.

‘There, she’ll look great in those. How are you doing in there?’

Amina came out of the bathroom looking a little better, wrapped in a towel with a towel wrapped turban-style on her head. Thea pointed at the clothes.

‘There! What do you think?’

Amina looked at them while Thea watched her face. For a fleeting moment a look of despair and panic slipped across her face. Thea looked at the clothes again. What was the problem with them?

‘What is it?’ Thea sounded sharper than she meant to. ‘What I meant was, are they ok? Tell me honestly. I promise I won’t blow my top.’

Amina looked at Thea and the towel dropped from her head, ‘I’m really sorry because they are lovely but they’re too revealing for me. I just—’

Thea knew Amina was waiting for her to explode. Instead she slapped her forehead. ‘Of course, why didn’t I think of that? D’oh!’

She bundled the clothes back in the drawer and moved back to the wardrobe pulling out some different clothes. She laid out a pink t-shirt and some cropped jeans for her to wear and found her a lacy bra instead.

‘How about that?’

Amina just grinned from ear to ear then hugged Thea.

‘Gerroff, you’re all soggy!’

Trying to get Amina dressed was very painful. Everything needed to be done very slowly.

‘Hang on I’m going to be sick,’ Amina stopped for a moment, ‘No. . . no, I’m ok. . . oh my head. . . I’ll be ok in a minute.’

‘Jeez Babes, at this rate it is going to take forever to get you sorted. We won’t get any breakfast,’ Thea said and grinned at Amina who turned a pale shade of green.

She watched the concentration on Amina's face while she put the bra on first. It was a Wonderbra and even Thea was impressed by the difference. Amina had an amazing cleavage.

'Wow!' was all Amina could say.

'It's ok, your t-shirt will cover it. No one will know.'

'But I'll know,' Amina smiled. 'Look! I've got boobs!' She pushed them up into an even bigger cleavage before putting on the t-shirt.

'Awesome! That looks really awesome.' Thea was pleased with the way Amina looked. 'Hey, Terrorist, you almost look normal.'

Amina looked down, 'Thea can you stop calling me terrorist, I'm not you know.'

Thea shrugged her shoulders,

'Ok. How about a bit of makeup?' she showed Amina some mascara and a lip gloss. 'Just to start with don't you think?' Amina nodded so Thea started to apply the mascara.

'Keep still. I could brush your hair for you too?' said Thea. 'It can't be easy knowing what to do with it now you've stopped wearing that thing.'

'It is called a hijab and that'd be great. I don't know what to do with it, but be gentle, my head hurts so much.'

'Stop talking. Let me apply the lip gloss. It must be good wearing that thing on those days when you were feeling crap and can't be bothered. Maybe I'll start wearing one.'

Amina laughed then grabbed hold of her head. 'Ouch! What's it with Ben and his temper?' she asked Thea. 'I thought he was going to kill Matt last night.'

'Ben. Yes he's got a bit of a temper. But part of it is down to who he hangs around with. They're a really aggressive lot and are very angry with the world.'

Some of them are into really bad stuff. I don't think Ben is. I think he hangs around the edges of the gang. Don't really know though, he doesn't talk much.'

'Apart from trying to strangle Matt, he seems ok.'

'Really? Are you trying to tell me, Terrorist, that you fancy Ben?' said Thea.

'I don't think so. I'm not sure if I'd know.'

'Oh for fuck's sake girl, we really need to educate you. Come on we need to get going or we'll miss breakfast and I'm starving.'

Chapter 10

Thea

It took them forever to get downstairs. There was a droning sound emanating from the restaurant. Everyone else had nearly finished eating. The tables were set like they had been the night before. The only difference was a huge table at the end covered in food and fruit juices. The pot plants had been pushed either side of the table. Silence fell when they walked in and twenty teenage heads turned and looked at the door. Thea was convinced it was written all over her face that she'd been kissed by Matt and liked it. But it wasn't her or Matt that were the centre of attention, it was Amina. There were several wolf whistles and Sam Jones shouted, 'Cor, I'd like a bit of that.'

Amina blushed.

A couple of the girls who aspired to be in Thea's gang looked daggers at Amina. 'S'ppose you look ok... for a bint.'

Thea stopped and looked at the girls, 'She's a bint you're right, but you haven't got a fucking clue what a bint means, so shut up and mind your own business.'

The girls turned back to their breakfast. Thea smiled, that felt good. She did like to put people in their place.

'Glad you decided to join us, ladies.' said Mr Cooke. Thea noted he was wearing what appeared to be the same clothes as yesterday. Perhaps he just had lots of exactly the same clothes so he didn't have to think about what to put on. Mr Cooke continued, 'I see Thea's having an influence over you, Amina. Make sure you don't do anything stupid.'

‘These clothes are *cooler* than the ones she brought, Mr Cooke,’ said Thea. ‘That’s all.’

Mr Cooke raised one eyebrow, ‘If you say so. We’re leaving in twenty minutes make sure you are on the coach in plenty of time.’

Ben and Matt were waiting for them at the table they’d sat at the night before. Their breakfast was already in front of them. Thea couldn’t look at Matt directly, but with a sly glance she noticed he looked as pale as Amina. She also saw that the top two buttons of his polo shirt were undone. Oh no, he’s trying to be cool.

‘Are you hungover too?’ Ben pointed a half eaten croissant at Amina who could just about nod. Thea noticed she was going even greener. Ben pointed at where the juices were. ‘You and Matt are a couple of lightweights. Drink some orange juice. That’ll help.’

Thea cringed at the sound of Matt’s name. She wanted it to be obliterated from her brain. The juices Thea had seen on the way in were apple or orange, plus there was coffee, the delicious aroma of which perfumed the air, and mineral water. The plates were piled high with fresh croissants and there were tiny pots of jam and glass columns of cereal, even Frosties. There were cheeses and cold meats and boiled eggs kept warm in a silver tureen. Thea had never seen so much food for breakfast. You could have a full meal if you wanted one. There was even a huge bowl full of every fruit imaginable and yoghurts, so you could have pudding too. It all looked very healthy. Thea grabbed a cup of the sweet smelling, hot coffee and picked up a couple of croissants. They were still warm and smelt glorious. They must have been the ones she could smell baking earlier.

Walking back to the table, she kept her head down. She still wasn’t ready to catch Matt’s eye yet. He’s a geek and a prat and a wally and every other word that

describes an imbecile and an idiot, thought Thea. There was every possible reason for her not to like him. Yet there was that kiss.

It was only when Ben coughed that she realised he'd been talking to her, 'What shit have we got to do today?'

Matt replied instead, his voice sounded heavy with hangover. 'The airborne sector and Pegasus Bridge, then the Museum of Peace and then town this afternoon. I think we'll be on and off the coach all day.'

Amina groaned, 'The thought of sitting on a coach...' she didn't finish her sentence, instead she got up and fled the dining room. Thea watched her disappearing with her hair flowing behind her.

'Think she's off to shake the hand of our porcelain friend.' Ben nodded at the disappearing back. 'Like I said before, they just can't take the pace.'

'I haven't been sick,' said Matt.

'Yet!' Ben put the last mouthful of croissant into his mouth.

'I better check the Terrorist is ok,' Thea took a mouthful of croissant before getting up to follow her.

'Wow, you almost sound like you care,' said Ben.

'Oh ha ha! You think you're so funny.'

'Yup, you're right I do think I'm funny. In fact I don't just think, I know!'

Ben smirked. 'Said hello to Matt yet?'

Thea wanted to kill him. He was a total twat.

It wasn't that she cared about Amina, but she could remember what it was like to have your first hangover. Fucking awful. At least she'd been at home so she could hide in her own bed and get over it. Amina was on her own in a strange place with people who were certain to take the piss.

'I hate you.' was all that Thea could think to say, which she knew was really lame.

'Shut up, Ben, you're not funny.' Thea was surprised to hear Matt say this. Perhaps she was wrong, perhaps he regretted it too. But he should feel grateful that she'd let him kiss her.

Amina was quite easy to find, all she needed to do was follow the retching noises coming from the ladies loo. There were three cubicles and Amina was in the middle one.

'Are you alright Amina? Let me in.' Thea pushed at the door, she heard Amina shuffle slightly so she was no longer blocking the way. Broken words tumbled out in between the retching.

'Why didn't you warn me, why didn't you tell me it would be like this? It never is in any of the films and books. They just say alcohol makes you feel good.'

'Well it does. . . at the time, Babes. They just don't tell you about the crap bit afterwards! Let's be honest, they're not going to tell you are they? It wouldn't make a good story, someone vomiting.' said Thea.

'Oh my god! Never again. Make it stop, Thea. I hate being sick.'

Thea pulled Amina's hair back so it didn't fall into the loo.

'I know, it's awful. We've all been there, it doesn't last. And you'll drink again because you'll forget. We all do. But it's ok, you'll feel better soon.'

She pulled Amina's hair into a pony tail. 'Bet you wish you had your hijab-whatsit on, that would've kept your hair back.'

Amina tried to nod but instead answered by being sick again. Thea stroked Amina's head and remembered back to her first hangover. Nobody stroked her head then.

'Do you know something? You will be amazed when I tell you...'

Amina grunted as she added further decoration to the inside of the loo.

‘I’ve just realised that Terrorist vomit smells and looks the same as normal people. Oops! Sorry didn’t mean to call you that, it just slipped out . . . but isn’t it incredible. You’re just like me!’

Thea was interrupted when Ms Brodie appeared at the toilet door wearing another floaty dress. She decided that Ms Brodie definitely hadn’t got the hang of what was suitable for a school trip yet. This was a particular disaster. Thea knew you would be able to see the outline of her body through the flimsy fabric when out in the sun. The boys were going to love it.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Ms Brodie.

‘Amina’s being sick, but it’s ok, it’s just a dodgy tummy. You know she hasn’t been to France before. Think she drank some of the water.’

Ms Brodie looked at Thea and her eyes narrowed, ‘Of course, France is such a backward country. You ok Amina?’

Amina started to stand up.

‘Yes Miss, I’m fine. It’s ok Thea was looking after me. I was just being a bit sick. Nerves, it’s always been a problem of mine.’

Ms Brodie smiled, ‘Really? Don’t be long then, you need to be on the coach.’

She left the girls to it. Thea looked at Amina. ‘Nerves?’

Amina laughed, ‘I know, I couldn’t think of anything else to say. You weren’t any better. The water?! Like we were in a third world country!’

Thea shrugged her shoulders, ‘I couldn’t think of anything else either!’

She pulled a hair brush and the bottle of perfume out of her bag. ‘Come on let’s sort you out properly. You brush your hair, I don’t want to make your headache any worse or make you vomit again. Then wash your face and I’ll put some of this on.’

Amina splashed cool water on her face, dabbing it dry with a paper towel.

'I feel so rough,' she grimaced, pulling her hair back into a scrunchie that Thea had just handed her.

'Is your handbag like Mary Poppin's? You seem to have everything a girl may need in it.'

Thea laughed 'Maybe, I like to be prepared.'

She sprayed perfume around the both of them. It was the same one they'd used last night to hide the smell of alcohol. This time it was hiding the smell of the consequences.

'There! No one will know how poorly you've been. You ok now?'

'I think so, except I think my head is still going to split into a thousand pieces at any moment.'

'Keep drinking water. It'll help.' She handed Amina a bottle and they walked out of the loos.

Ben and Matt were waiting for them. Thea still couldn't look at Matt.

'We saw Ms Brodie leaving, is everything ok?' said Matt.

'Yeah, yeah, just checking up on Amina.' Thea linked arms with her and they walked towards the coach, laughing. Their heads virtually touching as they lent into each other. Thea heard Matt say to Ben,

'I don't get it. Thea detested Amina yesterday, but look at them now. They seem like they're best friends and have been for years and years. It's crazy.'

'Don't even try. Girls are beyond understanding, trust me,' replied Ben.

The girls laughed and clambered into the coach.

Mr Cooke walked up and down the aisle doing a head count before he stood at the front of the coach. Thea looked up at him. She noticed how hard his eyes seemed. They were like glacial ice. She was certain his heart was frozen solid too.

He started to explain what they would be doing during the day. But she didn't want to listen. She had too much on her mind to think about work. She looked at Amina and started to mouth: 'Blah, blah, blah, blah.'

Amina giggled and just as if she was reading Thea's mind she said, 'Why haven't you looked at Matt? Was the kiss that bad?'

She wondered how to answer the question. Should she say he was crap or tell the truth? But her mouth seemed to decide for her.

'That's the problem. It was amazing.'

'Well, that's great, isn't it?'

Thea shrugged.

Amina continued, 'I don't get it, if it was great why won't you look at him? What's the problem?' Amina was staring at Thea, all wide-eyed and expectant.

'How do I explain this?' Thea stopped and got another bottle of water out of her bag, 'For fuck's sake I'm Thea Jenkins. I have a reputation to maintain. And also, he's a geek therefore he's intelligent, I'm not. He's got brains, I've got big boobs. They don't usually mix.'

Amina looked shocked, 'You can't think that about yourself. Boobs don't make the person! Of course you're intelligent. I'm sure you're wrong.' She patted Thea's arm like an aged aunt dishing out advice. Thea laughed at Amina but it didn't stop her, 'What does it matter, if Matt's a geek, if it feels right surely it is meant to be?'

Thea gulped some more water back then looked at Amina, 'I don't know. It was only a kiss anyway and that sounds all a bit *Pride and Prejudice* to me.'

'Oh I loved studying that book, it was my favourite.'

Thea grimaced. This school trip wasn't turning out how she expected it to. For a start she'd found herself wanting to be friends with the Terrorist, and worst

of all she'd been kissed by a geek who seemed to know what he was doing. It must be the foreign air, she decided. It would all be better when she got back to England, she was sure.

She looked out of the window as they drove off; they weaved along the streets they'd walked on last night avoiding parked cars. The shops were beginning to open up. Tables were being put outside ready for early morning coffee drinkers. Blinds were pulled up and shutters opened. Thea could see the Spar in the distance and when they came to the corner, an image of the girl they'd seen there appeared in her mind.

Again as if reading it Amina asked, 'Do you think that girl was ok? I'm sure she was being forced into sex.'

'She was so young. I wonder why her parents don't stop them. You don't think that man was her dad, do you?'

Amina shifted her bag to behind her head as a pillow, 'No I reckon she's been trafficked. She looked like she was from Afghanistan or something. Bet she's not here by choice. I wish we could help her.' Amina closed her eyes.

Thea wasn't sure whether it was to ease the pain in her head or to go to sleep. Amina answered her unspoken question, 'Wake me when we get there.'

Thea looked out of the window and tried to imagine what it would be like to be that girl. Fancy being forced to have sex with old men. It must be revolting. An involuntary shiver swept through her body as she watched the world go by. The movement of the coach soon lulled her to sleep like Amina. Except hers was fitful. She kept dreaming that the girl and Matt were trying to talk to her and reaching for her, but she couldn't hear what they were saying or get to them, however hard she tried. When the coach stopped, the screeching of the brakes woke Thea up. They must have reached the museum. Thea touched her cheek and was shocked to

find it was damp, she'd been crying in her sleep. She felt even more confused, she didn't normally dream. Why had she had such vivid dreams? This school trip was a trip in more ways than one.

Chapter 11

Ben

‘What’s that you’re reading?’

Ben snatched a book out of Matt’s hand. He’d been reading it intently for the last ten minutes and Ben was feeling ignored. He wasn’t used to that. He liked to be the centre of attention. ‘*Postcard to No Man’s Land*’ What’s it all about then? Bit of a crap name.’

Matt started to explain. ‘It’s a book about a boy who goes to Amsterdam to honour his grandfather. It is about the Second World War and...’

But before Matt could continue Ben had flicked through the pages and read a couple of lines.

‘No it’s not; it’s a book about homos. You’re a gay boy.’ Ben stood up and opened the book wide.

‘Listen everyone.’ He started to read in his best stage voice. A coach full of teenage heads swivelled, their eyes settled on the upstanding Ben, waiting for whatever tantalising bit of dirt he was about to share with them.

‘Two simultaneous actions silenced him. Ton’s lips placing fleetingly on his the ghost of a kiss. . . here comes the best bit. . . wait. . . And her hand pressing his hand deep into her crotch, where he felt the swell of a compact set of penis and balls.’¹

Matt’s face flushed with anger and he snatched the book back. A chorus of satisfied laughter and vitriolic voices spouted forth the latest gossip. The words ‘Matt’s a Homo’ was heard to echo around the coach. They were like pack animals.

¹ Aidan Chambers, *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, (Speak: London, 1999) P.8

They loved to have a victim. Apple cores and knotted empty crisp packets rained down on him. He looked up at Ben and just mouthed 'Why?'

'What? It was just a joke,' said Ben.

'Whatever!' Matt turned his back on Ben and stared out the window.

A disembowelled voice belonging to Mr Cooke rose above the cacophony that was still going on.

'That was rather predictable, Mr Williamson. Sit down and the rest of you can shut up.' Everyone who had been enjoying the spectacle shuffled round so they were facing the front again. It was like Mr Cooke had eyes in the back of his head; he didn't move but continued to shout. 'He doesn't need any encouragement, you'll make him worse.'

Ben sat back into his seat with a thud and looked at Matt who was still staring out of the window at the passing countryside. His shoulders told their own tale. They drooped with all the pressures of the world dragging them down. His whole body emanated despondency. Ben looked to the seats in front where the girls were. He wanted them to say something that made him feel better. To say how funny he was. But the girls had managed to sleep through the brouhaha. Ben was astounded, it'd been so loud. Why didn't they wake up? Perhaps they deliberately ignoring him?

He looked out of the window too. He could see the wide flat fields over the top of the hedges. It was Bocage Land or Green Hell. Dan had told them that it'd become known as this during the Normandy Landings. Ben imagined the soldiers being picked off whilst the Germans hid in the hedges. It must have been fucking scary. He wondered if it had been like that for Dan in Afghanistan. Did they have hedges to hide behind?

Being in the coach made him feel cocooned. It was like being offered an edited version of France. You didn't see what really happened, like with that girl. Was she really being sold for sex? He closed his eyes wanting to shut everything out. It didn't work. Instead of seeing his brother, like he normally did, all he could see was that girl's eyes. They haunted him. They were so desperate and fearful. He wanted to help her but didn't know how.

They drove into the Pegasus Museum car park. The building looked like a sweeping seagull. There were flags fluttering a welcome, and a bridge nowhere near a river or canal appeared abandoned on a patch of immaculate lawn. Ben assumed it was The Pegasus Bridge.

He was surprised to find himself apologising to Matt, 'I'm sorry for doing that, for being such a dick. I know you're not gay.'

Matt snapped around, 'Would it be different if I was then?'

Ben didn't expect that being thrown back at him. He didn't know how to answer. He knew what he should say, but would he mean it?

Matt threw the book at him. 'Try reading it, you might learn something.' He pushed past him and walked down the aisle of the coach to a chorus of jeers. Ben followed him. He'd started this.

'Oh shut up you lot, you're pathetic,' he said.

Mr Cooke was standing at the end staring at him. His bow tie seemed to be twitching. 'That's rich coming from the boy who initiated it.'

Ben was going to snap back, but stopped himself. What Mr Cooke said was true. It had been his fault. He looked at Cooke's thin face; there was spittle at the corners of his mouth. It made him look like a rabid dog. He smirked at Ben. So Ben looked straight into Mr Cooke's eyes. Ben heard him take in a breath preparing to shout down anything he was going to say. Instead Ben smiled at him

and climbed out of the coach. He could hear Mr Cooke letting out his breath like a deflating balloon.

‘Tosser!’ said Ben. He walked towards the museum, ‘A place full of landmark events from a vanished life.’ That was his brother’s favourite saying. They loved going to war museums together. Ben wondered if they would ever go to another one.

Chapter 12

Matt

Amina and Thea joined Matt by the flag poles. The sun was trying to push through the clouds, bringing some warmth to the day.

Where's Ben?' asked Thea

'Dunno and don't care,' Matt replied.

'Lover boys had a tiff then?' She asked, looking round for Ben.

They'd obviously slept through. Matt was pleased but her jibe hit a raw nerve.

'That's not fucking funny. Just shut up.' Matt saw the girls look at each other in amazement.

Before he walked away, he heard Thea say to Amina, 'Ok, we obviously missed something on the bus. See if you can find Ben and I'll go and talk to Matt.'

'Right,' said Amina.

Matt heard the crunch of two sets of shoes, one running away and one coming closer. Thea put her arm through his again, the now familiar electric shock flying up his arm and to all parts of his body. He wanted to kiss her again, but maybe now wasn't the right time.

'Ok, what happened? Why are you so pissed off with Ben?' Thea held his arm tighter and pulled Matt into her while they walked. His arm was now pressed against her breast. Any moment now he was convinced he was going to explode. He tried to focus on what happened on the coach and not the feelings that were coursing through his body now.

They stopped by the bridge and Thea still didn't let go as Matt regaled her with his horrendous journey.

‘Is that it? Is that what you two are having a hissy fit about? For fuck’s sake, you’re both just playing straight into Cookie’s hands, this is what he wants. Yeah, it was a really prattish thing for Ben to do. But then we all know he can be a total prat.’ She pulled Matt even closer to her. It felt like his arm was being sucked into boob heaven, swallowed up by the soft mound. The desire to kiss her became overwhelming. She looked so beautiful. Matt leant towards her.

‘No Matt! Not here.’ Thea snapped her head away leaving Matt’s puckered lips hanging in mid air.

‘Look there’s Amina and Ben.’

Matt could see that Ben looked as fed up as he felt.

‘Go on, say it.’ This was Amina speaking, Matt’d never heard her speak so forcefully before. She was always as meek as a mouse.

‘Sorry,’ said Ben, he looked at the ground when he said it.

Matt kicked at a stone. Ben hadn’t meant that.

‘S’ok,’ Matt decided he’d get his own back later, it could wait.

‘Right,’ said Thea. ‘Now you two have kissed and made up, let’s start doing the questions.’ She pulled the pack out of her bag, lifting out the right question sheet. ‘The first questions are about the Horsa Glider, we need to find it.’

‘There’s one over there,’ Ben pointed around the corner of the building. His demeanour was as arrogant as ever, he certainly showed no remorse now, Matt noted.

They walked over to the huge glider plane.

‘Question number one is: How much can the Horsa glider carry?’ asked Thea.

Ben spoke before anyone else had a chance, ‘Twenty eight men and a jeep with a trailer.’

Matt looked at him, 'That can't be right. How do you know?'

The wind caused the flags to flap wildly behind them, interrupting the heavy silence between the four teenagers.

'Look over there,' said Amina. 'There's an information board. I'll go and see what it says.' She ran across to the board her hair flowing behind her. Her hangover must be better for that sleep. Matt wished his was, he realised how crap he still felt. His head was pounding.

'Hey Ben, you're right. It says here: 28 men and a jeep with a trailer.'

Matt didn't want to believe that Ben knew something about this place. That didn't match with the image he'd cultivated in his mind. Being intellectual or knowledgeable didn't fit in. He was the geek, not Ben.

'Fluke! You must have looked before you came here.'

Ben didn't respond.

Thea organised them, 'Now, let's go inside and answer the questions in there and then we can end up at the actual bridge, is that ok?'

Neither of the boys answered but Amina nodded and raised her eyebrows. The two girls locked arms again; the animosity between the boys was not going to stop them. The boys walked with a good six feet between them. Neither would look at the other. Matt knew they looked like petulant toddlers as they crunched across the gravel into the building, but he wasn't going to give in first.

It smelt like a museum the moment you walked through the door. It was the smell of musty artefacts and ancient crumbling possessions that belonged to people from a bygone age. They were all kept behind glass so you couldn't touch them. There were uniforms, parachutes, guns and radios. All items that were used to make the Battle of Pegasus Bridge the most successful operation of the D-Day Landings. Or so Matt read on the little square plastic covered sheet on the wall.

‘Right,’ said Thea. ‘Amina and I will fill in the sheets because our writing is better than yours.’

The boys didn’t argue.

‘Oh for goodness sake, are you going to be like this all the way round?

You’re being pathetic, the pair of you,’ said Thea.

The boys still didn’t say anything.

Thea sighed and read the next question to Amina, ‘Who undertook this mission?’

Ben and Matt replied in unison, ‘6th Airborne Division.’

‘Ah the boys speak,’ said Amina.

‘How many bridges were there?’

Again the boys answered in unison, ‘There were two, one over the canal and one over the river.’

Ben looked across at Matt and half smiled.

‘What would they do without us?’ he asked.

Thea looked up from her writing, ‘We’d be having more fun. You two are like a pair of spoilt brats.’

Matt wasn’t sure he could forgive Ben yet, but he knew he ought to make a bit more of an effort.

They kept bumping into other groups of students trying to answer the same questions. Standing by a parachute they met up with Sam and his group, which consisted of Dave, and two girls, Courtney and Brittany, who were like twins with their matching blonde hair. They were both wannabe footballer’s WAGs.

‘Ben.’ They managed to make his name sound so long, ‘Wouldn’t you rather be with us, than those. . .’ they left the sentence hanging for the others to fill in as required. Then grabbed at his arm, trying to pull him away from Matt.

Matt wondered what Ben would say.

'Thanks girls,' Ben shook his arm free.

'But you know you really want to be with us,' drawled Courtney.

Ben shook his head and walked off towards one of the other exhibits to get away from them leaving the girls with their mouths gaping. 'Come on Matt, let's get on.'

Matt joined him. 'I thought you'd jump at their offer.'

'Really?' said Ben. 'Nah definitely not my type. Too keen and only after one thing.'

'Aren't girls supposed to say that about us, not us about them?' Matt laughed and looked back at the girls who were talking to Sam now.

'Times are a changing, Bro!' Ben laughed. 'I hate it when they're really obvious like that. They've no respect for themselves.'

Matt couldn't work Ben out. Most of the time he was arrogant and aggressive and then suddenly he would come out with something like that. He was sort of principled.

A strained truce developed between the boys while they walked round the museum. Ben nudged Matt, 'Look, over there.' He was pointing at a Veteran in a wheel chair being pushed by his son. 'Listen to what he is singing.'

The old man wearing his parachute regiment beret proudly, was singing to himself to the tune of Lili Marlene.

'We're the D-Day Dodgers out in Italy -

Always on the vino, always on the spree.

8th Army scroungers and their tanks

We live in Rome - among the Yanks.

We are the D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.'

‘Isn’t he amazing? That was the song they sang about the soldiers who were in Italy on the D-Day Landings. They thought they were skiving.’ Ben looked at Matt. His eyes were alive with excitement. Matt didn’t feel quite the same enthusiasm for the old man.

‘Yeah, that’s awesome, but it’s not helping my head. It is really pounding,’ said Matt rubbing hard at his forehead. Ben rummaged in his rucksack and came out with a strip of painkillers.

‘Take two of these. It’ll help.’

‘Are they legal?’ Matt took them from Ben’s hand and knocked them back with his water just as Mr Cooke and Ms Brodie appeared.

‘How are the questions going?’ asked Ms Brodie.

‘We’re nearly there, Ben knows so much and so does Matt. We don’t have to look at the information boards at all.’

‘Ben?’ said Mr Cooke as he lifted one eyebrow. ‘Bet you can’t answer this question then?’

‘Bet he can,’ said Thea. Matt looked at the girls who from their grins were expecting Ben to know everything and Mr Cooke who was expecting him to know nothing. He wasn’t sure who Ben was going to disappoint the most.

‘Ok then Ben, what was the call sign to say that the British had taken Pegasus Bridge?’ Mr Cooke stared at Ben, his nostrils flared as he took a deep breath anticipating Ben’s incorrect answer.

Ben thought for a moment. Matt looked away and surprised himself by praying that Ben got it right so he’d show Cooke up. Both Amina and Thea were watching Ben expectantly. They obviously had more confidence in Ben than Matt did. Mr Cooke looked ready to walk away as if he’d been proved right.

‘Ham and Jam, Sir,’ said Ben.

Mr Cooke looked at Ben, 'That's correct.'

With that he walked away. Ms Brodie winked at Ben then joined her fellow teacher.

Amina and Thea smiled at Ben.

'You kept all this very quiet, don't you?' asked Matt.

'Yeah, well,' Ben looked around, 'it's not great for the old gansta image, is it?'

Thea thrust her arms through both Ben's and Matt's arms, 'After that small victory, I think it is time to go and look at the bridge?'

Amina grabbed hold of Ben's other arm and the four of them walked towards the Pegasus Bridge laughing.

They had to dodge a group of British veterans. Matt noticed the difference between them and the Americans. They were all dressed in blazers with the regimental badge on the pocket and grey trousers. He recognised the parachute regimental tie they were all wearing too. Not one of them had a camera hanging round their necks and when they walked, they still marched. They were true old soldiers. Ben noticed them too and said to Matt.

'Do you think they were part of this? I wish we could talk to them.'

Matt agreed, 'Doubt they'd want to talk to people like us though do you?'

Before Ben could answer Thea spoke.

'Look there are real bullet holes on it.' She was standing by the bridge and sounded surprised. Matt laughed at her.

'Did you think our soldiers just walked up to the Germans and said "Excuse me chaps, think this bridge is ours now"?''

'I know I sounded stupid, but it's just that thought. They are real. It's scary. People were killed and injured getting this bridge.'

They all knew what Thea meant. It was huge. They stood in silence until they noticed to one side of the bridge a group of young British soldiers pushing men in wheelchairs.

Matt thumped Ben's arm and said, 'Look, he must have had a good session last night, he's legless.'

Ben looked where Matt was pointing. Matt heard him take in a sharp intake of breath, all the colour drained from his face and he turned to Matt.

'It is not only me that has to learn something, is it? That's a bastard thing to say.' Ben's words hit Matt like a verbal slapping again. They resonated around them. Then Ben turned away from the group and headed back to the coach, leaving the others just standing there, not quite sure what had just happened.

Chapter 13

Thea

She had been stuck with Matt for the rest of the day. Ben had made sure Amina was with him the whole time and Thea was not happy. To top it all, Matt had done nothing but whinge.

‘Matt, will you just shut the fuck up? You said something really stupid. Ben was no better, but get over yourselves. We’ve all got to work together so stop being such a fucking twat!’ She was about to stop but then thought better of it, ‘And if you think I am ever going to kiss you again, dream on!’ He look shattered until she added a caveat, ‘Until you stop being such a total dickhead.’

Matt looked at her with eyes wide open. He seemed shocked she’d spoken to him like that. But what did he expect? He was being a total tosser. She turned her back on him and looked out of the window. Should she have said that? Who knows, she thought, but blokes are such arses. She wondered what he would do now.

As the bus meandered down the unfamiliar French streets, Thea took in the difference between here and the familiar grimness of home. England and France were separate by more than just their language. It was more like being in a different world than a different country.

Thea suddenly sat upright. There was a familiar face in the crowd. It was the girl again. The girl Ben had pointed out. She looked smaller than ever, propped against her burly minder. He looked like he was waiting for someone and she looked terrified. Thea could see he had a tight grip of her arm. There was no chance the girl could escape. As the bus drew closer, Thea studied the girl’s face. It was empty, devoid of all emotion. There was a purple bruise developing just under

her left eye. Please don't give up, was all Thea could think, wishing she could do more.

When the coach stopped she didn't mention the sighting to the others. All she wanted was for the group to get on again, at least for the next few days.

Once the gaggle of kids had left the coach, Mr Cooke pointed using a rolled up magazine and said, 'Over there is Le Dolphin.' He was pointing to a small restaurant with several tables out the front, 'We're eating at 6pm. Make sure you are there on time. We won't wait for anyone.' He looked at Ben pointedly as he said that. Thea noticed that Ben had ignored his snipe and instead spoke to Amina.

'I'm starving already, wanna find something to eat?'

Thea grabbed Ben's and Matt's arms so there were no arguments and said 'Yes, I'm starving too. Let's find food.'

Amina smiled at her and she too grabbed Ben's arm. 'Yup. C'mon, Matt, keep up.'

The four of them walked past the coffee shops with people sitting outside, all smoking and talking. Smoke wisps slipped into the air from Gauloises cigarettes and their rich smell mingled with the exotic aroma of roasting coffee. Everyone seemed to be so relaxed as they smoked and dipped their lumps of sugar into small espresso cups. There were glasses of wine on the table too but no one commented on the time of day.

'They must all be spangled,' said Ben.

Matt and Amina spoke at once, 'Spangled?'

Ben didn't respond so Thea did, 'High on drugs or whatever. How are you managing without being spangled then Ben?'

Ben looked hard at her so she just lifted her eyebrows back at him. She could see the tension fall from his face as he burst out laughing.

‘Let’s look at the bakery over there.’

‘Don’t you mean, la boulangerie?’ said Matt, with a smile.

Amina laughed, ‘Ah maybe it’s le boulangerie!’

‘La or le, does it really matter?’ asked Thea.

‘Well strictly speaking it does,’ Matt’s smile was even broader now that he could show off a little. ‘It depends if the baker is a man or a woman, see la Boulanger is a female and le boulangère is a...’

‘Donkey,’ snapped Ben. ‘Who cares, just feed me!’

They all laughed and Thea ruffled Matt’s hair as they strolled over towards a shop with an open front. There were masses of croissants and multi coloured macaroons. All pink and green, tantalisingly tempting in all different sizes. The smell of baking bread enticing unwary shoppers in.

‘Look! Those are like the rolls like we had the other night.’

The others clustered around.

‘Oh yes, let’s get some and go and eat them by the castle,’ said Amina.

‘What are those ones with lardons in?’

‘Hard ons?’ spluttered Amina

Matt and Ben nearly keeled over laughing. More so because the words came out of Amina’s mouth.

‘What?’

‘You said hard ons!’ shouted Matt

Ben thumped him, ‘Did you hear? She said hard ons.’

Thea looked at the two boys as they fell about the place. She took Amina's arm and said, 'It is LARDons but may I introduce you to two examples of the male of the species, behaving like total twats and thinking they are hilariously funny?'

Amina looked down. 'It's ok Amina, just ignore them we'll go and get the rolls whilst they have an epi-fit over a hard on. You'd think they'd never heard it before.' Thea led her into the bakery.

Out of earshot of the boys Amina asked, 'Lardons are bacon aren't they?' said Amina, who barely whispered just in case she said something stupid again, 'I can't have those but I can have the ones with cheese in over there. Shall we get a mixture?'

'I think so and let's get loads so they keep us going, and some drinks of course,' said Thea as she hugged Amina's arm. 'How good is your French, can you order? I don't think I know enough and I am not sure they would understand if you asked for a hard on.' Thea winked at Amina.

The girls came out of the bakery to find the boys sitting on the grass near the castle, still laughing.

'Hey Amina, do you want a hard on with your roll?' Ben went to unzip his trousers.

Matt thumped Ben's back. 'Good one,' he also went to undo his zip. 'You could have a double hard on if you want? It's a bit like a double cheeseburger.' Once again the boys fell about laughing. Amina was bright red. Thea could almost feel the heat coming off her face.

'For fuck's sake, it wasn't that funny,' said Thea. 'Aren't boys pathetic? Ignore them. Let's sit here. If they want some rolls they can come over to us.'

They took the food nearer to the castle and sat on the grass. Thea felt so confused, her feelings for Matt were so irrational. He was a twat, a dork and an

imbecile, but she still found him attractive, even when he was behaving like a stupid child and laughing at words like “hard on”. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Amina looked at her, ‘Are you ok?’

The boys had walked over to join them; making a big show of trying not to laugh anymore.

Thea didn’t want Amina asking too many questions and certainly not in front of the boys, ‘Yes, don’t fuss.’

Ben raised his eyebrows at Amina. ‘Don’t waste your time, Amina, Thea’s got PMT.’

Thea swung out at him with her arm, ‘No, I don’t!’

‘It’s Post Matt Tension.’ Thea couldn’t believe Ben had just said that. Matt blushed and concentrated on drinking his coke, gulping hard and making a lot of noise. Ben roared with laughter.

‘Go on! You know you want to... kissy, kissy, kissy.’ Ben puckered up his lips.

Thea wanted to kill him.

‘Ben give ’em a break,’ Amina said, surprising Thea. She was even more surprised when Ben actually did shut up and stopped hassling her.

Instead he lay back and looked up at the sky.

Thea decided to tell them about her earlier sighting, ‘Actually I was thinking about that girl. I saw her again when I was on the coach. She had a huge bruise under her left eye. And that bloke was with her again.’

Ben turned to face Thea.

‘Where?’

‘Back there. She must be around here somewhere, because we keep seeing her.’ Thea flicked an ant off her arm.

‘That’s true,’ said Matt. ‘I wonder if we should ask around.’

‘I wish we could help her,’ said Amina.

Ben lay on his back again and sighed, ‘As you’ve already said, what can we do, we’re on a school trip?’

He stretched his arms behind him and changed the subject, ‘Look at that cloud, it looks like an elephant.’

It wasn’t long until all four were flat on their backs describing the clouds, having pushed the girl out of their minds.

‘That’s not an elephant, it’s a sea horse or a saxophone,’ said Amina.

‘No, everyone can see it’s camel,’ Matt drew it with his arm, illustrating his point.

‘Well, I don’t know which cloud you’re looking at but I can see one that is... cloud shaped!’ Thea laughed at her own joke.

A comfortable silence descended. They drifted into their own worlds where everything was how it should be. The sun warmed their bodies and the leaves in the trees shivered with the breeze, even the traffic seemed like a distant rumble. Thea enjoyed the nothingness. She watched a plane that looked like it was ripping the sky open and vaguely wondered if the universe would fall through the rip if she kissed Matt again.

Chapter 14

Ben

Ben sat back up, bored of looking at the sky. He noticed there was a group of French students sitting nearby, drinking. Sam Jones and the girls were sitting near the students. Sam was gesticulating madly at them.

As he watched, his resolve to be good vaporised in front of him and temptation took over.

‘Anyone fancy some vodka with their coke? I feel like I need some.’

‘Oh yes,’ he knew Matt would agree, but the girls didn’t seem so keen.

He ignored them. The girls were not going to stop him, he needed alcohol. He walked down into the Spar. Ben looked around to make sure there weren’t any loitering teachers to ruin his plan. He ran his hand across his head. All he could see were women laden with shopping bags and men on mobiles dodging young girls pushing buggies. There was a group of people who looked like refugees on the corner, but he couldn’t see Ms Brodie or Mr Cooke so he dropped his hands into his pocket and walked into the Spar. They hadn’t queried his age yesterday, so he was hoping they wouldn’t today either. His French was quite good but he wasn’t going to let the others know that. He knew he was lazy. He smiled to himself, if he could get other people to do the work, he always would.

The shop was familiar, not just because he’d been in it the night before, but because it was like any Spar in England. He wandered around, squeezing between the shelves and two nattering French women. He’d spotted the vodka just beyond them. Ben picked up one of the smaller bottles, less likely to query his age that way. He knew all the tricks from home. His crew would be pleased he hadn’t totally let the side down on the school trip. He still managed to break some rules.

At the checkout, he handed over the money and looked through the window behind the cashier. It was then that he saw her. It was the girl. She was standing in the middle of the pavement and appeared to be on her own. He grabbed the bottle stuffing it into his pocket.

‘Merci... er... keep the change,’ he called as he left.

In his panic the French had emptied out of his head. He ran out of the shop and up to her. She looked terrified but then seemed to relax a bit when she recognised him. He noticed she didn’t have any make up on this time and looked more like a young girl. Thea wasn’t joking about the bruise, it looked very painful. Her eyes were great brown pools that were full of fear. She kept pulling her long black hair across her face to hide the bruise. It was like a nervous twitch.

‘Hello... er.. Bonjour,’ said Ben, he realised he’d no idea what language she would speak. Luckily for him she replied in English.

‘Hello, I saw you on the bus,’ she said, she kept looking around her like she was waiting for someone. He could see she was really nervous.

‘Are you ok? Are you safe?’ Do you want to come with me?’

He held out his hand to her but she shied away. Ben couldn’t believe he’d just said that. He’d no idea what he was going to do if she’d said yes. But before she could answer, the man with the scar came up and snatched at her arm. He spoke to Ben in what appeared to be French but it was so fast and garbled he’d no real idea.

He raised his hands and said, ‘Sorry, Anglais.’

The girl kept looking at him. Her eyes were glassy with tears and fear. Ben understood exactly what was said to him next.

‘Fuck off.’

It was said with a thick Middle Eastern accent. He then lifted his leather coat. The sun glinted off a knife tucked in his belt. The language of knives was something Ben knew too well.

The man and the girl started walking away. He was taking huge, fast strides and the girl had to run to keep up with him. The whole time he was shouting at her.

Ben watched them go.

‘Fucking hell!’ He felt useless.

Ben looked to where the others were. They were still sitting on the grass laughing and giggling. They had no idea. The castle towered above them. You’re not much good at protecting people, are you? He didn’t want to stay outside anymore. The heat of the sun was unbearable. He felt sick at what might be happening to the girl now, and it was his fault.

When he got to the others he said, ‘Can we go up to the hotel room and do this?’

‘Why? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,’ said Thea. She leant up and took his hand, ‘Are you ok?’

Ben looked down at her hand. All he could think about was that girl. She needed help and he’d let her down. Again. It seemed very easy for him to let people down.

‘No, I’ve just screwed up.’

Matt jumped to conclusions, ‘Did Cookie see you buy the vodka, are you being sent back?’

Ben laughed, a dry rasping laugh, ‘I almost wish it was that. I saw the girl again. I tried to talk to her. She understands English. I even asked her to come

with me. But that man came up and grabbed her. He flashed a knife at me when he realised I only speak English then dragged her off again.'

'A knife?' Ben could see Amina was panicking. 'He could've killed you.'

'Nah! Not me.'

'Should we tell someone?' asked Thea.

'Who?' said Ben. 'We don't know where she's being kept. The police would laugh at us and Cookie would think I was making it up and see it as a reason to send me home.'

When they started to walk off the grass Ben noticed that Sam Jones and his group were well in with the French students now and it didn't look that innocent. He could see Brittany necking a bottle of vodka. He didn't care though that was their look out.

They aimed for the boys' room, which was the nearest. There were discarded clothes and underwear all over the floor.

'Ben you could've picked your clothes up!' said Amina.

Ben was furious. These weren't his clothes. Why did she assume that?

'Those are Matt's, mine are here.' Ben opened a drawer and pointed at a neat pile of clothes that were folded precisely.

'OMG, have you got OCD or something? They're so neat!' said Amina as she plonked herself on the other bed to Thea. Ben joined her whilst Matt retrieved his boxers. He put all his clothes in a not so neat pile near his rucksack mumbling, 'Sorry' as he did it, then sat next to Thea.

Ben was cringing, he couldn't bear the mess. His urge to clear up was almost painful. Amina was closer than she realised with her diagnosis.

'Give us the coke bottles and I'll add some vodka.' He looked at Amina, 'Do you want some? It's ok if you don't.'

‘No thanks, don’t ever want to feel that ill again.’

‘That’s cool,’ said Ben. Thea held her bottle out. He took it and poured vodka into hers and then put some in Matt’s bottle and then the rest in his own.

They drank in virtual silence. He wasn’t sure if it was tiredness that made them so quiet. He kept seeing the girl’s face and her look of desperation. Why did he care so much about that girl? She was only a stranger after all. He had his mates. His bros. His Crew. They didn’t care about anything, just having a good time. He couldn’t see how that could have changed. Well, apart from the fact he’d gone on a school trip and none of them would’ve been seen dead on one. He felt so confused his head was hurting again, he moved towards the window for some fresh air. After a little while Amina joined him,

‘Matt and Thea have fallen asleep.’

Ben turned and looked back at the bed where he could see two bodies wrapped round each other. He laughed as he mock toasted them, ‘Get in there Matt.’

‘Ben,’ said Amina, ‘can I ask you something?’

He looked at her and nodded but he wondered what was coming next as she seemed to need to think how to word her question. While he waited, Ben let his eyes run over her face. He’d never noticed how beautiful her eyes were. They were green and inviting.

‘You said that man could never kill you with a knife. How do you know? Why weren’t you terrified?’

‘I suppose I was, but you learn not to show it. And besides I’ve been there before.’ He lifted his shirt at the back and Amina could see a red line with other lines crossing it like a zip. It was a couple centimetres long.

Amina gasped, 'Have you been stabbed?' Her green eyes were now wide open and shocked, 'How?'

'Doh,' said Ben. 'Stabbings tend to be with knives!'

Amina pushed her bottom lip out with her tongue, 'Yeah I know that, but what I meant was why?'

Ben let his shirt slip back down. 'I was in the wrong gang, at the wrong time. I was a bit of a twat really. They were all into really bad stuff. I wasn't as much. But they upset another gang who decided to teach us a lesson and earn their stripes.'

'Stripes?' said Amina.

'Yes it's a gang thing. You earn your stripes by doing as much damage as possible.'

'Even killing?'

Ben lifted his eyebrow. 'What do you think? Ultimate glory for some.'

'Really?' Amina's eyes were wide open.

Ben just nodded. 'Anyway the gang ended up only teaching me a lesson. My so called mates ran off and left me. They weren't so brave when it came down to it and I've got the scar to prove it.'

All Amina could say was, 'That's awful!'

Ben looked at her and nodded. She was so innocent. They sat in silence as they both nibbled on another roll. He looked out of the window again and the face of the girl slipped back into his mind, he wondered what the girl was doing now, was she safe? Amina tapped him on the arm bringing his thoughts back to the room and his new friends. He looked where she was pointing. Thea and Matt were awake now but were totally oblivious to Ben's and Amina's existence. They were too busy exploring each other's bodies.

He coughed loudly, 'I thought you were a bit quiet. Think that's our cue to leave, don't you Amina? We'll... er... leave you to it. Stay safe!' He winked at Amina.

Thea shot off the bed, 'Oh no you don't, I'm coming with you.'

Matt was left lying on the bed with his mouth open.

'Better luck next time!' said Ben as he left the room.

Chapter 15

Amina

‘Thea, that’s cruel. Don’t turn into a cock tease, it doesn’t suit you.’ Ben looked at Thea, his mouth was smiling but his eyes were bleak.

Amina knew he wasn’t worrying about Thea and Matt though. He still had that girl on his mind. His whole body was taut with anguish and alcohol.

‘Let’s go back on the grass by the castle. It is near the restaurant that Cookie wants us to go to,’ said Amina.

‘Whatever, I don’t care,’ said Ben. Amina linked arms with Thea whose body also felt tense. She looked back at the hotel, ‘Where’s Matt?’

‘Licking his wounds I would imagine. Bet he feels crap. Poor bugger. Fancy having your pride kicked like that.’

‘Shut the fuck up, Ben. I know what I did was crappy, so don’t go on about it.’

They sat on the grass surrounded by more groups of students who were very loud and very happy. Amina wished some of their happiness could rub off on Ben and Thea. Neither were talking. Ben, she noticed, had been quite happy to finish the rest of the alcohol off. It made his mood worse. His eyes looked so hard and angry now. They were black, instead of the usual warm hazelnut colour. He kept clicking his knuckles and his leg was twitching the whole time. Amina was sure he would explode at any moment.

‘You know alcohol doesn’t solve anything,’ she said, then wished she hadn’t.

Ben looked at her and snapped, ‘What would you know? You with your nice cosy life.’ Amina felt stung by his words, but was more cross with herself. What a stupid thing to say.

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. It is just what everyone says.’

Ben looked round at her, his eyes blazing, ‘You’re right. You shouldn’t have said anything, so to quote Thea earlier, shut the fuck up. You know nothing and stop trying to pretend you do.’ He swung his arm out expansively, ‘That girl is out there and who knows what is happening to her and I couldn’t help. In fact, I probably fucking made it ten times worse for her.’

Amina didn’t feel comfortable with Ben like this. He seemed very aggressive. Thea wasn’t much help either as she just sat there picking at the grass.

‘Oi, you lot! I lost you.’ It was Matt appearing out of the crowds. His rejection didn’t appear to have done too much damage. Though Amina noticed his polo shirt was undone and his jeans were no longer nipple high. Thea was obviously having some impact, whether she liked it or not.

Ben and Thea both looked up and noticed at the same time as Amina that Matt’s pockets were overflowing with something. Amina couldn’t work out what it was. It looked like masses of silver squares.

Ben started to laugh. A deep belly laugh that rocked his whole body, every bit of angst seemed to melt away as he pointed at Matt.

‘What’ve you got there?’ Amina asked. She was curious what thing could change Ben’s mood so dramatically.

‘I’m making sure I’m always prepared,’ said Matt smiling. ‘Isn’t it the Scouts who always say ‘be prepared’? Well now I am.’

He emptied his pockets onto the grass. Amina still couldn’t work out what they were so she picked one up and looked at it. It was a small square with a mini Darth Vader on it and the words *Je ne serai pas ton père*. Amina translated them mumbling the words under her breath slowly, ‘I will not be your father.’ She looked up at the others, ‘They’re condoms!’

Ben was still laughing, there were tears streaming down his face.

‘Yes they’re condoms. Matt, I have to say I admire your confidence,’ Ben lifted some of them up and allowed them to fall through his fingers. ‘Think you could be in trouble there, Thea.’

Amina looked up at Thea wondering how she was going to react. The world seemed to stop for the briefest of moments whilst it waited for Thea, who looked down and also lifted some of them up then letting them drop.

With a very serious tone Thea said, ‘In his dreams.’ When she looked up she had a broad grin and started to laugh as much as Ben.

Amina was relieved to see Thea laugh. She started to laugh too and so did Matt. They all started throwing the condoms in the air.

Then Thea stopped with her arms in mid air, ‘Shit! It’s Cooke and Brodie, hide them!’

There was a moment of panic until Matt sat right in the middle of the group on the condoms. This made Ben and Thea laugh even more as they tried to get any spare condoms under Matt’s legs.

Ms Brodie and Mr Cooke strode up to where they were sitting.

‘There is a lot of hilarity here. Is it something we should know about?’ asked Ms Brodie. Her dress was covered in multi-coloured swirls and she now had a matching headscarf on, to keep her hair under control.

‘Oh just having a good laugh, you know, a good time,’ said Matt. ‘The Head was obviously right putting us altogether. We certainly get on, don’t we?’

Mr Cooke said nothing, not even a flicker of a smile. He just raised his eyebrows. He’d finally taken his bow tie off so his shirt was open. His blonde hair had been brushed and he looked so much cooler than normal. His eyes still looked hard as ice. Amina had never known anyone with such pale eyes.

‘You look like you should be at Glastonbury,’ announced Thea to Ms Brodie.

Ms Brodie smiled at her, ‘I wish I was, it is my all time favourite place. You know I was there in ’97 when it was a total mud bath. It was amazing.’

‘I was only three then. I don’t remember it,’ said Amina. Glastonbury was somewhere she’d heard of and a place she’d promised herself she would get to one year, if she could get her parents to let her. ‘I want to go there one day. Who have you seen?’

‘It was Radiohead and Sting that year, they were my favourites. But then I’ve also seen...’

Mr Cooke interrupted her, ‘Ms Brodie, I think it is time to get these students to the restaurant so we can eat.’

Ms Brodie looked flustered, ‘Yes of course, sorry Mr Cooke. Come on you lot let’s go.’

‘Coming,’ said the four friends.

Once Mr Cooke and Ms Brodie were out of ear shot, Ben said, ‘Right, let’s collect Matt’s condoms together. Don’t want to waste them!’ He passed handfuls of the condoms to Matt.

‘I can’t get them back in,’ said Matt as he tried to stuff them into his pockets.

‘S’ok, give ’em here. I’ll put them in my bag,’ said Thea, who took the rest. Nothing was said but Ben looked at Amina and lifted an eyebrow which made Amina giggle.

‘What?’ snapped Thea.

‘Oh nothing, nothing at all. Let’s go.’ Ben stood up, ‘I didn’t notice those students leave. The ones that were hanging around with Sam and that lot, did you?’

They all shook their heads

‘Ah well, not that I care really. Let’s go eat, I’m starving.’

Chapter 16

Matt

They walked over to the restaurant. Mr Cooke must have pre-booked. There was a long table set for them outside the restaurant. There were small pots of flowers dotted down the middle of the table. The cutlery and glasses were all spotless and neatly laid out. There were trellis screens which separated them from the restaurant next door. A lot of the smaller tables were already occupied with couples, some obviously tourists with their cameras placed carefully while they worked through the menu, phrase books in hand.

Matt headed towards the opposite end of the table to Mr Cooke and pulled the others with him. He didn't want there to be any opportunity for Cookie to wind Ben up. He and Thea sat one side and Amina and Ben sat the other.

They were just settling down when Matt heard a strange noise.

He couldn't work out what it was but Thea touched his arm, 'Look,' she pointed behind him. Matt turned to see Sam, Courtney and Brittany staggering along the road further along from the restaurant. They didn't look like they were planning on coming for the meal, but unfortunately Thea wasn't the only one to spot them.

Mr Cooke bellowed, 'Sam Jones, Brittany Tucker and Courtney Grayson, get over here. NOW!'

The threesome weaved their way over to Mr Cooke. Ms Brodie stood with her arms on her hips watching them, shaking her head.

'Hey Cookie Wookie and Brodie Wodie, we're here ready for supper, I've got the munchies. Hic!' shouted Sam.

Mr Cooke said nothing, he just watched. Then Sam tripped over a chair leg, sending the girls behind him into a fit of giggling. They both had huge love bites on their necks and by the looks of it Brittany had lost her bra. Matt couldn't help but watch her breasts jiggling under her t-shirt. He was surprised at how low slung they were.

'They're really pissed, aren't they?' Matt heard Amina say. He was amazed how naive she was. 'I didn't behave like that, did I?'

'No, you didn't,' Ben smiled. 'But look, they're not just pissed, they're stoned. Look at their eyes.' Matt looked too. Ben was right Sam's eyes were jet black pools. 'Can you see how dilated their pupils are?'

'Yes, does that mean they've taken...' she lowered her voice, '...drugs?'

Matt wanted to giggle at Amina's shock.

'Yeah, probably Henry.' Ben was watching the scene carefully.

'Henry?' Matt knew that Amina had no idea what Ben was talking about and wasn't going to admit that he didn't either.

'I forget you are such an innocent. Cannabis, weed.' Ben hugged Amina.

'Oh right. Sorry.'

'I bet Matt didn't know either, did you?' Ben kicked Matt under the table.

'Might of,' Matt winked at Amina then looked back at the drunkards and Mr Cooke whose face was parchment white. His lips had almost disappeared, they were so thin. His hands clasped the back of one of the chairs. Matt could see his knuckles were white.

Brittany came up to Mr Cooke and draped her arms around his neck. Matt held his breath and he heard Amina gasp as they all watched open mouthed.

'Hey Mr Cookie Wookie, you look really cross, whatsmatter?' said Brittany.

Matt felt a strange fascination, watching someone else make a total twat of themselves in front of a teacher.

Mr Cooke peeled Brittany's arms away from around his neck. 'Brittany, I think you and the others better follow me. Ms Brodie, can you get everyone settled and then join me? We need to decide what to do with these...' he left the sentence hanging before continuing. 'I think some parents may be coming to get their children.'

Mr Cooke's words seemed to have the affect of a cold bucket of water being thrown over them. All three suddenly sobered up at the mention of parents. The girls started to cry.

'Follow me, you three,' said Mr Cooke leading them away.

When he drew level with Ben, Mr Cooke looked at him. 'Did you have anything to do with this?'

Ben stood up immediately running his hand over his shaven head. Matt had noticed he did that a lot when he was stressed, 'No, I didn't. You can't blame this one on me.'

Amina stood up too and looked straight at Mr Cooke, 'Sir, that's very unfair. You have no reason to question Ben like that. He's not the only one with a reputation on this trip. And for your information I was with him all afternoon. You know I don't take drugs.'

Mr Cooke looked between Ben and Amina and then walked off saying nothing, not even an apology. The three students followed behind with their heads low.

Ben and Amina sat down again.

‘Wow, who’s turning into a stroppy moo? Fancy the terrorist sticking up for the gansta!’ said Thea raising her eyebrows at Amina. ‘I was sure he was going to try and pin that on you, Ben.’

Ben nodded then looked across at Dave, ‘How come you weren’t with them?’

‘Went with Ms Brodie to the look at the castle,’ said Dave picking at the table cloth.

‘Bet you’re pleased you did that or it could’ve been you?’ said Ben putting his arm along the back of Amina’s chair.

‘See, sometimes it pays to be a geek,’ said Matt.

Dave nodded and Ben turned around and spoke to the rest of the table, ‘Well it seems it’s not me who’s going to be sent home. Bet Old Cookie isn’t too impressed by that. I’m almost the golden boy.’

Ms Brodie couldn’t help but laugh, ‘That’s very true, Ben. Come on everyone sit down and decide what you want to eat. We’ll order and then I’ll go and help Mr Cooke.’

Chapter 17

Thea

Once the meal was finished, the group of friends walked along towards the shops and the Spar where there was no traffic. Thea looked around she could see that there were posters on bollards advertising circuses and bands playing. Couples sat on benches holding hands. Others just strolled by, window shopping. Some teenagers came along on skateboards throwing a basketball around. Thea looked at them. They could have come from any city in Britain.

Amina came alongside Thea and put her arm through Thea's and pulled her back a bit from the boys.

'Why did you do that to Matt earlier?'

'Say what you mean, why don't you?' Thea grinned at Amina but wasn't sure if she was cross with her for asking the question. 'To be honest, Amina, I dunno. I don't know what's the matter with me.' She looked across at Matt, 'But look at him, he is nothing like me.'

'What's that got to do with it? Don't they say opposites attract?'

'I know, but it's complicated.' Thea knew she was fudging the question but she had no idea how to explain it.

'Ben was telling me about being in a gang. Are you in one too? Is that the complication?' A pigeon flew up in front of them, startling both girls.

'Fuck off you flying rat.' Thea flapped her free arm at it. 'Yeah I am,' she stopped and looked at Amina, 'or maybe I should say I was. I don't want to be any

more.’ Thea wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince more, ‘They’d probably kill me if I went out with Matt and they wouldn’t let me be friends with you.’

‘Seriously?’

Thea was surprised by what she’d just said, but realised she actually meant it. She didn’t want the gang crap any more.

‘Yeah seriously. It’s all getting a bit heavy. You know they are shoplifting and stuff, but now some of the girls are even carrying knives. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to end up in prison for stabbing someone, or get gang raped as some form of initiation. Who needs that?! Not me!’ With that Thea turned and hugged Amina.

‘What are you two doing?’ shouted Matt. He and Ben were a good way ahead of them. ‘Come on, catch up.’

Thea started to run pulling Amina along, ‘Come on, slow coach!’

But as she ran something caught the corner of her eye. She looked over to the shops on one side. There was an alley way between two clothes shop. She was impressed to see one was *H&M*. Home! But that wasn’t what her caught her eye. It was the man and girl standing in the alley way.

When she came alongside the boys she said, ‘Don’t look, but over there by *H&M* is the girl and that man!’

Despite what Thea said, all three of them looked over at the shop. The man was standing in the door wearing the same SS style leather coat. One hand was gripping the girl’s arm and the other held a mobile phone to his ear.

‘She’s changed. She had jeans on earlier,’ said Ben.

Thea looked at the girl who was wearing a very short skirt and a boob tube with no boobs in it. Her hair was scraped back into a pony tail and the bruise on her face seemed to be covered with makeup.

‘What do you think they are doing?’ said Matt.

Thea felt Ben put his arm round her and Matt,

‘Dunno but she’s got different clothes on. I bet he’s setting her up. Let’s follow them and see where he takes her!’

Matt shook Ben’s arm off his shoulder, ‘What do we want to do that for? It’s not like we can help her.’

‘And you said he’d got a knife, it could be dangerous,’ said Amina watching the man and the girl.

‘For fuck’s sake, I’ll do it on my own then. I thought you wanted to be bad Matt, taking risks is part of being bad.’ Ben put both his hands behind his head in exasperation.

‘I’m with you Ben,’ said Thea. That girl had really got to Ben and he was her mate. Mates stick together. ‘I think we’ve got to do something. And at least if we follow her, we can show the police where she is. Come on you two. You said you wanted an amazing trip? How often do you follow people at home?’

Matt and Amina looked at each other. Matt shrugged his shoulders and Amina said, ‘Suppose you’re right. Let’s go for it but we’ll need to keep our distance so he doesn’t spot us.’

‘Well, yeah, duh!’

They watched for a few moments then Ben said, ‘Look he’s moving. Let’s follow and try not to make too much noise.’

Thea grabbed Ben. ‘Hang on, not so fast. He’s seen you hasn’t he? Matt and I should go first and you and Amina follow at a bit of a distance. Good idea?’

‘Yeah, ok. But can we stop wasting time, or we will lose her.’

Thea grabbed Matt’s arm. ‘Come on, let’s go.’ Matt looked at Thea and grinned. ‘Oh, stop dribbling, will you?!’ said Thea, winking at him.

They walked along in their pairs slowly, keeping a safe distance between them and the man with the girl. He still had a tight grip on her arm. A lot of the time, she had to walk on tip-toes because he was so much taller than her.

The man and the girl turned down a side street, Matt and Thea followed, stopping to look in a bakery window when the man looked behind him.

‘Did he spot us?’ asked Thea

‘No, I don’t think so, let’s keep back a bit more,’ said Matt looking over Thea’s shoulder at the couple disappearing into the distance. Ben and Amina caught up.

‘We can’t lose them.’ Ben appeared very agitated. Thea wondered if he wished his crew were with him.

‘Shit he’s looking right at us. Hide!’ said Thea.

‘Fuck!’ said Ben as he and Amina jumped into a doorway and crouched down. There was no room for Thea and Matt so before she could think about it too much she grabbed Matt and started to snog him. He didn’t respond initially but it didn’t take him long to relax into the kiss. Thea was enjoying it again. He really knew how to kiss and she didn’t want to stop.

‘Great decoy! But come on he’s moved on again and turned into that car park. We need to catch up,’ said Ben as dragged Thea off Matt. Ben started to run trying to keep sight of the pair before they disappeared from view.

‘What the...’ Thea blanked for a moment then remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

Matt who looked positively shell shocked and smiled, ‘Come on, let’s rescue a girl.’

Chapter 18

Ben

Ben peered round the corner of the building, holding the others back with his arm. He could see the girl standing with the man in the SS Coat. He was holding her in front of him and was facing a man dressed more smartly. He had a suit on and was wearing a tie. Ben was sure they were negotiating a price for her. They were both talking fast. Ben turned to the others.

‘I don’t think we’ve a choice any more. We’ve got to rescue her. I think he’s about to sell her.’

The others looked slightly more cautious, but Matt spoke up

‘Ok, what do you want us to do?’

‘Matt, go around the edge. I need you to create a diversion so that I can grab the girl.’ He looked at Amina and Thea, ‘When I get her, take her and run. Don’t wait to see what happens to me. Just go. Don’t go through reception. You don’t want to risk being seen by anyone else. I’ll meet you back at your room and then we can decide who we are going to tell and what we are going to do.’ Ben ran his hands across his head, ‘If I am not back in an hour, tell Cookie what happened. Matt, go with them after you’ve created the distraction and make sure they are safe.’

Ben looked back at the girl. An agreement had obviously been reached because the men shook hands. The man in the suit looked down at the girl. Ben saw him lick his lips, which turned his stomach.

‘Right, Matt go round the edge now and be ready.’

‘How will I know what to do?’ Ben looked at him and realised he was worried.

‘It’s ok mate, you’ll know. I trust you. Girls ready?’

‘Yup,’ the girls replied in unison, and stood either side of Ben.

He could see Matt as he sneaked behind some bins that lead to the other side of the car park.

‘Ok, just do what I say. And I mean it, when you have her, you must run and don’t look back.’

Ben could feel the sweat trickling down his back. He was nervous what if she got hurt. No time to think like that. Get on with it. Matt was in place.

‘Here we go. Follow me!’ Ben strode out into the car park, the girls kept just one pace behind him. The two men stopped talking and looked at Ben. They hadn’t seen Matt. Stay calm, keep breathing, Ben said to himself. You can do this. He saw a flicker of recognition on the girl’s face. He nodded his head slightly then looked at the two men in the face.

‘Qu’est-ce que tu fais?’² said Ben

The men look startled but didn’t answer. Ben kept walking towards them. He could see Matt to one side, hiding but watching everything. Was he mad to rely on a geek, a bimbo and a terrorist to help him save this girl?

‘Que la jeune fille vont.’³

The man in the suit panicked, ‘Vous m’avez mis en place!’⁴ He jumped into his car screeching his wheels as he sped off, just missing Matt’s hiding place.

² Translation, ‘What are you doing?’

³ Translation, ‘Let the girl go!’

⁴ Translation, ‘You’ve set me up!’

Ben didn't watch him go. He kept his eyes on the other man. His scar was even redder than usual and there was a trickle of sweat running down the other side of his face.

'Fuck off! Ou je vais la tuer,'⁵ he grabbed the girl and whipped his knife out, holding it against her neck. The girl screamed, so did Thea and Amina. Ben stopped walking and looked at him. He raised his hands in front of him. At which point Matt came racing out knocking the bins over. The man was taken by surprise and let go of the girl.

Ben shot forward and grabbed her. She was screaming. He shoved her at Thea and Amina. 'Run! Don't look back and don't stop till you get to the hotel. GO!'

Thea took the girl's hand and said, 'Come on, run!' The girl looked at Ben, he nodded at her, 'Go with them!'

He couldn't watch them go. He had to trust the girls and Matt to get her to the hotel safely. Ben ran at the man trying to stop him from going after the girl, he had to make sure she stayed safe. The man tried to run by but Ben ran at him pushing the man hard but even so the man managed to stay on his feet. He was tough, his eyes were black with anger now.

'Vous allez payer.'⁶

The sun was glinting off the knife. Ben could see the blade was about 7 inches long with a sawback. He knew it could do damage.

The man lunged forward, Ben darted to one side just missing the blade. He managed to grab the man's wrists. They danced a tortuous tribal dance as he tried

⁵ Translation, 'Or I will kill her.'

⁶ Translation: 'You are going to pay'

to break free of Ben's grip. He stuck his leg out trying to trip Ben up but Ben was too quick. He'd seen this all before. He needed to get the knife out of his hand.

He twisted again but his hands were sweating and he lost his grip. Everything seemed to slow down. He could hear the rumble of the traffic in the distance. The man drew his arm with the knife back, preparing to stab Ben. He knew he'd got Ben on the back foot. Then from nowhere the world seemed to speed up as Matt appeared with a dustbin over his head and hurled it at the knife-wielding man. The full force of the bin knocked him off his feet and he dropped the knife. He lay on the floor winded.

Ben had no idea where Matt had come from or how strong he was, but he didn't care. Matt'd just saved his life.

'Come on. Run!' shouted Matt. Ben scooped the knife off the ground and legged it with Matt. Neither looked back, nor stopped until they were near the hotel. Ben couldn't hear any footsteps trying to follow them.

When they finally stopped they bent over, putting their hands on their knees and tried to catch their breath.

'Where did you come from?' asked Ben. 'I thought you were with the girls!'

Matt couldn't speak for a moment. When he finally managed to suck in enough air to speak he said, 'Did you really think I was going to let you deal with that on your own? I'd no idea what I was going to do; I just followed my gut instinct.'

Ben turned the knife over in his hand, 'Well, I think you may just have saved my life.' Ben smiled at him. 'Not bad for a geek!'

Matt grinned at him, 'What are we going to do with that?' He pointed at the knife.

‘Dunno, maybe we could bury it in the kitchen bins at the back. He wouldn’t think to look there, would he?’

‘You better clean your prints off it though. Just in case.’ Matt handed Ben a hanky.

‘I’d no idea a handkerchief could be so useful,’ said Ben as he used it to wipe the blade and handle down. He wrapped the knife in the hankie until they got to the bins. Matt opened them up, the stench was unbelievable. They both retched.

‘That is gross, quick stick it in.’ Ben did what Matt said. He pushed it down as far as he could amongst the rotting detritus. Matt let the bin lid drop.

‘Let’s go and find the girls. Do you think they got back ok?’

‘Christ, I hope so,’ said Ben. ‘I don’t want to have nearly died for nothing!’ He laughed, but there was an edge of nervousness to it. What if the girls hadn’t managed to get her back? Or if she had refused to go with them? The sun was beginning to set now and Ben hoped the girls were safe inside their room. He didn’t fancy searching Caen in the dark for them.

They clambered up the fire escape.

‘Is this their room?’ said Matt. Both were feeling disorientated. They’d only got into their room via the fire escape once, on that first night.

‘Shit, I don’t know. We can’t knock in case it isn’t.’

Their whispering voices disturbed the residents of the room anyway, and the window opened. Ben and Matt held their breath until Thea stuck her head out.

‘Oh thank God you’re safe. Quick, come in.’ She pulled the net curtain back to let them in. Ben clambered through and stood for a moment trying to see better in the darkness of the room. Then he saw her. She was cowered in the corner but

she was there and therefore safe. He sat on the bed with a thump. The events of the last hour overwhelmed him. Matt sat next to him, still breathing heavily.

‘We did it,’ he said.

Chapter 19

Thea

‘Yeah, but now what are we going to do?’ said Matt.

Thea wanted to feel elated. Instead she felt like all the wind had been taken out of her as the enormity of the task ahead hit her. They hadn’t stopped running from the moment they left Ben and Matt. They didn’t give the girl a chance to do anything but follow them.

‘I know we should hand her over to the authorities but...what if they just send her back,’ said Matt.

Ben looked across at Saba, ‘No we can’t do that.’

‘What about telling Cookie?’ asked Amina. Thea and Ben looked at each other, Thea she was sure she knew what Ben was thinking so spoke out,

‘No if we do that for one thing Cookie will hand her straight over but also he would find a way to use it against Ben and send him home. We can’t let that happen to either of them.’

Ben nodded at her as the others agreed. She continued, ‘And anyway my Mum’s a social worker maybe she can help if we get her back home.’

Thea sounded more convinced than she felt, her Mum would go ballistic but she couldn’t let the girl down. So for now she had to think how, precisely, were four students on a school trip going to smuggle a girl back into the UK?

The girl was still cowering in the corner. She was so afraid. Her eyes were wide open as she curled herself up into the smallest ball possible. If the wall could have eaten her up, she would have let it.

‘Have you found out anything about her?’ asked Ben.

Thea said, 'Not much. Her name is Saba and she is eleven. Amina was right, she comes from Afghanistan. And we think that man *was* selling her for sex. Talking of which, you kept it very quiet that you could fucking speak French, didn't you?!

Before Ben could reply there came a loud banging on the door. All four jumped and Saba began to whimper in the corner. Thea saw the look of terror in her eyes it was gut wrenching.

'It's ok, Saba, we'll keep you safe.' Amina tried to put her arms round the girl but she shied away, trying to meld in with the wall even more.

The knocking came again. It was more insistent this time and they heard Cookie shouting.

'Williamson are you in there? I want you out here. Now!'

'Oh, what now?' Ben looked exhausted and still hadn't told them what'd happened back in the car park.

Thea, Matt and Amina all looked at him. 'What can he want with you?' said Matt.

'I don't know, but we need to make sure he doesn't see her. I'll go to the door.'

'I'll stand here so he can't see the bed,' said Thea. 'And Matt, if you stand with me and we can pretend we are looking at the work. Ok Ben, answer it.'

Ben opened the door. Mr Cooke was about to knock again.

'About bloody time too. Knew you'd be in the girl's room. What took you so long?' He looked beyond Ben.

'Sorry, we were arguing about who should answer,' Thea smiled at him. She hoped this would be enough though she knew it was a pathetic excuse.

‘Ok,’ said Mr Cooke. He looked at Thea for just a moment too long. She wasn’t sure he believed her. Her hands were behind her back where she kept her fingers crossed. She felt her stomach crunch in fear. She was convinced he was about to walk in the room and find Saba. But Mr Cooke turned back to Ben as if he’d just remembered why Ben was there. He smirked,

‘There have been allegations. I need you to come with me.’

Ben looked at the others and shrugged his shoulders. Thea tried to think what allegations they could be. Ben hadn’t done anything and hadn’t been alone at all so how could he be accused of anything.

Matt spoke up, ‘Allegations sir? What sort of allegations? Ben hasn’t been apart from me or any of us at all. If he’d done something we’d know about it and we know he hasn’t.’

‘Very commendable, Matt, but I fear your loyalties are misplaced.’

Thea couldn’t believe Cookie had just said that.

‘You’re so wrong, Mr Cooke,’ said Thea

‘Coming from you, Thea, that’s almost funny. I think I’ll be the one laughing when I’m proved right and I can send him home. Come on you.’ He grabbed Ben’s arm and pulled him out of the door.

Thea and Matt watched the door shut behind Mr Cooke and Ben. They just stood for a moment then Matt spoke almost to no one, ‘He’s going to frame him. He is so determined to get him, he’ll do anything.’

‘He’s had it in for Ben ever since his precious car was keyed. That’s why he didn’t want him on the trip. He is convinced it was Ben that did it but I know it wasn’t him.’ Thea turned and looked at Amina.

During the shouting Saba had edged towards Amina. She was now cuddling Saba, whose tear-stained face was staring at Thea.

‘Is it my fault,’ asked Saba in barely a whisper. ‘Have they found out about me and that’s why they’ve taken that boy?’

Thea smiled at Saba and Amina, ‘The boy’s called Ben and no, it isn’t your fault. It’ll be alright. Ben’ll make sure of that.’

Amina looked up at Thea. She knew Amina didn’t really believe what she was saying.

Chapter 20

Ben

Ben walked behind Mr Cooke. He could feel the blood coursing through his veins. It was ice cold. It needed to be. He wanted to numb all his emotion. He must not feel. He must stay in control even though he was exhausted.

But allegations. What allegations?

He'd tried so hard and yet Cookie had still found something. The Monet pictures merged into one as they walked along the corridor. A one way trip back home maybe. The smell from the restaurant seemed rancid now rather than delicious. His trip was falling to pieces in front of his eyes. And then there was Saba, how was he going to be able to help her if he was sent home?

'In here.' Mr Cooke opened a door to another bedroom. Ben noticed that Mr Cooke was obviously in the green room as opposed to his and Matt's blue room and the girl's yellow room. Ms Brodie was sitting in a chair near the TV sipping a cup of tea. Sam Jones and the girls were standing beside her. Sam was slumped like a pile of dough. All white and pathetic, he just stood there. His eyes rimmed in red. Been crying then, thought Ben, and decided to cover your back by dumping on me. The others wouldn't look at Ben. They seemed embarrassed.

'Hello, Ben,' said Ms Brodie. She didn't seem angry with him, but her eyes were sad. They said it all. He realised that she was disappointed.

Mr Cooke turned and looked at him, 'I said all along you shouldn't be allowed on this trip. And I was right wasn't I? Fancy being stupid enough to supply alcohol to the others!'

Ben looked at Sam. 'I didn't get any alcohol for them. Why would I?' He tried not to think about the wine and vodka he'd got Thea, Matt and Amina.

'According to Sam you got the alcohol so you could 'get off' with Brittany.'

Ben shot a look at Sam, 'What?! You're joking, aren't you? Brittany is more plastic than a Barbie doll. Not my thing.' Brittany looked up and started to cry. 'Sorry, Brittany, but I don't need to get girls alcohol to get off with them... but Sam on the other hand...'

Sam lunged at him, 'Shut the fuck up.'

Mr Cooke grabbed him and pulled him away from Ben. 'Stand there and don't move.'

He looked back at Ben. For a moment Ben saw a flicker of doubt in Cookie's eyes before the hardness returned.

'Who shall I ring first Ben, your mum, so she knows what a loser you are or the Head so I can tell him I was right all along?'

Ben could see beads of sweat had settled on Mr Cooke's top lip. He focussed on those rather than thinking about what his Mum would say if Mr Cooke sent him home. He tried to tell Mr Cooke what really happened.

'Look, ask Thea or Matt or Amina, I've done nothing and I've been with them all day. I didn't give Sam alcohol. I did see him and the girls hanging round with a load of French students.' Ben ran his hand across his head as he shook it. 'I didn't do it.'

He took a deep breath. Don't lose it. Don't let Cookie win. And most important, don't let him see you're worried. You didn't do this. Don't get sent home for something you didn't do. Mum doesn't need it.

Ms Brodie stood up and walked between the two boys. 'So Sam, you say that Ben got you some vodka from the Spar. Is that right?'

‘Yes, that’s it. That’s what he did. He got us some vodka to get us drunk and into trouble.’ Sam smirked at Ben.

Shit, if they ask at the Spar, I’m done for. That woman is sure to recognise me after I ran off without my change. He looked down. It was only a matter of time now before Cooke was proved right.

‘That’s easy then, Mr Cooke,’ said Ms Brodie. ‘I’ll take Ben to Spar and see if the cashier recognises him and remembers what he bought.’

‘Now that’s a good idea, Ms Brodie. Why don’t you do that?’

Ben looked up at the ceiling. That’s it, all over. Ben’s despondence was interrupted by a crying Sam.

‘No, you can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’ asked Ms Brodie. Ben knew that her sickly sweet voice hid an iron will. She turned and looked at Sam who was blubbering.

‘Coz I lied. The lady in the Spar won’t recognise him. It was me. I got the vodka from there. Some French students asked me to and we shared it so they would give us some weed too. We just wanted to try it.’

Ben couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Sam was too thick to realise that there was a good chance that Ben had been in the Spar too. And then to announce he’d smoked Henry too! How stupid could Sam be? Ben laughed on the inside.

At least it wouldn’t be *his* Mum that Cookie would be ringing. He let out a great lungful of air in relief. But he said nothing. He knew better than to let Cookie know he was relieved or happy. He didn’t want Cookie to look at him.

It was Ms Brodie who spoke next, ‘So you’re telling me that not only did you and your accomplices get drunk and stoned but you lied and tried to frame someone else? I don’t know about you Mr Cooke but I find that unforgivable.’

Ms Brodie was full of venom. Ben was impressed as she continued, 'Sam is going to apologise to you and then you can go back to your room while we decide what to do with him and his friends. When they've sobered up that is.' She looked at Sam, 'Come on Sam, I think you've something to say to Ben!'

'Sorry, Ben,' Sam just about mumbled.

Ben looked across at Mr Cooke who was tapping a pencil rapidly on the chest of drawers. It was the only indication that he was irritated. He looked across at Ben, 'Yes, yes, get out, Ben.'

Ben raised his eyebrows.

'I said, get out!' screamed Mr Cooke.

Ben didn't wait any longer. He nodded at Ms Brodie and left the room. He felt quite lightheaded as he walked along. He'd been convinced he was on his way home and now it was all ok again. Well, apart from Saba. They were going to need to sort out how to help her. Poor kid.

The smell from the restaurant smelt delicious again and the Monet's were no longer merging. Ben walked along with a definite spring in his step. He knew how lucky he'd been.

He knocked on the girls' door. He heard a lot of shuffling around and then Thea asked, 'Who is it?'

'It's me. Let me in.'

Thea flung the door open and pulled him in. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

Matt cleared his throat and asked, 'What happened?'

Ben explained it all and how lucky he'd been.

'You were so close to being sent home, and it wasn't your fault,' said Amina.

‘I know. Cookie is going to watch me like a hawk. He’s been thwarted and he’ll want to get his own back if he can, so we are going to have to think carefully how we are going to help Saba.’

Amina uncurled from where she’d been on the bed and stretched. She looked like a cat stretching.

‘Yes, Ben’s right. We’re going to have to be very careful.’

A sense of exhaustion overwhelmed Ben. Everything about him sagged.

‘I need to go to bed. It’s been a very long, very strange day. Are you coming Matt?’

‘What about...?’ said Thea. Ben looked across at the girl who looked as exhausted as he felt. Ben smiled at her,

‘I think she needs to rest to. Tomorrow we can talk to her and decide what we are going to do. Are you ok with her being in here?’

‘Of course, and anyway, I don’t think she would go with you. She seems to be absolutely terrified of men,’ said Amina.

‘Too right, I wouldn’t trust another man after her what she’s been through. Come on Matt, let’s go. See you in the morning.’

Ben dragged Matt out and off to their room. He was still reeling from the incident with Mr Cooke. It could quite easily have been a different outcome if Sam hadn’t been so stupid. What a day!

Chapter 21

Amina and Saba's story

Amina woke to Saba's screams, 'Maadar, Maadar!'

She was shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes still closed. She was having a nightmare. Amina cradled the girl in her arms. She soothed her by stroking her hair whilst she sang a lullaby her Mum used to sing to her:

*In your name, Oh Lord, I lay to sleep
To rise in the morning by your leave.
If you take my soul from me as I wake, please forgive me.
And if I wake in the morning again
to a new and bright day,
then I pray you will always guide me
upon the straight way.*

*La ilaha il Allah, La illaha il Allah.
Subhanallah a-Alhamdulillah
Allahu Akbar.
La ilaha il Allah, La illaha il Allah.
Subhanallah a-Alhamdulillah
Allahu Akbar.⁷*

Saba's eyes slowly opened.

'You're Muslim?' Saba touched Amina's hair, 'No hijab?'

Amina looked down at her and smiled, 'No, no hijab, but yes, I'm a Muslim, now go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning.'

She pulled the duvet back round the two of them and holding Saba close to her. They soon fell back to sleep.

When they woke again the sun was pouring through the yellow curtains and Thea was up making some tea.

⁷ The words for *Lullaby* (Du'a before Sleep) were taken from the CD *Road to Madinah* (1998) by Dawud Wharnsby.

‘Do you two want some? We have plenty of rolls left from yesterday if Saba wants one. They are just cheese.’ She threw the bag of rolls onto the bed. Amina reached down and handed one to Saba.

‘Is it very early, or is it just me?’ asked Amina as she yawned and stretched.

‘Yes, it is early. It’s about six, but we have things we need to do.’ She nodded at Saba, who was feasting on the roll.

‘You know you said yesterday that your Mum was a social worker,’ said Amina, ‘Well, I was thinking over night, my Mum and Dad might consider fostering her. I know it was something they were thinking about. But maybe that’s just too easy?’

‘It does sounds perfect but am not sure how it really works, I am going to ring my Mum when we are in the UK and ask, I think. We should tell the boys our idea, maybe on the coach.’ said Thea as she brought across three cups of tea and put them on the table between the beds. Saba looked up and said,

‘Thank you.’

Amina took this as a cue, ‘Saba, your English is quite good, how come?’

‘Maadar and Baba said it was important to speak English. They taught me. Baba was a teacher.’ She took a sip of the tea. ‘Euurgh, not sweet.’

Thea took the mug back, ‘I’ll put some sugar in it. Where are Maadar and Baba now? Are they your Mum and Dad?’ She handed the mug back to Saba.

‘Yes, Maadar is Mother and Baba is Father. They are both dead. My aunts and uncles too, all shot by the Taliban. They didn’t like us. Only me left.’

Amina wondered if they should push her any further. She seemed very matter of fact about everything but before she could voice her concern to Thea, Thea asked another question and one that Amina hadn’t wanted to ask yet.

‘How did your Mum and Dad die?’

She held her breath waiting for Saba to respond to Thea.

Saba looked up at them, both her eyes were wide open and full of sadness.

‘The Taliban shot Baba because he was teaching girls in secret at night. He taught at the school during the day. We had to run away because they came to get Maadar too. They wanted her dead because she was a doctor and in secret she treated women who were ill. That was forbidden.’ Saba stopped to take another sip of tea. She smiled at Thea. ‘Sweet!’ Then carried on with her story, ‘Luckily when they came, Maadar was out. She was sorting out our escape and I was hiding at the back of a cupboard. But I could hear them.’

‘That must have been very scary,’ said Amina. Saba shrugged her shoulders.

‘But what about your Mum?’ asked Thea.

‘She died on the way here. In the back of the lorry. There were lots of us all trying to escape the Taliban. We were all crammed in and there was little water. She got ill and they wouldn’t let me help her. She knew what was happening because she kept telling me. She was having a miscarriage, then she got an infection. They wouldn’t get medicine for her.’

Saba stopped and wiped her hand across her snotty nose and a huge tear trickled down her cheek.

‘I kept shouting for help but they kept hitting me when I did. I couldn’t stop her dying. I tried so hard.’

Huge great wracking sobs shook the tiny body now. Both Thea and Amina cuddled the girl.

‘Your Maadar knows how much you tried. She would be proud of you.’ Both teenagers were crying.

‘That’s when he took me,’ Saba continued. It was like she needed to tell the rest of the story. She hiccupped the words out, ‘He said we owed him money, but

we didn't. He took Maadar's bag, which had all our money in. I told him he was a liar. He just hit me.'

Saba took the tissue that Amina offered her, 'He told me I had to pay back the debt by doing stuff.'

'What stuff?' asked Amina as she stroked her head.

'He wanted me to do.... stuff.' She clung on to the girls.

'Saba, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to but did that man make you do anything you didn't want to?' asked Thea. Amina wasn't sure Thea should be pushing Saba but how else would they find out what had happened.

'He was going to make me kiss that other man when you took me. He said he would think I was a good girl if I did that properly and would let me have something to eat, maybe even some chocolate.

'Well, I think we could get you some chocolate and you don't have to kiss anyone for it,' said Amina as Thea's phone rang. She recognised the name that came up.

'Hello Ben, you're up early. Yeah, everything fine here. I thought your phone was switched off?' She smiled at Saba. 'Ok, so see you in a bit.' She switched the phone off, 'Well Ben and Matt have been shopping and are coming up with stuff for you.'

Saba scrambled back against the wall again. 'Do I have to kiss them?' A look of total panic tore at Amina's soul. She could see why this girl had had such an impact on Ben when he saw her that first day. She wore her heart on her sleeve and in her eyes.

Amina reached forward and held Saba's hand. 'You don't have to kiss anyone you don't want to ever again. I promise.'

Chapter 22

Amina

‘We better get you dressed,’ said Thea. ‘You don’t want to wear what you had on yesterday. Have you got anything that might do Amina, my stuff is a bit too...?’

‘Grown up?’ said Amina as she flipped open her suitcase.

‘Is that a hijab?’ asked Saba pointing to the piece of cloth on top.

‘Yes it is, do you want to wear it?’ Amina picked it up.

‘Please!’ Saba took the hijab and put it on then She picked up the other hijab and handed it to Amina. Amina looked at Thea but she just shrugged her shoulders. No help at all.

‘Saba, I’m not wearing mine at the moment. I want to see what it like to be like the western girls. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.’

Saba looked amazed at Amina, ‘Don’t you want to be a Muslim?’

It was Amina’s turn to look amazed, she’d never thought of herself as not wanting to be Muslim. That seemed wrong. It wasn’t her religion that she was fighting, maybe it was her parents. She felt very confused as she watched Saba pull on her hijab. It made her want to put hers back on. How could a child make her feel so guilty for wanting to fit in she thought as she pulled the hijab back on? Thea was busying herself washing up the mugs from their tea and getting dressed. She was unusually quiet.

‘Will you say some prayers with me?’ asked Saba. Amina didn’t know what to say. She was taken aback. Since being in Normandy, she hadn’t said her prayers once.

She helped Saba adjust the hijab until it sat properly.

‘We’ve missed Fajr but we could pray at Dhuhr if we are back?’

Saba looked tearful, ‘Can’t we just pray anyway? I haven’t been able to pray for weeks and I want to pray for my parents and to say thank you to Allah for you finding me.’

‘Ok, well lets go and wash first and then I’ll do it with you.’ She took Saba into the bathroom where they both washed themselves until they were ready. Back in the bedroom, Amina worked out which way Mecca was and they both faced the wall. She always liked the idea of standing with the world behind her, though she felt very strange doing this with Thea still in the room.

Thea seemed to read her mind, ‘Don’t mind me, do what you want.’

They both watched Saba who was taking it all very seriously as she stood with her head dropped. Amina also dropped her head. In silence and lost in their own thoughts Saba and Amina performed their prayers. Amina ended with a private prayer asking for help to keep Saba safe before she took her hijab off again.

There was a knock at the door. ‘That’ll be the boys,’ said Amina. They were standing there with two huge carrier bags of stuff.

‘How much do you think Saba is going to eat?’

‘It is not all food. We have bought comics and colouring books and things for her,’ said Matt. ‘Ben and I have been talking about what we need to do with her today.’

The boys dumped the bags on the bed and all sorts of things spilled out. There were more rolls, drinks, chocolate, coloured pens and all sorts of things that would keep anyone quiet for days on end. Let alone one day. Saba looked amazed as she stared at it all.

‘Is that for me?’ She looked frightened and said to Amina, ‘Are you sure I don’t have to do anything?’

Ben and Matt looked confused.

‘We’ll explain later, Thea said, ‘but no, Saba, you don’t have to do anything.’ Thea and Amina sat down next to Saba,

‘Look, Saba,’ said Thea. ‘We are going to have to leave you here on your own this morning. We can’t risk taking you.’

Saba was watching Amina closely as she took in what was said to her. ‘Ok, I understand, I think.’ A moment of fear flickered through her eyes, ‘Will you come back? Will he be able to find me?’

‘Of course we will come back and I’m sorry that we’re having to leave. Matt and I’ve been trying to work out a way to take you with us but we just can’t do it, not without the risk of you being found. We will make sure that he never finds you again. We’re going to keep you safe,’ said Ben.

Saba picked up the coloured pens. ‘Promise?.’

Amina hugged her, ‘Of course we promise. Make sure you don’t answer the door at all.’

‘Saba, when the cleaners come in to do the room you will have to hide either in the cupboard or under the bed. They always knock before they come in. You need to make sure there isn’t too much of a mess so they won’t think someone is in here. Is that ok?’ said Thea. ‘Oh, we could put the Do Not Disturb sign out! It might put them off.’ She picked it up and swung it round her finger.

Ben took it off her, ‘That’s a really good idea.’ He opened the door and hung it on the handle. ‘We need to go down to breakfast or Cookie will come looking for us. Saba, will you be all right?’

Saba stopped colouring and looked up and said, ‘Yes.’

They walked out of the door and Thea said, ‘She’ll be ok, won’t she? We can’t let her down.’

The hard bitch definitely seemed to have softened in the Normandy air.

The foursome left Saba alone in the room and headed down to breakfast.

When they got there they noticed there was no sign of Sam or the girls.

Matt whispered, 'He really did it. Cooke must have sent them home. I didn't think he would.'

Matt couldn't continue because Mr Cooke walked out of the restaurant, 'You lot have cut it fine. We go in twenty minutes, make sure you're ready. Remember it's the Museum of Peace first.'

Breakfast was a meal that matched its name. It was fast. All four were very keen not to attract attention of any sort. Good or bad.

'I'll meet you on the coach,' said Amina. 'I just want to go up to the room and check.'

'Me too!' said Thea.

The boys looked at them both, 'Why?' said Ben. 'Is this like girls having to go to the loo in pairs wherever they go?' Ben was picking at the crumbs on his plate.

Thea ignored his comment and looked at Amina, 'We want to check everything is ok, don't we?'

'Yes. It is going to be a long time for her.'

'See you on the coach then,' said Matt and Ben in unison.

Thea and Amina ran up stairs. Amina wondered how Thea was going to react when she found out the real reason she wanted to go to the room.

Thea used the key card to get in but it still made Saba scream. She tried to make herself as small as possible against the wall and in the corner of the bed.

'It's ok Saba it's only us. Don't be frightened.' There were tears streaming down Saba's face. The two girls had really terrified her. Amina ran and took Saba

in her arms hugging her tight. 'Don't worry Saba, we won't let that happen again. We'll have a secret knock, won't we, Thea?'

'Yes Babes, listen this is what we'll do before we come in so you know it's us.' She drummed a rhythm on the chest of drawers.

Saba smiled a very watery smile. 'Ok, I sorry.'

'Don't be sorry we should have thought about it, shouldn't we, Amina?'

Thea sat with a thump on the bed. 'We better go, will you be alright?'

'Can you hang on a mo? I'm not quite ready.' Amina moved across to her suitcase and took out the spare hijab again. She looked in the mirror whilst she put it on. Thea's face was reflected too. Amina waited for the rude comments but there was nothing until she'd finished and turned round, then Thea spoke, 'You ready then?'

'Yup, we won't be long Saba and remember the code,' said Amina as they headed towards the door again.

Walking down to the coach Thea said, 'You look very pretty with your hijab on. You have such lovely eyes.'

'Excuse me! Is this really Thea Jenkins that I'm talking too?'

Thea thumped her arm, 'Cheeky cow!'

They ran onto the coach where everyone was waiting. Mr Cooke looked at Amina, 'Are you ok? I see you've put your hijab back on. That's a good thing. You need to remember who you are.'

Amina wanted to snap at him. How dare he say something like that? But she knew they weren't supposed to be attracting attention.

'Where's Ms Brodie?' asked Thea looking round as she walked down the aisle.

‘She’s had to take Sam and the girls to meet their parents. She’ll be back by lunchtime. So it is just me looking after you this morning. Make sure you behave.’

‘What’s it worth?’ asked Matt.

‘A chance not to be sent home too,’ Mr Cooke scanned the coach doing a silent head count. ‘Now today we are going to the Museum of Peace. When we first get there, you’ll see it’s like a large slab of marble. It appears to have a crack down the centre, which is where the entrance is. This is meant to reflect the fracturing of peace.’

A voice from the back piped up, ‘Sir, we could do that at school, instead of fracturing of peace we could have the fracturing of education.’

‘David, just because your compatriot has been sent home, doesn’t mean you have to fill his shoes with stupid comments.’

Everyone laughed but Dave turned puce and slid further down his seat so he couldn’t be seen.

It was a very short coach trip to the museum but it was long enough for the girls to explain to the boys what their plan was and how they were going to ring Thea’s Mum. Luckily the boys agreed.

At the museum Mr Cooke reminded everyone they had to work in their groups. Ben, Matt, Thea and Amina headed towards the first part. It was a long dark spiral. Along the walls were photographs depicting the degeneration of peace into war again between 1918 and 1939.

‘This is so clever,’ said Matt. ‘The way it draws you in.’

Ben was looking around, ‘Yeah, I know what you mean, but there are too many words. I want more pictures or movies. I don’t want to have to read everything. It takes too long.’

They looked at the photos of the young people, not much older than them, being hung. Further along there was a small child's shoe that had been found at Auschwitz. Amina looked at the shoe for a very long time. She kept thinking about Saba and what she'd been through and what the child whose shoe it was must have gone through. Such horrible things and done to children. Amina's head was hurting. She found the museum really upsetting. It was like no one was ever capable of living in peace.

'This place is so depressing. Just look what we keep doing to each other,' Thea stood staring around her.

'I know,' said Amina. 'Can we get out of here please?'

'Just got a film to see,' said Matt, 'then we can go, are you ok?'

Amina didn't answer him.

The film showed all the conflicts that there had been since the end of the Second World War. Korea. Vietnam. Falkland Islands. Rwanda. Bosnia. Iraq. Afghanistan were just a few. Not one of them spoke during the film. They were taking it all in. At the end they walked out of the Museum to sit near a gun with its barrel tied in a knot.

'We're not very good at doing peace are we?' said Ben.

No one replied. They were all lost in their thoughts. Thinking about what they'd seen, and a small girl who was sitting in a French hotel room all alone without any parents. A child who'd seen far too much and had lived some of the things they'd just seen in the Museum.

Mr Cooke gathered his brood and got them back onto the coach.

'Come on you lot, hurry up, let's get back to the hotel and have some lunch.'

The normal hubbub of the coach had been silenced by the museum.

Amina's head was beginning to hurt so much and she felt sick.

‘Thea, have you got any water?’

‘Yeah, are you feeling alright? You look really white, sorry pale!’ She handed Amina the bottle of water. Amina smiled at Thea’s attempts to be politically correct. It was even funnier bearing in mind Thea’s skin was far more caramel than Amina’s. The water had never tasted so good as Amina gulped it down.

It only took ten minutes to get back to the hotel. They all spilled out on to the pavement. The need for food reinstating the conversation when they got into the open air. Amina walked down the steps of the coach out into the heat. The sun was so bright it hurt her eyes. She was conscious of her hijab making her head sweat, emphasising the throbbing in her temples. It hadn’t taken long to get used to not wearing it.

Amina felt a hand grip her arm, vice like, and start to drag her away. She stumbled and grazed her legs as she tried to turn around to see who was pulling her. Was it Ben having a sick joke?

‘Ben! This is hurting.’

But the joke was on her when she could see who it was. It was the man that had had Saba. She heard Ben shout.

‘No! Gerroff her.’

Thea and Matt added to the shouting. ‘Amina!’ They both screamed.

Someone grabbed her other arm. Amina hoped it was Ben. It was in fact Mr Cooke and he wasn’t going to let go. She was being pulled in half like a Christmas cracker. Some of the girls were screaming now. She heard Mr Cooke’s booming voice. The one he used when he was really angry.

‘Let go of the girl immediately or I will call the police. Do you hear that? Let go of her. Now!’

The man whipped out his knife, throwing Amina to the floor. He started to move towards Mr Cooke.

‘Now don’t be stupid, you don’t want to do that,’ said Mr Cooke but the man kept moving towards Mr Cooke.

‘Vous protéger les musulmans!’⁸ he said, then he spat.

Amina watched terrified. The man looked so angry. He made a lunge at Mr Cooke, everyone screamed.

In the next moment Ben appeared grabbing the man’s wrist. He twisted it hard, the man let go of the knife and it flew in the air clattering a few metres from them. Ben hadn’t finished, it felt like déjà vu as he tried to kick the man’s legs out from under him but somehow he managed to stay on his feet. He snatched his wrist out of Ben’s grip and ran off shouting, ‘Fucking putain.’⁹

Ben tried to run after him.

‘Ben leave him. I need you to stay all together. Everyone inside. Quick.’

Amina was too shaken to cry. Mr Cooke swept her up in his arms and carried her in.

‘Are you ok, Amina?’ he asked.

‘I think so. Just everything hurts, I already had a headache before.’ Mr Cooke lowered her on to one of the settees in the reception area.

He turned on Ben, ‘What did you think you were doing? You could’ve got killed.’

⁸ Translate: ‘You protect Muslims’

⁹ Translate: ‘Whore’

‘No Sir, I think it was more likely you would’ve got killed!’ Ben didn’t hold back. ‘You forget where I live. I’ve seen people fight with knives, I understand their language.’

Mr Cooke ran his hand across his head, ‘It was a stupid thing to do. But thank you.’ He held out his hand for Ben to shake. Ben was hesitant but then took the hand and shook it. Mr Cooke nodded at him, ‘I better go and call the police.’

Amina began to panic. The last thing they needed was the police poking around. ‘Do you really need to do that, Sir? I’m ok. I don’t want a fuss.’

Mr Cooke knelt down by Amina, ‘I do, it is school policy. How are you feeling?’

But before she could reply the receptionist bustled over to see what was going on, then disappeared again. Ben joined Mr Cooke on the floor and took Amina’s hand.

‘Are you sure you are ok? That really freaked me out.’

‘Do you want some more water, Amina? I could get you a cold glass if you want.’ asked Thea.

‘Yes please, but can Matt get it? Thea I want you to help me take my hijab off. It’s making my head hurt.’ Matt raced off and Thea knelt down by Amina, gently easing the tight scarf from her head.

The receptionist came back and handed Mr Cooke a first aid kit.

‘Thea, would you mind cleaning Amina’s cuts. Where’s Ms Brodie when you need her?’ said Mr Cooke, looking positively dishevelled and worried.

‘Of course I will, Sir.’ Thea opened the kit and got out some cotton wool to start cleaning the cuts and grazes.

‘Did you know him?’ Mr Cooke asked anyone who was around. Ben answered.

‘We’ve seen him around. He was always shouting at people.’ At least Ben was telling a version of the truth. It wasn’t all a lie.

The police had arrived and Mr Cooke went to meet them. He spoke to them for a while. Then he came back over and the police left again. ‘Ok, I’ve managed to convince them not to interview you at the moment but they do want you to write down exactly what happened to you Amina, and you Ben. They are going to come back later for your statements. They don’t hold out much hope of catching him. Apparently there is a lot of stuff like this going on. East London seems quite safe now, doesn’t it?’ Mr Cooke smiled at his own joke.

‘Mr Cooke, I really don’t feel like going out in the coach again today. I feel really shaken and rough. Can I stay in my room this afternoon please? I just want to try and sleep this headache off,’ asked Amina as she used her hijab to wipe the sweat off her face.

‘That sounds like a good idea Amina,’ Thea winked at her. Amina was thinking of Saba, but also she was telling the truth. She really didn’t want to go out again.

‘Well, I don’t know, it’s not normal to leave a student behind unsupervised.’ Mr Cooke sounded agitated.

‘Did you say Ms Brodie would be back soon? Couldn’t she check on Amina when she gets back,’ said Thea.

Matt arrived and handed Amina a glass of water. It was full of ice, which clinked against the sides, and there was a slice of lemon too. If she’d had the energy, she would’ve laughed. Only Matt could bring a glass of water with all the trimmings in an emergency.

‘Also we could tell the receptionist that she’s on her own and to keep an eye on her?’ said Ben.

Amina took a sip. It tasted delicious with the hint of citrus. ‘Good drink Matt, thank you. I’ll be fine, Mr Cooke. I’m sensible, you know I am, and Ms Brodie could check on me. All I want to do is sleep this headache off.’

Mr Cooke hesitated again but then gave in, he just didn’t seem to have the strength to fight, ‘Ok, Amina, I’ll let you, as it is you, and I know I can trust you.’

Thea toppled over giggling.

‘Thea, what are you doing?’

‘Sorry I slipped. I think her legs look ok now, don’t they?’ She looked up at Mr Cooke.

‘Yes, you’ve done a good job there, Thea, thank you. You better all go and get something to eat. Amina, do you want some?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ She took some more sips of the water. She couldn’t get rid of feeling nauseous. Her hands were still shaking.

Thea stood up, ‘Shall I take her upstairs and make sure she is settled? Ben and Matt can get some food for me, can’t you?’

‘Yup, we can,’ said Matt. Ben and Matt headed towards the restaurant.

Mr Cooke wiped his brow. He seemed quite relieved for someone else to be making the suggestions, ‘Yes, Thea that would really help. I need to get hold of Ms Brodie.’ He walked away, looking at his mobile.

‘Come on, Amina, let’s get you upstairs. Saba will be pleased to see you.’

Amina lent on Thea. She clung to her as they walked up the stairs to their room. Thea felt strong and it made Amina feel safe.

‘Thank God he didn’t get you,’ said Thea, ‘I don’t think we should tell Saba, do you?’

All Amina could do was shake her head.

Thea knocked rhythmically on the door and then slipped the key card in opening the door and led Amina in.

Saba ran forward smiling, 'You're back,' she noticed Amina was hanging on to Thea, 'What happened? Did the Taliban get her?' Tears started to well up in her eyes.

Thea helped Amina on to her bed then swung round sweeping Saba up in her arms. 'No, the Taliban didn't get her. They're not here, Babe. Amina's just got a really bad headache and she fell over scrapping her knees.'

Saba looked down at Amina's knees, 'Oh, poor Amina.'

Amina was relieved to feel the cool of the pillow against her head. She closed her eyes and listened to Thea's instructions to Saba.

'Now listen, Saba, I need you to look after Amina. She is going to stay here with you. We've got to go and look at a cemetery. Same rules apply though. If someone knocks, unless it is our knock you must hide.'

'I can look after her. Maadar was a doctor. She always said I would make a good doctor too. I used to help her. I will make sure her headache goes,' said Saba.

Thea hugged Saba, 'I know you will, Now be good, you two,' said Thea as she left them in the safety of their room.

Chapter 23

Ben

The coach trip to the British War Cemetery at Bayeux was a quiet one. Everyone was still shocked by the morning's events. They slipped along the lanes until they arrived at the museum by the cemetery. Ben was sitting on his own because Matt was with Thea. Ben needed space; the events of the last twenty four hours kept playing over and over again in his head.

'Ok, everyone out,' said Mr Cooke. Even Cookie seemed rather quiet. He was probably in shock too. Ben had to admit he was really impressed with the way Mr Cooke had handled things. Ben'd never seen anyone move so fast when he grabbed Amina's arm. And his shout! That was enough to terrify a whole army of insurgents. And then to top it all he sweeps Amina up into his arms. That's what good films were made of.

They lined up, waiting. Everyone was strangely well behaved for the moment.

'Right, we'll go along to the cemetery first, then we'll come back to the Museum afterwards. Though if we are running out of time I may take you straight to Omaha Beach. It will be a fluid afternoon.' He grinned then wiped his face again. The sweat patches under his arms were huge. Ben wondered if he had a wife.

They walked along the road to where the cemetery was. Ben was shaken to see that there was a road running through it. On one side of the road was a large building made of arches and seats, then on the other was row after row of white gravestones. The grass looked brown and there were gardeners tending the flowers but they seemed quite dead too. Surrounding it was the sound of building

works. Cranes hung over the cemetery. They looked like they were waiting to pounce. Grab their bit of land back from these buried skeletons of the past.

It wasn't what Ben expected and he didn't like it. It wasn't right. There should have been more respect. It should have been tranquil. He could see the odd veteran walking around.

Mr Cooke interrupted, 'Ok, let's go and stand under that tree.' He was pointing to a large tree with long overhanging branches in the centre. Mr Cooke led the way. They walked past a memorial with wreaths of poppies against it. Several of the gravestones had wooden crosses stuck in the ground in front of them. Ben stopped and looked at a gravestone. A whole life was carved in the stone. The idea weighed heavily on Ben. He imagined all the men that had been killed in Afghanistan. Would their lives be etched like this on a single stone, and where would it be. Surely it couldn't be in Afghanistan?

When they got under the tree it was cool but it couldn't shut out the noise of the building works going on all around. Everyone sprawled on the grass. Thea was sitting between Matt's legs leaning against him. Mr Cooke had to speak loudly to be heard.

'Ok, this is one of the British Cemeteries. There are American ones too. But buried here are nearly 4,000 British soldiers plus Canadian, South African, Australian and even some Germans. Back in class we talked about how many men were lost during the war. This gives the numbers some context.' He swept his arm round encompassing all the gravestones. 'This is just a very small percentage. The French gave the British this land, so it will never be built on.' Mr Cooke looked round at the cranes.

'Do they know that?' asked Ben.

‘I hope so, Ben, I really do.’ Ben was taken aback that was the first time Mr Cooke had ever spoken to him without being rude or angry.

‘What I want to talk about first is a poem.’ Everyone groaned.

‘Not poetry, this is a history trip,’ said Dave, still looking a bit lost without his mate Sam.

Mr Cooke sighed, ‘This poem is part of history. You have probably all heard part of it as it is used every year on Armistice Day, which is?’

A flurry of hands shot into the air.

‘Matt.’

‘Armistice Day is the day set up to remember the First World War. There is supposed to be a two minute silence on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. But there is also Remembrance Sunday too, which is when the old soldiers walk past the Cenotaph in London. My Grandpa did it once.’

Mr Cooke had been walking up and down under the tree, he stopped and looked at Matt, ‘Well that was a lot more information than I required, but all good.’ He wiped his face with a hankie. ‘But the part of the poem I’m talking about is the one that is often read when the poppies fall from the ceiling of the Royal Albert Hall or when the *Last Post* is being played on a bugle. It’s part of Laurence Binyon’s *For the Fallen*. It was first published in *The Times* in 1914.’ Mr Cooke pulled a book out of his rucksack.

‘I want you all to stand whilst I read this and I want you to think about what these men have been through but also what our soldiers are currently facing. When I finish reading we’ll have a minute silence.’

Everyone stood up without question. Mr Cooke started to read. He made his voice loud and powerful over the noise of the building works. It had a haunting sound to it.

'They shall not grow old , as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning.

*We shall remember them.'*¹⁰

Ben knew those words off by heart. Ever since Dan joined the army, they'd watched everything connected with Remembrance Day. Today, though, the words ripped at his heart and a wayward tear escaped out of the corner of his eye. He wiped it away before anyone could notice. Gangsta's don't cry. People around him started to shuffle as the minute's silence came to an end.

'Now take some time to look at the gravestones. Some of those lads weren't much older than you. I will meet you all by the coach in an hour. We can decide then what we want to do.'

All the students moved off going their separate ways. Ben joined Matt and Thea. He felt a bit lost without Amina there. He wondered how she was, back at the hotel.

'Let's go and see what that is,' Matt was pointing at the larger building across the road. They were about to cross, when a novelty train peeped at them and drove by.

'That is so wrong,' said Thea, 'why would you have a silly train going around here.'

'Tourists,' said Matt in a very matter of fact way. 'It's because it's Bayeux, you know the Bayeux Tapestry.'

Thea looked blankly at him, 'Don't worry about it,' said Matt.

¹⁰ Laurence Binyon, 'The fallen', <http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/binyon.htm> (accessed March 2011)

‘Well it is still wrong. I think they should show more respect, don’t you Ben?’

Ben hadn’t really been listening. He’d been thinking about the fact there were nearly 4,000 British bodies buried here.

‘Sorry?’

‘The train, it’s disrespectful isn’t it? It looks like a child’s train.’

Ben looked at where the train was disappearing. He heard the bell announcing its arrival at another part of Bayeux. ‘Yeah, think you’re right there, Thea.’

They walked up to the open-fronted building it was very tall and the arches were huge. In fact when Ben looked, he realised it wasn’t a building at all it was just a row of arches and in each arch there was a marble bench. And it was only when you got close did you see the all the names etched on the sides of the arches. They were listed under regiments.

‘Look it’s covered in names. More dead I suppose? Maybe these are ones who they couldn’t find the bodies for. How sad is that?’ said Matt.

He and Thea sat in one arch whilst Ben sat in the one next door where he started to read the names. There were so many. All of them would have left behind parents, maybe brothers, sisters, wives, sons, daughters. Their normal lives shattered by war.

It wasn’t long before he was brought back to the present day by the unmistakable slurping sound of a snogging session. Ben got up and walked away. He couldn’t face it any longer.

Chapter 24

Finley McGinley's Story

Ben felt like a gooseberry. He had to get away. He looked around. It felt like the cemetery was about to be invaded by all the cranes and building work that was going on round it. The tranquillity was shattered by cars and builders' shouts. How could these soldiers sleep in peace, with their marble headstones, each telling the story of a lost life, with this racket? Ben headed towards one of the shelters that looked out over the memorial, with its fading poppy wreaths.

He needed to sit and think. All these gravestones and so many of them so young. Many the same ages as Dan. He couldn't get it out of his mind that one of these could have been Dan in another cemetery, in another place, with a similar gravestone with his name tattooed onto it.

He walked through the archway feeling the cool air hit him. He closed his eyes briefly so was very surprised when he opened them and found he wasn't the first person to get there. There was an old man already there looking at him, panic written across his face. He clasped at his medals.

'I can give you money, but don't take these.'

Ben stopped and looked at him, 'Sorry?'

Ben looked down at his clothes. His shorts hanging round his bum. His t-shirt. His baseball cap. Everything that portrayed the stereotypical mugger, or so *Crimewatch* implied. He understood why the old man felt he was going to be attacked.

He smiled sadly, 'I don't want your money or your medals. I just came in here for a bit of peace and quiet. Somewhere I can think. Would you mind if I joined you?'

Ben pointed towards the other end of the bench. The old man just nodded.

The fake gansta, and the veteran clutching his beret, sat a generation apart, lost in their own thoughts. The silence only punctuated by the occasional sniff and tear slipping out of the old man's rheumy eyes. Ben realised he was crying. Should he ask if he was alright, or would that upset him further? Ben hadn't had much to do with old people and wasn't sure what to do.

He took a sideways glance at the old soldier. He must have been a big man once, but age had emptied him. His blazer and trousers hung on a shell. The cap badge on his beret glinted in the sun. His hands were gnarled and weather-worn. Veins like a pulsating traffic system tattooed their way up his hands to his arms, age spots providing the odd roundabout. Ben looked back at his own hands which were also clasped together, almost in prayer. His were smooth. They had no story to tell yet.

The old soldier's story was further written across his chest where multi-coloured ribbons hung weighed down by precious, hard won, medals. All remembering a time Ben could not imagine. He remembered Dan's medal, the one for Iraq. And he'd eventually get the one for Afghanistan. But Dan'd never collect as many as the old man now.

Ben moved his eyes up from the medals. Instinct told him that the old man was looking at him. His eyes were bluish-slate and watery. There was a half smile.

'Sorry 'bout that lad, it's just...' Ben knew what he was going to say, it hung in the air between them.

'It is the way I look, isn't it,' said Ben, the old man nodded. 'I'm not bad you know, it's just a uniform, stuff you have to wear. Like your blazer and trousers.'

'Is your Grandpa here?' The old man pointed to the gravestones.

'No, school trip.' said Ben.

‘Ah that makes sense,’ He held out his hand and Ben took it. ‘My name’s Finley McGinley.’

Ben grinned.

‘Now don’t be cheeky, it’s not my fault my parents had a sense of humour.’ The old man was grinning back with tobacco stained teeth. ‘Bet your parents were sensible.’

Ben nodded, ‘I’m called Ben. Can I ask you something Mr McGinley?’

‘Nope,’ said Finley. Ben looked down, the old man continued, ‘Not if you call me that, but you can if you call me Finn, like everyone else.’

Ben kicked at a stone. He wondered if he should really ask this question, was it too personal?

‘Mr... Finn, were you here, were you part of it?’

‘Yes. Yes I was. A lot of my friends are here.’ He pointed at the nearest gravestones again.

‘Can you talk about it?’

‘It’s hard. So many of my friends were killed, others were injured and never the same again.’

Part of Finn’s sentence thwacked Ben so hard in his back it had taken his breath away.

‘Why were the ones who were injured never the same again?’

‘Ah, it’s a soldier’s tale. There is some honour in being killed in battle. Many men think they have failed if they’re injured and can’t fight. I know many soldiers at the time who’d rather have died than lie there hearing it go on around them. All you hear is the gun fire, men screaming and shouting while you wait for the medics.’ He turned the beret over in his hand, ‘It was impossible at times to decipher whether it was an order being shouted or another soul screaming for it to

be over. Then there was the smell of rotting or burning flesh, oil and blood mingled on the sand. It visits me at night, still. It never goes. You just learn to live with it.'

'Your beret. Were you a Marine?' asked Ben

Finn brushed a finger over the cap badge, 'Yes I was, one of Lovat's Special Brigade.'

'What was that?'

'Who you mean. It was Lord Lovat, he led us. We used to call him a mad bastard because of his wild bravery. He was crazy. Do you want to know why?'

Ben turned towards Finn and tucked one of his legs underneath him, taking off his baseball cap. It seemed appropriate. 'No,' he said.

'As I say, Lord Lovat was crazy. The whole time he has his own personal piper with him.'

'Piper?'

'Played the bag pipes,' Finn pretended to play, just in case Ben didn't get it. 'When we were in the landing craft on the way across he had this chap, Bill Millins, I think his name was, stand at the front of the ship and play his bagpipes. It echoed round us. He was in full battle dress, with his kilt and all.'

Ben couldn't believe this. 'What? You mean when you were on the landing craft, there was some bloke playing his bagpipes in a kilt? That's amazing. What was it like on the landing craft?'

'I hated it. The sea was really rough so loads of people were seasick. They'd given us a corned beef sandwich and a tot of rum, which didn't help. It was a very confusing time, you were excited being part of something so big – you should've seen all the boats in Southampton water, you couldn't see the sea for them – but

also you were really apprehensive. We had no idea what was going to happen and there was also the fear of failure hanging over us.'

Finn stopped, thinking back to those times, 'Some men were saying prayers and crossing themselves, others were reading the Bible whilst some were trying to memorise French phrases from the phrase book they'd given to us. Most just waited, saying nothing. I didn't even speak to my best mate, John Jackson, we'd been friends before the war. We just looked at each other every now and then, saying nothing. You felt very private. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I think I do. Like when you're lost in your own thoughts.' Ben shifted slightly; his leg was going to sleep. There were no sounds from outside, just Finn's rasping voice.

'When we got within firing range of France, the battleships would let fly with their big guns. If you were nearby when they were fired, you felt it in your chest, like a big hug. The power from the shot was so great.' Finn folded his arms like he was hugging himself.

Ben wanted to know more. This was just wonderful, much better than any museum with all that writing; he was talking to the real thing. 'What about when you got to the beaches?'

'That was terrifying. You could hear the German machine guns firing. They could spit out bullets much faster than the Americans. They would go,' Finn lifted his hand like he a gun, "brrrrrrrrrr". The American and British machine gun sounded more like 'brbrbrbr'. The bullets would rake across the water and ping against metal. You knew anyone of them could have your name on it.'

He looked across at Ben who couldn't help smiling. He tried to stop, maybe it wasn't the right thing to do, but he was enthralled by Finn's story.

Finn continued, 'We were lucky. On a lot of the landing craft when the ramp dropped down, so the first men got shot. But Lord Lovat was ok even though he went first. He was six foot tall so we'd know how deep the water was. His piper was playing again. He played *The Road to the Isles* as he walked towards the beach, his kilt floating round him in the water. Lovat got out ok, but the bloke straight behind him took a bullet straight in the face. Blood everywhere.'

'We were as mad as Lovat, despite what'd just happened. We all took off our helmets and put on our green berets. We wanted them to know who we were.'

Finn put the beret on his head.

'As we walked and swam ashore, we didn't know if we were standing on bodies or not. The water was coloured with all the blood but you just kept going. There were so many mangled bodies that some soldiers just stood and stared. They couldn't move. They suffered from 'blood and guts paralysis'. But that was the worst thing to do. You were a sitting duck for the snipers.'

'Sounds like *Saving Private Ryan*,' said Ben

'What's that?'

'A film with Tom Hanks.'

'American?'

'Yup.'

'Won't watch it then. They still like to claim everything is down to them and it wasn't. They certainly bloody helped. We'd never have done it without them, but there were a lot of other nations involved, not just them.' Finn shifted slightly.

'Are you ok? Do you want to go?'

'Why, you heard enough?' Finn looked a bit cross.

'No, please tell me more. This is so interesting. This is my favourite period in history.'

‘Bloody hell, that makes me feel old. I’m history, eh?’ Finn took the beret off again and tapped it against his leg.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.’

Finn looked at him and grinned, ‘Don’t worry lad, I was teasing you. You take life too seriously, learn to laugh a bit. Actually, it’s really good talking to someone who is interested. I’m sorry I thought you were going to mug me. It’s happened before, you get wary.’

Ben noticed Finn lifted one of his legs to move it slightly. Finn continued ‘They had put tanks onto the beaches ahead of us with flails on them to get rid of all the mines. I could hear the piper as I ran up onto the beach. The noise was unbelievable. Bangs, shouts, screams. John was alongside me. Then I thought I saw him run ahead. I tried to catch up with him. That’s when it happened.’ Finn stopped.

Ben was waiting to hear of the death of John. What he heard was the last thing he’d expected to hear.

‘That’s when I trod on a mine. One they hadn’t cleared.’

Ben let out involuntary gasp pulling his knees up to his chest.

‘I didn’t know my legs had gone at that point. I screamed out. John heard me. He came back to try and help. I could see the shock on his face when he saw me. I knew it was bad. I hadn’t looked down at that point and now knew I didn’t want to. John shouted to me to hang on, he was going to get me out of there. But he never finished that sentence. A sniper took him out. Straight through the head. If we’d kept our helmets on, he probably would have been ok. See that gravestone over there – at the end of that row? That’s him. My best friend.’

Ben looked to where Finn was looking. He could see a small wooden cross with a single poppy on it resting against the gravestone. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then Finn started talking again, 'I hated him for dying and leaving me alive. I wanted to die. As I said before, sometimes it feels like there's no honour in surviving. I didn't even get to Benouville. That's where we were heading, to support the paras at Pegasus Bridge.'

'The shouts and screams mixed with the gunfire created a cacophony of sound that seemed to rip the air to shreds around me. My desperation and confusion was palpable, until she came.'

'She?' Ben queried.

Finn didn't answer he just continued talking, 'She had a face like a porcelain doll, whose eyes twinkled when she smiled at me. The touch of her hand was cool and gentle. It dissolved those feelings of desperation and confusion. I knew I was going to be ok. That's why I married her!'

Ben was confused. Was this make-believe. 'Was she a British nurse?'

Finn shook his head, 'No, she was French. Some of the French women, they were so brave. They came down to tend to the injured. Her name was Auroré, we married after the war. She died last year.' His face lit up as he took a very tatty photo out of his wallet and showed it to Ben, who now knew this was no fairy tale.

'This is her. I couldn't come back when she was alive, she didn't want to remember. But I needed to see John again. Say a proper goodbye.'

Ben looked at the photo. He wasn't sure what he should say. He opted for the safest, 'I am sorry about your wife.' He handed the photo back.

Finn looked at him again. His eyes were full of tears, 'Don't be, we had a very happy life. I don't remember much after that, until I got back to England but

she was always with me. She insists that she saw me legless on that beach and knew she was going to marry me. Mad woman.’ He smiled a private smile.

Ben took a deep breath. Now it was time he could tell his story. At last. He didn’t have to keep it quiet any longer.

‘Finn, can I tell you something?’ The old man looked at Ben and nodded. ‘My brother, Dan, he’s a Marine too. I was so proud of him. He seemed so strong and knew everything. He could sort everything out too. He made me feel safe. I wanted to be like him.’ Now Ben had started, all the words came tumbling out like someone had released a valve. Ben for the first time for a long time felt he could be honest.

‘That’s good,’ said Finn

‘He’s been fighting in Afghanistan.’

‘He must be a brave boy. That’s a tough war.’

For the second time that day Ben could feel the tears leaking out of his eyes and streaming down his cheeks. Finn took hold of Ben’s hand.

‘It’s ok, tell me what’s happened.’ He squeezed Ben’s hand, ‘Is he dead?’

Ben shook his head, ‘No, but he wishes he was. He trod on an IED, like you. He’s lost both legs. He doesn’t want to be alive any more. He says what’s the point in living if he can’t be a soldier.’ Ben took a gulp of air trying to fight the desire to sob, ‘I wanted him to be back like he was. I didn’t want him to be broken. I’m so ash...’

The silence hung in the air until it was snatched away by Finn. ‘You’re ashamed of him,’ he said simply.

Ben nodded and his head dropped as great gulping sobs took over him. Finn shuffled along the marble bench and patted Ben’s arm then gingerly put his arm across Ben’s shoulders.

‘It is ok. He’s probably ashamed of himself too. You both have to go through a grieving process for the Dan you’ve lost. Is he home?’

‘Sometimes. He comes back for a bit, but most of the time he is at Headley Court for rehabilitation. They reckon he’ll still be able to do an office job in the army. He wasn’t happy about that.’

‘I can imagine no squaddie would be. Poor bugger.’

‘He’s so nasty to my Mum. She has to help him a lot and he hates it. It was my job to shout at my Mum, I’m the teenager. Now I have to look after her. Hold her when she cries because he’s been so horrible to her. When he’s not shouting, he sits there in silence just staring at nothing. It’s like the IED took his voice as well as his legs. It’s all wrong.’

The sobs just kept coming as Finn pulled Ben’s body towards him in a hug.

The sound of footsteps made Ben and Finn look up. Thea and Matt appeared at the doorway.

The look of total shock on their faces made both Finn and Ben laugh out loud. A crying gangsta and an old man made an incongruous hugging couple.

Chapter 25

Matt

There, sitting on the bench in front of Matt and Thea, was Ben and a man with a face crackled with age. Both with tears in their eyes. Matt knew they'd intruded but it would have been worse to turn their backs on them and walk away. Ben and the old man started to laugh, a raucous laugh that splintered the tension that stood between them.

Ben stood up, 'Matt and Thea, I'd like to introduce you to Finley McGinley.'

Finn coughed.

Ben continued, 'He likes to be called Finn. And Finn these are my friends Thea and Matt.'

Matt stepped forward and put his hand out. Finn took it and shook it with a firm grip.

'It's good to meet Ben's friends. I was just telling Ben how I lost these.' He wacked both legs, making a tinny noise that echoed around the building.

'Were you in the D-Day Landings then?' asked Thea

'Yes I was, young lady.'

'That's awesome, a real veteran.' Finn smiled at Thea.

'Well, thank you. I've always wanted to be 'awesome'! Is it me, or is it a bit cramped in here? Shall we get out?'

Matt, Thea and Ben followed the old man out of the shelter. They wandered towards the memorial they'd seen earlier with the poppy wreaths.

'We lost you, Ben,' said Matt.

'Sorry, I should've said but I felt a bit like a gooseberry, and I didn't want to interrupt.'

Matt felt himself go red. He had to admit he'd forgotten Ben was even with them. Thea's mouth had emptied his brain. He smiled as he remembered.

'So you two are in love?' asked Finn.

Matt watched Thea. How was she going to answer? He still wasn't sure whether he was just something to play with. Something to stop her getting bored on the trip. His heart felt like it was going to explode when she said, 'Oh yes, Matt's my boyfriend.' Thea smiled at Matt.

'That's good. How old are you lot? Seventeen, eighteen?'

'No we're sixteen.' Ben looked at Finn, 'How old were you on D-Day?'

'I was nineteen when I met the woman of my dreams.'

Matt was totally confused and he knew he looked it. Finn watched him and laughed. 'I met my wife when I was injured. Ben'll tell you the full story, won't you? I want to hear more about you. Are you having a good time?'

'That sounds very romantic,' said Thea. 'We're having a brilliant time except...' Thea's voice trailed off and her face flushed. Matt knew she was just about to tell Finn about Saba. Ben and Matt looked at her. Sometimes she could be really daft.

But would it be a bad thing if Finn knew? Would he be able to help them get Saba home. Finn's eyes were sparkling, 'Except what?'

'It's nothing,' said Ben and Matt simultaneously. Matt found he was twisting his hands together. He only did that when he felt guilty.

'So, it's nothing is it, that's got you lot so worried? I can see it in your faces. I may be old but I'm not stupid. Now spill.'

Matt looked at Ben who shrugged his shoulders and then said, 'Matt you tell him, you'll do it better than me.'

‘Before you start, can we find somewhere to sit down again? What about that bench over there?’ Finn led the way to a bench under a tree. It was far enough away to ensure that whatever was spoken about wouldn’t be overheard. Matt liked Finn, he seemed to understand everything.

Finn sat on the bench with Ben beside him. Matt and Thea sat on the grass in front and both plucked at it. Matt wasn’t quite sure where to start. How do you tell someone you have a girl hidden in your hotel room and are planning on getting her back to Britain by whatever means? Even if it was for her own protection.

It was Ben who ended up speaking.

‘Finn, we’re trying to help a girl get to England. She’s only eleven.’

Matt was impressed. Ben’s statement didn’t appear to faze Finn at all. He just turned the beret over and over in his hands.

‘Where are her parents?’

Matt spoke this time. ‘The Taliban killed her Dad and her Mum died trying to escape Afghanistan. She had a miscarriage and nobody took care of her. Then they stole all of their money and tried to sell Saba for sex.’ Matt watched Finn’s face, still there was no reaction.

‘Saba, is that her name?’

They all nodded.

‘She’s come from Afghanistan?’

Again they all nodded.

‘Has she no family?’

Thea shook her head, ‘No they were all killed by the Taliban.’

‘What are you going to do with her if you manage to get her into England?’

Thea broke the silence, 'My Mum's a social worker. I think she can help. We have another friend who is back at the hotel, Amina. Her parents may be willing to take Saba in. They'd been thinking about fostering.'

'Yeah,' said Ben, 'We haven't been able to speak to her yet what with Amina being attacked and everything. Plus Thea thinks it would be better when we are back in the UK.'

Finn looked at Ben and then Thea, 'What do you mean Amina was attacked?'

'The bloke we got Saba off yesterday attacked Amina. When we got off the coach, he tried to drag her away. Our teacher stopped him.' Thea looked at Finn, 'She stayed back at the hotel with Saba, just in case. We can't tell our teacher because he's not like you. He wouldn't help, and he's out to get Ben. Any excuse to be proved right and send Ben home.' Finn raised his eyebrows at Ben but said nothing, Thea continued, 'We're certain he'd hand Saba over to the authorities here, and who knows what would happen to her then. We'd never be able to find out. We thought about Ms Brodie too but she'd only ask Mr Cooke and we would be in the same shit. We decided it was best if we just kept quiet for Saba's sake.'

Matt watched Thea take Finn's hand, 'What should we do?'

Finn clasped her hand, letting the beret fall. Matt watched Ben pick it up, he stroked the cap badge before he handed it back to Finn. Matt wondered why, he found Ben so difficult to work out.

'Ok, I can see you've good reason to help this girl. I suppose you could've been asking me how to smuggle drugs or something.' He laughed. 'Where are you staying?'

Ben answered, 'We're staying in Caen.'

Finn seemed to take charge, 'Right, we are too. I need to go and talk to some friends but I think we can help you. Meet me outside the cathedral, near the castle, at 6pm tonight. Hopefully, I will have found a solution.'

Matt felt a huge sense of relief. He hadn't realised quite what a heavy weight worrying about Saba was. Having an adult know was a good feeling. Matt's relief was understated compared to Thea's. She launched herself at Finn and hugged him, nearly knocking the old man off his seat, 'Thank you. Thank you so much.'

Finn hugged her back. 'I haven't done anything yet!' There was a shout from the other side of the cemetery, 'That'll be time for me to go. I'll see you later,' said Finn.

Ben helped Finn up from the bench and walked part of the way back with him. But when Ben was walking back to join them, Matt saw Mr Cooke go up to Finn and talk to him. He was pointing at Ben. He was sure Finn wouldn't say anything about Saba, but what was Cookie saying about Ben?

Ben had just joined them when there was a shout from Mr Cooke telling them to go back to the coach. They hadn't spoken a word whilst Ben went with Finn. Both were lost in their own thoughts.

Chapter 26

Amina

There was the secret knock at the door and Amina smiled at Saba.

‘I think they’re back.’ Saba grinned but moved closer to Amina. Saba was still very afraid, so she put her arms around her and hugged her close. Thea, Ben and Matt tumbled into the room.

‘Are you feeling better?’ they asked in unison. Saba and Amina laughed at them.

‘Yes I’m much better, aren’t I Saba?’ Saba nodded. ‘I slept the headache off but I’m still really achy from... you know.’ The others nodded before Amina continued, ‘But Saba’s been looking after me, haven’t you? Ms Brodie came in twice and Saba was a really good girl and hid from her. She was very brave because one time I was asleep when she came in.’

Ben put his hand up for Saba to high five, ‘Well done you!’

Thea sat next to Amina, ‘I’m glad you’re feeling better. I saw Ms Brodie downstairs and she said she’d seen you. Do you know what she said to me? No one’s ever said it to me before. She said she was proud of me and the way you and I’ve become friends.’ Amina noticed that Thea’s eyes were glassy with tears and she couldn’t take the smile off her face.

Matt interrupted her, ‘But we have other news as well. Ben met someone who is going to help us, didn’t you Ben?’

There was so much cross chatter going on that Amina’s head was beginning to hurt again and she was getting very confused.

‘Hang on a minute, did you say you have someone to help us? Help us with what?’

Ben smacked his forehead 'D'uh! Help us to get Saba to the UK. We are meeting him at 6pm outside the cathedral. He thinks he will have a plan by then.'

This all sounded too good to be true. Who was he? Could they trust him? Could they be putting Saba in more danger? She had to say something.

'Hang on a minute, who is he and how do we know he is safe?'

Ben, Thea and Matt all looked at her and burst out laughing, 'Oh, if you'd met Finn you'd know how silly those questions sound,' said Matt.

Amina was feeling cross and irritated now. 'Well I didn't, did I, so how do I know he's safe?'

'Yeah, ok, I'm sorry, it's just when you meet him you'll see why it's funny,' said Ben. 'His name is Finley McGinley and he is a D-Day veteran. I met him at the cemetery today.'

Amina stood up, she couldn't believe what she was hearing, 'So you're telling me that you told someone who you'd never met before all about Saba and expected them to help. How do you know he won't go off and blab?'

Amina became aware of Saba moving back against the wall, her shouting was frightening her. 'I'm sorry, Saba, it's just...' her voice trailed away when she realised how crazy she sounded. Of course they wouldn't tell just anyone. Ben must trust this man.

Ben took hold of both her arms, 'It's alright, Amina, I understand. I'd be the same, but as I said I'm meeting him later, why don't you come too and you can judge for yourself.'

Amina nodded. Ben hugged her for longer than was necessary; she enjoyed the feeling of his body against hers.

'It is ok you know, we've had a very strange few days,' said Ben.

When Amina came out from Ben's chest she found that Thea was sitting with Saba, 'Are you ok little one?' Saba looked at her and promptly burst into tears.

'I don't want people arguing over me. I don't want to be sent away.'

Thea pulled her into her arms.

'Ssh, don't worry, you're not going to be. We're going to look after you and we're not arguing over you. Just sometimes we all get a bit worried, don't we Amina?'

Amina looked at the pair of them. She knew Thea was trying to calm the situation down, 'Yes, Saba, I was being silly. Everything is fine I promise. Though what was that thing you asked me a little while ago, before anyone came back?'

Saba looked at Amina for a moment, then grinned, 'I'm hungry! Those rolls you gave me this morning, Thea, are there any more? I ate the ones the boys brought.'

'No, there aren't any, but we can go and get some for you, can't we Matt?' Thea looked up at him.

'Yeah, I'll come with you,' said Ben.

Thea stood up, 'No, it's ok, Matt and I will do it. Won't we? You stay and keep Amina and Saba company.'

'Oh alright,' Ben looked at Amina who shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea why Thea was being so insistent.

'Is there anything else you want?' asked Matt.

'Could you get us some coke or something? I don't know about you but I'm a bit fed up of water. Saba?' Amina looked at her.

'Could I have lemonade, please?'

‘Of course,’ Thea picked up her bag and put her arm through Matt’s, ‘Come on, we have stuff to do.’

Matt looked back at the others. He seemed as confused as they were.

After the door shut, Ben turned to Amina, ‘She’s taken her bag!’

Amina looked at him like he was stupid, ‘Of course, she’s going shopping.’

‘Then wouldn’t she want her purse,’ Ben pointed at the shiny pink purse which was still by the tea things.

‘Oh. She must have forgotten it.’

Ben grinned, ‘But I remember what’s still in her bag. I noticed them today. She never emptied them out.’

Amina looked at Ben, still not understanding what he was getting at, ‘So?’

Ben raised his eyebrows at her and it suddenly dawned on Amina what Thea had collected in her bag when they were on the grass.

‘Do you think...?’

‘Yup!’ Ben clapped his hands, ‘Told him he’d get there in the end.’

‘Oooh!’

Saba looked baffled. ‘What? What are you laughing about?’

Amina just hugged her and said, ‘We’re laughing at life, it’s good to do that sometimes, don’t you think?’

Amina started to tickle Saba, who couldn’t help but giggle.

Chapter 27

Matt

Thea and Matt left the others and were about to head off to get some rolls when Thea turned to Matt and said, 'I need a wee, let's go to your room, I can go there and then we can go to the bakers.'

'Why didn't you go before we left?'

'I didn't need to when I was in there. Come on, I won't be long.'

Matt couldn't believe this. 'Can't you hang on? It's not like we are going to be gone for hours.'

'NO! I can't. Come on Matt take me to your room.'

'Oh for goodness sake,' Matt took Thea down to his room and let her in.

He sat on the bed waiting for her to go to the bathroom, but she didn't go, instead she sat next to him on the bed.

'What the...?' Before he could say anything else Thea leant forward and kissed him. Matt felt the air disappear from his lungs. He couldn't believe this was happening. She'd tricked him. She must have been planning this all along.

She stopped and looked at him, 'Do you want to? I've come prepared.' Thea emptied all the condoms that were still in her bag.

Matt looked at her, making sure he didn't smile. 'No,' He could see that Thea couldn't disguise the look of disappointment and confusion, 'I don't think I can manage it that many times in one afternoon.'

Matt couldn't keep his face straight any longer and burst out laughing. Thea thumped him. 'I don't believe you did that to me.' She pushed him back onto the bed. Their mouths locked together, their tongues dancing. Hands feeling, touching, daring. Legs entwined. Bodies leaning into each other.

There was hesitancy, or a maybe a question, behind their movements. Matt pulled her towards him. His tongue explored her mouth. He wondered if it would matter that he couldn't be like a porn star. He hadn't got a huge cock and wasn't even sure what to do with it. What if I do it wrong? Will I know if she doesn't want to? So many questions and no answers.

Matt slipped his hands under Thea's t-shirt. He stopped kissing her.

'Is this ok?' Thea smiled and nodded at him as she let her own hands run down his back whilst his hands wandered up her back. Her skin felt so smooth, he just wanted to keep stroking her. He kissed her deeper and harder.

She stopped kissing him so she could pull her t-shirt off, and then she slipped off her bra. Matt looked at her. She was absolutely perfect.

'Can I?'

Thea nodded. Matt watched his fingers explore the soft mounds. He'd never felt anything like this, nor imagined it could be so wonderful.

'Is this ok?' he asked.

'Yes, don't stop.'

He started to kiss them with relish. The real thing was much better than any porn he'd seen. This felt so good. Matt could feel his cock trapped as it became more erect. He tried to shift his jeans to allow for more room.

'Shall we take everything off?' Thea asked.

Matt felt panicky. What if it is too small? What if I cum? What if she laughs? But he did what she asked. Once they were undressed Matt lay back on the bed not sure of what to do next, but Thea leant forward and kissed his cock.

Shit! She just kissed it. His cock nodded in response. How did I not explode? That was amazing. Matt needed to focus on something else. But what? Mr Cooke. Now that was a bad image and Matt preferred the one in front of him.

Thea's muff was perfect. He didn't care it wasn't shaved. The real thing was so much better than any porn magazine or movie he'd watched. This felt good.

'Can I explore you down there?' asked Matt pointing and feeling slightly embarrassed that he'd asked.

'Of course,' Thea lay back.

Again he let his fingers do the walking. They moved up her thighs and then encircled her muff. He started to prod at it.

Thea took his hand away and said, 'More like this.' He watched her finger, enthralled as she showed him what to do. Thea took hold of his fingers and guided them to where she wanted it, 'Put them here, and move them like this, see?'

He let his fingers slip into her and she gasped. Matt snatched his hand away.

'Are you ok? Did I do it wrong?' he asked.

She grinned at Matt, 'No, you didn't do it wrong and you definitely hit the spot.'

Feeling braver, Matt bent down and kissed her there. She's being really quiet, Matt thought. Maybe I'm doing it wrong? He sat back and started using his fingers again to explore the way she'd shown him. Matt watched and listened to her breathing. Her body started to shudder.

'Please, oh please, Matt. Please. Please. Oh please. Please. Perfect perfection...'

His own body was shuddering now. Shit! Matt had shot his load all over Thea's thigh.

'I'm so sorry. I'll get tissues. I... I... just couldn't control it.' Matt was blushing. 'Oh Thea, I wanted it to be so special.'

Thea took hold of Matt's hand, 'Stop Matt, it doesn't matter. No one's ever done that for me. I have never cum before. It's never once been about me.'

'Really?'

Thea nodded. She grabbed the mass of tissues he'd found and started mopping herself up.

'We'll just have to practice till we get it right,' she said.

Matt and Thea had just finished clearing up when Matt's mobile rang. He picked it up and looked at the screen.

'Shit! It's my Mum. I shouldn't have switched it back on. Do you think she's got CCTV in here?' He looked up at the corners of the room making Thea laugh, 'I told her not to ring any more. She is so embarrassing. Why don't parents ever do what you ask?'

Matt answered. 'Hello, yes Mum, I'm fine. No, I haven't done anything stupid.'

At which point Thea snorted with laughter. Matt tried to put his hand over Thea's mouth.

'No Mum, there isn't anything wrong. It is just one of the girls having a laugh with their friends. Yes Mum. No Mum. I won't do anything with any of the girls. Yes I will respect my body.'

Thea ran out of the bedroom laughing.

Chapter 28

Ben

Ben opened the door to Matt and Thea. He took note of the broad grin on Matt's face.

'What took you so long? I thought you were only buying rolls. Did you make them or did you make something else?' Matt blushed a satisfyingly deep red as Ben thumped his back, 'Well done!'

'What do you mean?' asked Thea.

'It's no good being all innocent, we know what you've been up to,' said Ben, picking up Thea's purse and handing it to her, 'There was only one reason you'd want to take your bag and not your purse.'

This time it was Thea's turn to go bright red. Ben grinned at her and took the rolls and drinks from Matt.

'Come on, let's eat. Amina and I'll have to go and see Finn soon. You don't mind staying here do you?'

Matt and Thea nodded whilst Ben put out the drinks and rolls on Amina's bed.

'What would you like, Saba? Some of this lemonade?' Ben handed it over to her.

'Thank you, and could I have a roll too please. What did Thea and Matt do that made you laugh so much? I don't understand.'

Saba bit into the roll watching the others intently waiting for an answer.

Amina put her arms round Saba, 'They were just being silly. Ignore them. They're just big teases.'

'Does anyone know the time?' asked Ben.

‘Yeah it’s ten to six,’ said Matt as he looked at his phone.

‘Come on Amina, we need to go and meet Finn.’ He walked towards the door and opened it for Amina, ‘Hopefully when we come back we will have a plan to save the wonderful Saba.’ He winked at her and for the first time he saw her face truly light up as she smiled back at him.

Amina and Ben walked arm in arm towards the cathedral.

‘Wow that is one huge gothic cathedral! Spires everywhere. Look at those gargoyles they’re weird.’ Ben looked where Amina was pointing.

‘Yeah, they look like greyhound dogs. I thought gargoyles were grotesque?’

‘Obviously not!’

Ben saw Finn in the distance.

‘There’s Finn,’ he waved at the old man who also spotted them.

Finn smiled at them both as they walked up. Ben noticed all the intricate fine lines that appeared when he smiled. They were like a spider’s web that’d been woven out of his history. He said a quiet prayer hoping that Amina would like and, more importantly, trust Finn.

Finn thrust out his arthritic hand towards Amina, ‘You must be Amina, I gather you had a bit of a tough time this morning.’

Amina smiled at him and said, ‘Hello, yes but everything is fine now.’ Ben took this as a sign that she was taking a liking to Finn.

‘Let’s go and have a coffee at that place over there,’ Finn pointed to a cafe with metal chairs and tables outside. ‘I have some ideas for you and your little friend.’

They sat down and Finn ordered three espressos.

‘The doc says I shouldn’t have caffeine at my age, but what does he know!’

Finn laughed his wonderful rasping laugh as the waitress came and placed the

small cups onto the table. The smell of strong coffee invaded Ben's nose, daring him to drink it.

'Ok, I can tell you how we hid a friend once.' Finn took a sip from his coffee cup then lit a cigarette, blowing out a cloud of smoke before he continued, 'We were going to a football match in Germany and were on a coach, then going by ferry but George forgot his passport. Wally! So do you know what we did?'

'No, what?' said Ben

'We hid him in the luggage compartment under the coach. Do you know where I mean?' Finn smiled.

'Yes, but could he breath under there?' asked Amina. Ben noticed how worried she sounded.

'Yes he could, but when we got on the ferry we sneaked down into the hold and got him out. Have you got a big holdall she could hide in? I imagine she's quite small.'

Ben looked at Amina who was looking at her coffee cup with a furrowed brow. 'Thea's bag is huge, couldn't Saba get in there with some of her clothes. We could spread the rest between our bags. What do you think?'

At first Amina said nothing. Ben took her hand and squeezed it. 'Do you think Thea would let us?'

Ben was shaken to see that Amina's eyes were full of tears when she looked up. 'Yes, but I'm afraid. Afraid for Saba and afraid for us. What if we can't help her? What if she gets sent back to no one or worse still that man gets hold of her again.'

Ben squeezed her hand again but the enormity of what they were planning swept over them both. Everything became silent. There seemed to be no traffic noises and even the birds seemed to stop singing once they'd heard the plan. It all

seemed very real now and not a game - if it ever was. Ben could see that Finn was watching them.

He broke the silence in a very matter of fact way as he stubbed out his cigarette, 'When do you go back to England?'

'I think we're on the ferry at 10.45. It is Calais to Portsmouth,' said Ben.

'No,' said Amina. 'We're going from Caen on the return journey so it is less time on the road.'

'That's brilliant, you are on the same ferry as me, must have been a cheap deal then! But it means I can help you if you need it.' Finn sat back, 'that is of course if you want my help.'

'Yes please,' said Amina. Ben let out a silent sigh of relief. Amina continued, 'It would be good to have you there to help us get Saba out, as you've done it before.'

'I'll talk to some of those on my trip that I trust. They can help too.'

The three of them sat there together for another half an hour whilst Finn told Amina about how he met his wife and what life was like back then.

Ben sat back and watched Finn and Amina talking.

'I love it when a plan comes together,' said Ben to no one in particular.

Chapter 29

Thea

“So what did Finn say?” asked Matt. He looked between Amina and Ben.

‘Well we’ve got a plan,’ said Amina. ‘Are you going to explain it, Ben?’

Thea watched Saba’s face

Ben nodded and sat one side of Saba, Amina sat the other and put her arms round the small girl.

‘When we were in the cemetery I made a new friend. He’s called Finn and he’s going to help us. I’ve just taken Amina to meet him and you liked him, didn’t you?’ Ben looked across at Amina who wrapped her arms tighter round Saba,

‘Yes I do, he was lovely, like the best grandfather you could ever have.’

Saba grinned.

‘But the first bit is going to be very difficult and quite horrid.’ Thea wondered what was coming next. Ben looked down and a silence hung between them all before he started talking again, ‘Saba you’re going to have to be very brave. Almost as brave as you already have been.’

Saba’s eyes were wide as she looked at Ben. He put his arm round her too and hugged her tight to him.

‘Do you trust us, Saba? Because you really need to if this is going to work.’

Thea saw Saba gulp, poor kid.

A very quiet, ‘Yes,’ escaped her mouth.

‘Do you see that big bag over there that belongs to Thea?’ Ben pointed at Thea’s half-opened bag with clothes spilling out of it. Ben looked at Thea for approval. What could her bag have to do with this? She remembered that first day

when she was so nasty to Amina. It seemed like years ago. Ben brought her back to the present.

‘Saba, we need you to hide in there. We’ll put you in the luggage compartment with the other bags. We’ll make sure you have water and something to eat in there but you must be very quiet. Do you think you can do that?’

Thea gripped the chair tightly, her knuckles going white. ‘Is that the only way?’ she asked Ben.

‘Yes it is, but it won’t be for long. I’m sorry Thea, I didn’t have a chance to ask you properly. You don’t mind do you?’

How could she? It was for Saba, wasn’t it? But her clothes. . .

‘Of course I don’t mind. Just one question, do I have to leave my clothes behind?’

Ben laughed, ‘No, of course not, we’ll spread them between our bags. Would that be ok?’

‘Yeah, of course it will. As long as Saba is safe and she’s happy to do it.’

Thea looked down at Saba who smiled broadly. Matt came up to Thea and hugged her then kissed her cheek.

‘You’re truly amazing.’

Ben continued, ‘Do you remember the return journey is from Caen to Portsmouth? It means we are longer on the ferry, but Finn is going to help us get her out once we are on the ferry. He knows how to do it.’

Saba looked around at everyone and said, ‘Should we practice. Let’s see if I can get in the bag.’

She pulled the bag across and took the rest of the clothes out and climbed in. ‘See I do fit! Zip me up.’

Thea looked at Matt, who looked at Amina, who looked at Ben. No one wanted to zip her up. 'Please, someone zip me up or we won't know if I can hide in here will we?' Saba's brow was furrowed with concern.

Ben got up and pulled the zip up. Saba disappeared totally. You would never have guessed there was an eleven year old girl in there.

'Are you ok?' asked Thea.

'Yes, I can move quite a bit,' the holdall was squirming like a chrysalis.

'I think you'll need some clothes in there for padding. Don't you think? It'll stop people seeing a foot or something too, won't it?' said Thea.

'Can you breathe alright?' said Matt who'd got up and was standing next to Ben.

'Yes, at the moment. There is a zip on the inside too so I can pull it down if I need more air. Look.' The bag started to open slightly. 'See.' Saba pulled the zip all the way down and jumped out.

Thea looked at the small girl with the huge eyes and wondered if she'd have been that brave in the same situation. She doubted it somehow.

Ben knelt down by the bag, 'You are so brave Saba, I am sure you will be very happy when we get you home.'

Saba took Ben's hand and looked at him very seriously, 'I can't be totally happy because Maadar and Baba won't be there. But I can go to school and I can be a doctor. No one will shoot me for wanting that, will they?'

'No,' said Amina. 'No one will shoot you for wanting to be a doctor, you're quite safe on that one.'

'What time is it?' Thea jumped up.

'It's seven o'clock,' said Matt. 'Why?'

‘You didn’t hear Mr Cooke, did you? He said we had to be down in an hour for dinner, which is now.’

‘Better go then,’ said Ben, ‘don’t want to attract attention do we?’ he tickled Saba then stood up straight. ‘Amina do you feel up to coming too?’

‘Yes I will, it’ll stop them coming up to check on me, won’t it? Saba, you’ll be ok for an hour, won’t you?’

Saba nodded and took up her position in the corner of Amina’s bed and started to read one of the books that Thea and Matt had brought back with them.

Thea smiled at her and when she walked out she turned to the others, ‘She’s the most amazing person I’ve ever met.’

‘I agree. And that Finn bloke that I meet today was amazing as well,’ said Ben.

‘This trip hasn’t turned out how we thought it would has it? But definitely nearly perfect,’ Matt put his arms round Thea and Amina.

‘Nearly?!’ said Ben.

Matt blushed and Thea laughed, ‘Well it was the best sex *I’ve* ever had.’

Amina put her hands over her ears, ‘Don’t want to hear this lalala lalala!’

They entered the restaurant all laughing. When they walked to the table, Thea heard Mr Cooke say to Ms Brodie. ‘I would’ve bet my whole salary that that group would be a disaster and I would’ve had to send Ben home. How wrong was I?’

Ms Brodie didn’t answer him, instead she said, ‘Amina are you feeling ok now?’

Amina nodded and they took their places at their table.

‘Please no limp green stuff tonight.’

'No, Matt,' Mr Cooke overheard. 'It's the last night, so you can choose from the menu!'

'Can we have wine then?' asked Ben.

Mr Cooke just looked at him.

'Ok,' said Ben. 'I'll take that as a no then?'

The group and Ms Brodie laughed, even Mr Cooke smiled.

Chapter 30

Amina

The following morning when Amina woke up she couldn't decide whether it was a bubble of excitement or fear that was threatening to burst in her stomach. She watched the curtain billowing out of the window and felt Saba's shallow breaths against her arm. It had only been two nights but Saba had taken to snuggling into Amina for comfort.

Would she be able to do the same tonight? Were they really going to be able to pull this off? It felt like a proper adventure. Stuff that turned up in books, not that happened in real life. She, Amina, the confused Muslim girl, was about to live it.

She slipped out from under Saba and headed to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, the face of an unknown girl stared back. Long black hair framing her face with her large green eyes. This is the person she wanted to be. Putting the hijab on again felt so claustrophobic, but she knew she needed to put it on to go home. Once there she could work out how she was going to explain to her parents that she no longer wanted to wear it. Amina pulled her brush through her hair. She loved the way it looked and shined. She slipped the hijab on. It started itching immediately. She remembered Saba's delight at putting the hijab back on. But that was different. That was who she was, and it'd been forcibly taken away from her.

Thea bounded into the bathroom.

'Don't you knock? I could've been on the loo,'

'Yeah right, like that would really worry you. We're friends now. Things like that don't matter. Remember I've been with you when you were sick!' Just to prove a point Thea hitched up her t-shirt and perched on the loo.

‘I’m outta here. I’ll wake Saba. We need to sort the cases out.’

As she walked out she heard Thea shout at her, ‘Saba’s already awake. I’ll be there in a mo, when I have finished having a pee.’

‘Too much information, Thea!’ Amina walked into the bedroom and found Saba bouncing on the bed.

‘Right, let’s get sorted, let’s get dressed first and then work out how much padding we need to put around you to make sure you are comfortable. The rest of Thea’s stuff can go in my bag.’ Amina stopped what she was doing and shouted, ‘Thea is it ok if I still borrow your bra?’

‘Of course,’ came a voice accompanied by the noises of frantic teeth cleaning. ‘It’s yours. My pressie to you.’

Amina put on the Wonderbra that Thea had given her. And pulled a t-shirt over the top. She loved the feel of it. Something else she was going to have to explain to her parents, but at this moment she didn’t care. She started to dance round the room, flashing her bra. She was thrilled at owning something so exciting. Saba giggled.

‘You’re silly. Is that how people behave in England? Will I have to do that do?’ She started dancing round the room lifting her t-shirt too. Amina jumped on the bed and indicated to Saba to follow, they jumped from bed to bed and then back onto the floor.

‘No, you do it in private where no one can laugh at you, but it’s fun isn’t it?’

There was a rhythmic knock at the door and Amina heard Matt say, ‘It’s us. Let us in.’

Amina and Saba raced around trying to get dressed. Clashing into each other as they panicked and giggled at the same time.

‘Come on, let us in. Someone might see us.’ It was Ben this time.

Thea came out of the bathroom looked at the crazy girls that were racing around the bedroom, 'What are you two up to? You're both fruit loops.' She opened the door.

Ben and Matt walked in. They had a bag of food and drink for Saba and their own bags already packed.

'We thought we ought to bring these down, just in case we can't get all your clothes in Amina's bag.'

Thea put her hands on her hips, 'What are you saying? Are you saying I brought too much stuff?' She winked at Saba.

'Like I'd dare!' Ben also winked at Saba, who giggled. 'Right in here is breakfast, Saba. You can eat this while we go down and have ours. Then when we come back we can get you sorted. Is that alright?'

Saba nodded, but was too busy exploring the bag Ben had just given her to really listen to what he was saying. They left her to it.

Amina didn't hang around at breakfast. She didn't feel like eating, so headed back to their room. The nerves were beginning to get to her. They were gnawing a hole in her stomach for sure. The others were obviously having the same problem as they appeared shortly after she got back to the bedroom. Ben took control and Amina was happy for him to do so. She felt out of her depth.

'Saba, let's have a test run and see how much padding we need to put round you and how much food and drink you can take with you. Let's put the bag on the bed.'

He flung it up and opened the zip wide. Saba looked at the gaping hole in the bag and then to Amina who could see Saba's face was as white as parchment as all the colour drained out of it. Her eyes were full of fear again.

'Are you alright?' asked Amina. 'Can you do this?'

Everyone in the room held their breath, waiting for Saba's answer. She didn't say anything but just climbed inside. There was a collective sigh as Thea and Ben put some of Thea's clothes in around Saba until she was padded, but still could move. Ben gave her a bottle of water, some rolls and some chocolate.

'This should keep you going. Can you move?' Saba wriggled around. 'That's good. Now let's try with the zip shut.' He pulled the zip up. Once again Amina was looking at a chrysalis, but this time it was only vaguely moving. 'Saba, is that ok?'

'Yes,' came a muffled voice. Ben opened the zip up again. They divided the rest of Thea's clothes and makeup between the other bags. Matt looked at the contents of his bag.

'I hope no one opens my bag! I'll never live it down if they find a bag of makeup and a leopard skin bra!' He picked the bra up and pretended to put it on.

Thea snatched it off him. 'Gerroff, that's my best one.'

'We need to start going,' said Ben, he seemed to have lost his sense of humour. Amina noticed how much he was sweating. He was as nervous as she was. 'Thea, are you going to be able to carry your bag with Saba in?'

They all looked from one to the other. No one had considered that.

They zipped Saba up and Thea tried to pick the bag up. She looked at Amina, her eyes were panic-stricken.

'I can't lift it. What are we going to do? They'll wonder why if I don't carry my own bag.'

They all looked from one to another trying not to let Saba realise they were worried. Amina kept thinking, this is it, stuffed before we have even started.

'Got it!' Matt put his arm around Thea. 'Ben and I carry all the bags. If they question it, we can say we are being gentlemanly and helping our lady friends.'

There was a noticeable sigh of relief from everyone including the holdall. 'That is a brilliant idea, Matt. What a star! Right, Saba,' Ben continued, 'We're ready to go. Are you ok? We'll do our best not to bump you. Just remember, when we get on the ferry I'll come and find you.'

There was a muffled, 'I remember,' this time.

Ben swung his own bag on his shoulder and Amina's, which was also a small bag. He took one handle of Thea's, and Matt took the other after he put his rucksack on.

'Everyone ready?' said Ben. They all nodded. 'Now listen, Saba, once we are out of this room we cannot speak to you. Ok?' The holdall seemed to nod.

They were ready to go when Thea suddenly threw her arms in the air. 'Stop I've got a brilliant idea. Matt, have you got your mobile?'

Matt nodded.

'Then put it on silent and give it to Saba. Make sure Ben's number and my number are in there.'

They put the holdall down and unzipped it. A very pale Saba appeared out of the opening. 'I like that idea.'

Matt handed her the phone and showed her how to make it work. 'Now if anyone other than Thea or Ben rings, do not answer it. You can text us to let us know how you are. Do you know how to do that?'

'Yes,' said Saba. She half smiled at them again and said in a voice tainted with fear, 'Thank you. Thank you for saving me and trying to help me.'

Amina could feel a lump developing in her throat. She was determined not to cry.

'Don't be daft,' Amina said. 'Now back you go. You're our own butterfly inside its chrysalis.'

Once again the party left the room and headed towards the coach. When they got outside they noticed that most of the bags had already been put in. Amina was relieved, that was part one of the plan achieved. They needed the bag to be one of the last put on board.

Mr Cooke spotted the boys carrying the bag, 'Good grief whose bag is that? Are you smuggling a refugee in there?'

Amina started to panic, she could feel the sweat prickling on head against her hijab. She could see the colour had drained from Ben's and Matt's faces. But it was Thea who saved the day.

'Sir, What do you mean? A girl has to have enough clothes to make an impact, you know. This is France after all.'

Mr Cooke looked at her and then laughed, 'Only you, Thea. Only you could think like that. Right come on, let's get the bags in and head home.'

Amina looked around at the hotel and out into Caen. She couldn't believe so many things had happened and changed in the few days they'd been there. But then something caught her eye on the pavement opposite, which made her gasp. It was him. That evil man! If he knew just how close Saba was. She touched Ben on the arm, 'Look,' she nodded in the direction of the man. She heard Ben mutter, 'Shit!'

Amina was really surprised when Ben walked up to Mr Cooke and pointed him out. This was either a really brave idea or a really silly one, depending on what Mr Cooke did.

'Thank you, Ben. Right let's get the last of these bags on board and then all of you get on the coach. I just need to nip back into the hotel.'

It took all Amina's strength not to laugh. Ben's face was a picture. The look of total surprise when he was thanked by Mr Cooke was hilarious. That was twice Mr Cooke had been nice to him now.

Amina watched them load Saba in. She was so brave, she didn't make a noise. Amina wasn't sure she could've done the same thing. The luggage compartment was shut and Ms Brodie was hustling those still on the pavement into the coach. Mr Cooke came back out from the hotel and got onto the coach behind Ms Brodie. As the door closed, a police car drew up with its sirens blaring.

Amina panicked. Perhaps Saba's captor had worked out what they were doing. Perhaps they were going to search the coach. She held her breath waiting for the door to swing open again. Instead the driver started the engine and they pulled away. As they left the police got out and took the man by the arm and led him into their car.

Ben's phone trilled as loads of messages came through. She knew he'd only just switched it back on. But there was only one that she cared about and Amina let out the longest sigh of relief she'd ever made in her whole life when he showed her the screen. It was from Saba.

'Whoopee, we're off!'

'What words have you been teaching her? 'Whoopee?' For goodness sake.'

Ben was smiling. He looked as relieved as Amina felt. Step one was over with. The next would be trying to get her out of the compartment on the ferry. Amina didn't want to think about that bit. Instead she concentrated on the police car that was now travelling away from them carrying the man in the opposite direction to Saba.

Chapter 31

Ben

The coach joined the queue for the ferry. Ben's stomach kept flipping. He was beginning to think he was totally mad to even try this. Maybe he should've spoken to Cookie and asked him to help. But the thought of Saba being handed over to the French authorities was more than he could cope with. He just hoped Finn was right and she would be ok in the luggage compartment. He knew she'd been stuck in the back of a lorry, but that was with her mum and other people. This is on her own, Ben thought, with the only people she knows sitting above her in comfort.

Another coach drew alongside Ben's coach. Ben looked across and there sitting right next to him on the new coach was Finn. He looked across at Ben and put his thumb up. Ben nodded and did the same. Ben's phoned beeped. He read the message 'R we near the ferry?' He text his reply. 'Yes, just getting on it. Will get you out as soon as we can. Not long now.' He couldn't imagine what it must have felt like to be stuffed in a luggage hold, wrapped in a holdall. Amina grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

'She'll be ok, she's tough,' she whispered.

Ben and Amina looked across at Finn who waved. 'At least he was right and they are on the same ferry as us.'

Thea and Matt were sat together behind them. 'Was that Saba?' asked Thea.

'Yes, she's fine, but I'll be so pleased when we can get her out. Have you seen Finn's there?' Ben pointed through the coach window.

'Yes, we saw him. I hope he's right about getting her out.'

The coach started to move again, heading slowly but surely towards the ferry's gaping mouth, hungrily consuming all the vehicles that were coming its way. There was a lot of clanging and banging as they were put in their place. Their coach and Finn's were put on first so they would be first off the other end. This was a good thing. He kept looking around so he could make note of any landmarks that would tell him where doors were in relation to the coach. There was a knot of panic growing larger and larger in his stomach. He could feel the sweat trickling down his back. His breathing was getting shallower and shallower. What if he couldn't get her out? What if she died? What'd he done to her?

A pair of cool hands took hold of his face and turned his head until he was looking at her.

'Ben, stop panicking. Now breathe slowly. Look at me, Ben.' Ben stared into Amina's calm, green eyes. They were smiling, even though her mouth wasn't. He focussed on what she was saying whilst he tried to slow his breathing down.

'She'll be fine. You must trust Finn. And most importantly you've done the right thing. You've saved that girl from prostitution. Thea's Mum will get it sorted and she'll be very safe, hopefully in my house as my new baby sister.'

Ben smiled at Amina, 'I hope you're right.'

'I am, Ben, trust me and most importantly, as I said, trust Finn. I've got total faith in him.' She winked at Ben and he smiled. She let her hands drop.

At the front of the coach, Mr Cooke was standing up. 'Gather whatever you want off the coach and follow me off slowly. Just remember you can't come back down here to get anything so make sure you have everything you want and don't take anything you won't need.'

Ben looked at Amina in panic again. 'Stop it, Ben. Let's go. I thought you were a brave gansta? What happened to him?'

Ben whispered in her ear, 'He was a big fake, but don't tell anyone.' Amina hugged him then moved down the coach.

They climbed down the stairs of the coach and headed with everyone else towards the door that led to some stairs.

An almost overwhelming stench of exhaust fumes hit Ben. He turned and looked at Amina, 'The fumes,' he mouthed at her. Mr Cooke was too near to speak out loud. She just smiled back and mouthed, 'She'll be alright. She won't be in here for long.'

There were sailors everywhere in their high-viz jackets, which at least made them easy to spot. Ben hoped they were just getting everyone in place and out of their cars and wouldn't still be there when he and Finn came back down.

Finn and his mates were getting off their coach too. Much slower than Ben's coach and with a lot less swearing. The veterans were all dressed in blazers and shirts and ties. Ben stopped to let them go by. Finn caught his arm.

'Good to see you lad. See you upstairs? I've some mates I think you'd like to meet.' He turned to the other veterans and shouted, 'This is Ben, the one I was telling you about.'

They all waved with arthritic hands before they struggled up to the stairs.

Ben found Mr Cooke was standing by him. 'You really did make an impact there, didn't you?'

'Not really. He's an amazing man himself. He was part of the D-Day Landings. He lost both his legs, like...' But Ben didn't finish the sentence. He didn't want to tell Cookie that bit of information.

'I just don't understand you, Ben Williamson, I really don't. You're an enigma.'

‘Wasn’t that the name of the machine they used to break the German’s codes?’

‘Yes it was. Since when have you been so interested in the Second World War?’

‘Forever.’

But Mr Cooke didn’t hear Ben’s answer because everyone started to move on. A caterpillar of people headed up the stairs to the rather more comfortable part of the ferry where they could find cinemas, casinos, shops and places to just sit and contemplate. None of them, Ben doubted, had smuggling on their minds, or a young girl hidden in their luggage.

Chapter 32

Ben

‘Come on, Ben, hurry up.’ Thea was pushing him from behind up the stairs.

‘I can’t go any faster, there are people in front, stop pushing.’

The foursome soon lost Mr Cooke and the others. They walked around until they came across a quiet area near the front of the ferry. There were masses of seats, just like the ones on the coach, but with very few people. There were huge windows overlooking the front of the ferry, and they could see a great mass of sea ahead of them as they chugged out of the harbour. There were fewer screaming babies and harassed parents in this bit.

It was Ben who spotted a small group of veterans. ‘Look, they’re over there.’

They headed towards them.

‘Hello,’ said Ben.

Finn looked up and smiled, ‘Ah there you are. As soon as we’re out of the harbour, we’ll go on our mission.’

The four teenagers sat with Finn who introduced them to some of the other veterans. ‘Everyone, I would like you to meet my new friends,’ he started pointing at them, ‘Ben, Thea, Matt and Amina.’

Finn smiled, ‘These reprobates are called,’ once again he started to point to the veterans this time, ‘Peter, Charlie and this is Noel.’

They all nodded. Ben watched them and grinned. Noel had a long white beard and a huge belly that seemed to go with his name. These men had been through so much. He was desperate to talk to them, but he knew other things had to be dealt with first. He looked at Matt and Thea. They looked very pale and their hands were knotted together. Amina was incredibly calm, or so she appeared. She

caught Ben watching her and winked. It was Matt who spoke first and voiced the question that had been going round and round Ben's head.

'How are we going to get into the luggage compartment? I saw him lock it.'

Finn dangled a set of keys in front of them. 'Not a problem.'

They all gasped. 'Are they the coach keys? How did you get them?' asked Thea.

Finn tapped his nose. 'Best not to ask, but we have our ways, don't we lads?' The group of veterans laughed and nodded at the youngsters. Ben was taken aback. He never imagined old people being bad. That's what people like him did, not OAPs.

'Right, come on, Ben, and Matt. You girls go and sit over there for the moment. Don't want it to look strange with you sitting with some old.'

Thea interrupted him, 'Wouldn't it be better that Amina went with Ben? Saba knows her well.'

Finn stood up slowly, 'Look, I'm sorry and I'm probably old fashioned, but I want the boys there just in case it gets nasty.' All four paled, no one had ever thought of it getting nasty. But Finn wasn't going to let them dwell on this, 'Now let's get going but listen, the code when everything is ok, is "Ham and Jam".'

Ben interrupted 'Like at Pegasus bridge!'

'Precisely my lad. If we have problems. It's Peanut Butter.'

'Peanut Butter!' Ben couldn't help laughing. But Finn gave him a silencing look.

'Yes, Peanut Butter, US crap. Now come on, or don't you want to get that girl out.'

The two boys and the old man headed towards the stairs. Ben knew they must have looked quite incongruous, the geek, the gangsta and the veteran all on a

secret mission. They went down the stairs. Once they got to the door of the hold, they stopped again for more instructions. In front of them were row upon row of cars, Ben scanned them looking for anyone who might stop them getting Saba.

‘Listen, if it looks like there are going to be any problems, you disappear and I will play the do-lally trick.’

Finn looked at them both very seriously, they both nodded.

‘Right, Matt, stay here and keep an eye out. If anyone is coming, whistle. You can whistle can’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Matt let out a loud ear piercing whistle using his fingers.

‘Not now, we’re not supposed to be attracting attention!’

Finn looked at Ben, ‘Are you sure he’s up to this?’

‘Yeah, he’s a bit geeky but he’s ok. He saved my life.’

Finn didn’t look convinced. ‘We’re wasting time. Matt just keep look out.’

Finn and Ben walked down the metal steps right into the hold. Matt stood at the top of the stairs watching out for anything. They couldn’t move fast because of Finn’s legs, but they managed to sidle alongside the cars. Ben kept his head down because he was much taller than Finn. Looking in the cars, he could see the debris of people’s journeys abandoned in the rush to get out of the car. There were screwed up magazines, half-eaten apples and coke cans spread across back seats, waiting for their owners to return. It didn’t take long to get to the coaches and they soon found theirs.

Finn fumbled in his pocket to find the keys and pulled out the bunch. Ben and Finn looked at them.

‘That’s a lot of keys,’ said Ben.

‘Yup, we’ll just work our way through them.’ He took the first one and slipped it in the lock. He tried to turn it. It wouldn’t move it. ‘Next one.’

Ben could feel the sweat trickling down his back as one and after another, Finn tried the keys.

‘What if it’s not the right bunch?’

Finn wiped the sweat off his own face before continuing with the keys, ‘It’s the right bunch, and you have to learn to be patient.’ Finn put the next key in and twisted it. There was a resounding clunk and Finn pulled the luggage compartment door open. The holdall was where it’d been put, one of the last in. Ben unzipped the holdall, and a very pale but smiling Saba appeared.

‘Come on let’s get you out of there,’

Saba climbed out and Finn shut the door. Ben saw him make a mental note of which key it was before he put them back into his blazer pocket.

‘Saba, this is Finn, he’s helping us.’ Saba flung her scrawny arms round Finn’s neck. He looked abashed.

‘Thank you.’ But as she spoke, a high, piercing whistle echoed round the hold.

‘Trouble. You two make your own way but keep low and silent. I’ll do a bit of acting.’

Saba and Ben hid between the coaches. Ben could see Saba’s eyes were glinting with tears. He whispered, ‘It is ok, we’ll be fine.’ He gave her a hug.

‘Follow me, but keep very low and very quiet.’

He could see Finn walking away from them. ‘Come on, this way,’ they crawled along towards the stairs. Every time they got to the edge of a car Ben would check to see if anyone was around. He’d lost sight of Finn. But then he heard him.

‘I can’t find the toilets. Can you help me? I am so confused.’

Ben turned round to Saba and put his finger to his lips. A voice Ben didn't recognise responded. 'Of course Sir, you're very lost. You're not supposed to be down here. Come with me and I'll show you the toilets.'

'Thank you, that's very kind of you. This is such a big place.'

Ben waited until the footsteps of the two men faded. Even the silence seemed loud now. He wanted to get Saba out of there as soon as possible. 'Come on let's go. Keep low but let's see if we can go a bit quicker.'

'Ok,' said Saba, then she hesitated. 'Ben, I'm frightened.'

He knew what she meant. The hold echoed around them with the sound of crunching metal and battering waves. It was so dark with a battalion of cars set out in front of them. But he was determined not to fail at this mission.

He turned and knelt down in front of her. He had forgotten she was only eleven. 'I know you are, but we'll be with the others soon. Do you want to hold my hand?'

She gripped his hand and squeezed it a lot tighter than Ben imagined any eleven year old could, it was almost painful. They started to move forward again and were soon at the stairs. Ben sneaked a look over the bonnet of a car and could see no sailors anywhere neither could he see Matt or Finn. For a brief moment he panicked, should he go or should he wait for them? He knew he had to get Saba somewhere away from the hold where she would feel safe again.

'Come on.' He pulled up to a standing position and they walked up the stairs. Ben was trying to look very nonchalant as if he always walked up the stairs with a smuggled child. He looked at Saba, 'Are you ok?' Her face looked very small under the hijab but she nodded. 'Nearly there. But listen, when we get into the corridor and the public places we can't hold hands, in case someone from the school sees us. They'd ask questions. Are you ok about that?' Ben noticed her

bottom lip quivering slightly. Oh please don't cry, Saba, I know this is hard for you.

She didn't cry she just said to Ben, 'That's ok, I understand.' She took a deep breath and let go of Ben's hand. They walked separately into the public areas until they found the others.

'Ham and Jam!' said Ben loud enough that everyone would hear. He could see Finn was back with his friends and Matt was with Thea and Amina. The moment Saba saw Amina she forgot all about pretending she didn't know anyone. She raced forward and hugged Amina.

'Oi you lot, do you want to play cards? Bring the little'un,' said Noel. His eyes twinkled as Saba came up to him.

'I like your beard?' Saba was looking at his beard, 'My Baba had a beard but it wasn't as long as that one.'

'Go on, pull it, see if it comes off.' Saba looked around at Amina and the others.

'It's ok, go for it,' said Thea.

Saba took hold of the beard and gave it a tug. Noel's head moved with the beard and he let out a mock shout, 'Ouch!'

Saba looked heartbroken, 'I didn't mean to hurt you but you told me to, I'm so sorry,'

Noel put his arm around her and squeezed. 'It was a joke, little one. You didn't hurt me. Would you help me play cards?' Saba looked at the others again, her eyes full of questions.

'It's ok Saba,' said Amina. 'You're quite safe, I promise.'

He handed her the cards and Saba tried to shuffle them but succeeded in dropping them on the floor.

She turned to Noel, 'I'm sorry, I'll pick them up.'

'That's no problem, you just played 52 card pick-up!'

'Can you lot play poker?' asked Finn. Ben admitted he could play badly whilst the others couldn't at all. 'Time to teach you then, isn't it. It's part of history. This is what we played before we landed.'

All four teenagers gasped and spoke in unison, 'The special project sheet. Shit!'

'What's the problem?' asked Noel.

Matt fished the red piece of paper out of the pocket of his jeans. It was very crumpled.

'We were supposed to find out what soldiers were doing the night before the landings.'

'Oh that's easy,' said Finn. 'Ben, I told you about the piper and what happened in the landing craft, didn't I?'

'Yes you did, about people wanting private time and reading the Bible and things.'

Noel spoke next, 'We'd no idea what was going to happen. We all waited on the beaches by the Solent. You couldn't see any sand or grass for soldiers and you couldn't see the sea for boats. It was a very strange night. There was a tension in the air as we waited to be told to start. There were WRNS from the local Fleet Air Arm base walking amongst us. They were handing out sweets and fags.'

'My Nan must have been one of those. She said she'd done that.' Matt was jumping up and down on his seat, knocking the cards off.

'Be careful, Matt,' said Thea trying to catch all the cards. 'You need to write this down.'

‘I bet your Nan was one of them. They were lovely girls. They’d stop and talk to us for a bit before moving on. We all knew we’d no idea if we’d be coming back. We were a mass of mixed emotions. Excitement at the thought of being involved in something so big and important, and naked fear of might happen there. No one wanted to die,’ said Finn. He started to shuffle the cards. Matt was scribbling away as more and more memories came forward whilst the ferry moved up and down like it was sighing in its sleep. Disturbing no one.

‘This’ll be the best project ever,’ said Ben. Out of the corner of eye he spotted Mr Cooke coming towards them. ‘A Cookie to the left!’

‘Everything all right here? This lot aren’t causing any trouble are they?’ His eyes scanned everyone looking for the answer he wanted, but he didn’t get it.

‘Anything but, they’re keeping us company and playing cards. You should be proud of four such well mannered and delightful teenagers.’ This was Peter with a shaking face who was talking. Ben noticed he was wearing the military cross. He wanted to ask how he’d won it, but Cooke kept talking.

‘I see you’ve picked up another one.’ He pointed at Saba. ‘I hope her parents know where she is?’

Ben felt spikes of anger forcing their way into his head. He wanted to snap at Mr Cooke and tell him what a dickhead he was.

Instead, Noel spoke: ‘She’s my great granddaughter. And her parents know exactly where she is, thank you.’ Noel managed to sound very gruff when he said this. Mr Cooke looked embarrassed and walked away rapidly.

The group in unison announced, ‘Ham and Jam!’

The hours on the ferry raced by and it wasn’t long before Finn was saying, ‘Saba we need to take you back.’

Her face dropped for a moment before she managed to force a smile, 'Ok, off we go.' She stood up and everyone hugged her.

'You're so brave, Saba. It'll be all over soon.' Ben knew he had never met anyone so brave, apart from maybe his brother.

The trip to get her back was a lot smoother than the one to get her. No one spotted them and Finn knew exactly which key it was this time. But it tore at Ben's soul to leave her there again in the darkness. He could see tears trickling down her face as he did up the zip.

'I'm so sorry, Saba, but it's the only way.' She smiled a very watery smile.

'I know. Ham and Jam.'

On the way back, Finn took Ben and Matt a different route. Ben looked at Matt who just shrugged his shoulders. Finn obviously had a plan which he didn't feel it was necessary to share but it soon became obvious to Ben and Matt what it was. Ben could see the coach driver ahead eating at a table. Finn walked straight up to him, bent down beside him then when Finn got up he said, 'Excuse me, these keys were under your chair. Are they yours?'

The driver looked surprised then when he saw the keys.

'Yes mate, that's them. Thank goodness you spotted them. I didn't realised they'd dropped out my pocket. What a disaster that could've been! You're a hero, old man. A real gent.' He patted Finn on the back.

'No problem, glad to be of help.' Finn walked off. Matt and Ben joined him again. 'Ham and Jam?' said the boys.

'Oh yes, definitely Ham and Jam.'

They got back to the others where Ben announced, 'Finn's amazing he's just...' But Finn interrupted him, 'Ssh,' he pointed into a corner where Mr Cooke was sitting. Ben shut up immediately and sat with the others looking out towards

Portsmouth Harbour. They could see HMS Victory standing proud guarding the port.

Thea came up to him and whispered in his ear. 'Whilst you were gone, I rang my mum. I thought I ought to warn her. She thinks we are mad but also very brave. She's going to help Saba, if she can.'

Ben hugged Thea and then sat down to look out over the Harbour like the others. It'd been the strangest few days Ben had ever experienced, he didn't want it to end. He wanted to stay in contact with Finn and his mates. Maybe they would even be able to help Dan.

'This might be a really silly question, but do you have a mobile Finn?'

Finn pulled a brick of a mobile phone out of his pocket. 'I may be old and this may be old,' he showed everyone his mobile, 'but it works and I can work it. So yes I do have a mobile. Shall we swap numbers? I'd like to meet your brother.'

They managed to exchange numbers before there was a call for all passengers to make their way to their vehicles.

'Here we go,' said Amina. She and Thea hugged Finn and all his friends.

Noel thrust his hand out towards the boys, 'Sorry, don't do any of this wussy cuddling stuff between men, just a good shake of hands, like proper men.'

Matt and Ben grinned then shook the hands of each veteran.

'Thank you,' said Ben, 'for all your help with... what can I say... with everything.'

Chapter 33

Ben

Back on the coach, the foursome could wave at their new friends.

‘I can’t believe we’ve managed that. Saba’s just text me. She’s ok but Matt’s Mum keeps ringing!’

‘Oh gawd, she would, wouldn’t she. Wait till she finds out I have a girlfriend. She will have an apoplectic fit.’

‘Thanks!’ Thea crossed her arms and turned away from Matt.

‘Not ’cos it’s you, but because it’s anyone. She thinks I shouldn’t have anything to do with girls until I’m twenty five.’

Amina, Thea and Ben looked at him, ‘You’re joking aren’t you?’ They asked in unison.

‘I wish I was.’ Matt shrugged his shoulders.

The coach started to move forward.

‘Here we go, homeward bound,’ announced Ben. But then their coach and Finn’s were pulled to one side. Ben could see men in uniform and dogs standing at the front of both the coaches.

‘Fuck. Sniffer dogs,’ said Ben under his breath.

‘What?’ said Amina. ‘You’re joking.’

‘No, I’m not.’ Ben looked across at the other coach. He could see Finn was looking at the dogs too.

Mr Cooke piped up at the front. ‘Looks like Ben Williamson’s reputation has preceded him. Don’t worry everyone the dogs are just going to search around the coach and maybe in it.’

Ben felt panic welling up inside him. He grabbed at Amina.

‘Christ, what do we do? They’re going to find her. Why didn’t I think of this?’ said Ben.

Thea craned her neck to try and see what was happening, ‘We’ve got so far and it can’t fall to pieces now, surely. Even if they find her, where will they send her back to?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe they won’t smell her, they are looking for drugs not little girls,’ said Amina.

She almost crushed Ben’s hands when the men with the dogs started to advance. The four teenagers held their breath until a loud banging stopped the men. Ben and the others looked across at Finn’s coach. There was an awful kafuffle on it. Noel was making wild hand signals and pointing at Finn. What was going on?

‘No,’ shouted Amina. She was pointing at Finn. He was in his seat, holding his chest and seemed to be fighting for breath. ‘He’s having a heart attack or something.’

Ben, Amina, Matt and Thea sat watching helplessly through the window while their new friend fought for his life. But then they found their coach was moving forward.

‘Mr Cooke,’ shouted Ben. ‘What’s happening? It looks like Finn was taken ill.’

Mr Cooke stood up and came down to where the four of them were.

‘It did look that way. I’ll try and find out what happened when we get back. I’m sorry, I know you made friends with him. They waved us off without checking so the ambulance could get in.’

Ben let his head drop into his hands. Mr Cooke rested his hand on Ben's shoulder, 'I'm sure he'll be ok, Ben.' He walked back to the front of the coach. No one was chatting anymore. They were all so shocked.

Ben's phone beeped when they got out of Portsmouth. He looked at it in amazement. The message was from Finn. All it said was 'Ham and Jam.'

Ben couldn't stop the tears. Any tough-gansta-guy image melted away. Finn was ok, and he'd done it to save Saba. He wiped his cheeks quickly and passed his phone round to the others. They all had the same reaction. Tearful smiles passed between them.

The coach drove into the school yard where a myriad of parents were waiting for their children. Ben spotted his Mum immediately. She was wearing her Sunday best and looked very tired. He vowed to help her more now he was home, rather than running away from everything. He could spot Thea's Mum because he'd seen her before. She was a carbon copy of Thea. Or rather Thea was a carbon copy of her. Both cared just a bit too much about appearances. She was standing there in a tight leopard print top and very high heels that made her totter when she walked. She didn't look anything like a social worker should, but she was supposed to be brilliant. Ben hoped this was true.

He tried to guess which were Matt and Amina's parents. There were two couples who he imagined might be them. One was an Asian couple, very smartly dressed, the mum stood just a little bit behind the dad, in respect, Ben assumed. They looked very precise people. Her sari and hijab were very neat and Amina's Dad's suit was very well pressed. All the other dads were dressed in casual clothes so he stood out a bit. Then there was a couple who he prayed for Matt's sake weren't his parents, but he had an awful feeling were. They were wearing

matching, hand-knitted cardigans. Ben knew if they were his parents he would have rather curled up and died than admitted it. Poor Matt.

He heard Matt speak, 'Oh no, they've gone for the happy family look, shit. Those cardigans!'

'Have you got one too, Babes?' Thea asked Matt.

'Yes, but I deliberately set fire to mine so I couldn't wear it.'

Thea, Amina and Ben couldn't help laughing.

'I don't think they're too happy with you not answering your phone by the looks of it,' said Ben. 'Think it will be more than a burnt cardigan you have to worry about.'

'Oh great! Wait till they find out what I have really been up to whilst on the school trip. Though maybe I won't tell them everything.' Ben saw him wink at Thea and laughed again.

'Let's be honest, nothing we've done is going to compare to when they find out we've been smuggling people.' Amina tried to laugh but they all knew this could backfire big time.

In the next few minutes their worlds, and Saba's, could all fall to pieces. Ben text Saba. 'We are here. Not long now. Be brave.'

They all trundled out of the coach. Parents rushed forward and embraced embarrassed teenagers, all of whom were squirming to get out of the hugs. Mr Cooke and Ms Brodie looked exhausted. The driver came round and opened the luggage compartment. Ben and Matt moved quickly to grab the holdall from him before he threw Saba on the floor.

They brought it back to where their parents were. Thea's mum looked at them all. 'Well, where is she?'

'Where's who,' said Mr Cooke who'd overheard.

Ben unzipped the bag.

A small head wrapped in a hijab with bright sparkling eyes and a broad grin appeared and announced, 'Ham and Jam.'

Epilogue

September

Ben was standing watching the Homecoming Parade. There was music from the military bands providing a sound track as regiments marched up to stand in front of the Guildhall. The streets were lined with men, women and children, all shouting and cheering. Some were waving flags, others were clapping. It was a mass of sights and sounds celebrating the return of soldiers.

‘Look, Mum, there they are.’

He pointed to where Finn was pushing Dan very slowly to where the Queen was going to give him his Operational Service Medal. Both were properly turned out. Dan in his combats and green beret. Finn in his blazer with regimental tie and green beret. Two marines, battles over 50 years apart, but the same injuries, same pain, same guilt. Ben wished he could make it easier for them, but knew it was beyond him.

He’d offered to push Dan, but Dan had refused, ‘No I want you to watch me get my medal from the Queen with Mum, not have to push me.’

This was where Ben was now. His Mum was standing at his side, wearing a brand new outfit that Saba, Amina and Thea had helped her choose. Her whole body was shaking.

‘Are you ok, Mum?’

She gripped his arm tighter and looked at him. Her eyes were glassy with tears but the smile told the truth, it couldn’t have got bigger if she tried. She just nodded at Ben. He knew she was so proud, as was he, watching his brother the soldier, not his brother the cripple.

Thea and Matt came strolling up holding hands.

‘Hello Mrs Williamson, you look gorgeous,’ said Thea. Ben’s Mum beamed at Thea. The couple were still together despite Matt’s parents, who’d done their utmost to split them up. Thea’s Mum had had to work hard to get his parents to give in and agree they could continue to see each other. But that wasn’t as hard as the magic she did to make sure Saba could stay in this country and more importantly that she could stay with Amina.

The two girls were walking towards him too. They were holding hands like sisters should. Saba had her hijab on but Amina didn’t. She’d been able to argue her point eloquently and her Dad understood what she was trying to say. He told her that he hoped one day she would go back to wearing it but when she was ready and not because he said. He was more relaxed with her now the trip. Her brothers, however, disapproved and made sure she knew it. But it wasn’t just not wearing the hijab, they were against but her new friends too.

‘Ben!’ shouted Saba, she let go of Amina’s hand and raced over to him. He picked her up and swung her round before putting her down.

‘You’re a lump!’ She’d grown quite a bit since the trip.

The trip. That’s when everything had changed. It’d turned Ben’s world upside down and inside out. He was no longer trying to prove anything. He knew who he was and if someone didn’t like it, so what? He didn’t need to fight them or threaten them with a knife. He just walked away. He’d walked away from a lot of things and had chosen to walk towards a lot of other things. Amina stood next to him and slipped her hand into his, squeezing it tightly then let go. He looked down at her and smiled. She was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

They were all standing together now watching Finn and Dan. It was like they were relatives. His family had suddenly got very big. He liked it like that.

His Mum suddenly clasped his arm again as the Queen moved forward and presented Dan with his medal. She shook both Dan's and Finn's hands. The old veteran visibly glowed with pride.

Mr Cooke came up to where Ben was standing.

'Congratulations Mrs Williamson, you must be very proud. And congratulations to you Ben on your GCSE's, you did well. I had no idea you were so interested in history.'

'Thank you,' Ben carried on watching the soldiers. He wasn't really interested in what Mr Cooke had to say and neither was his Mum who was engrossed in watching her other son. Undaunted Mr Cooke continued,

'Ben, I have to be honest, you are not the person I thought you were.'

Ben looked Mr Cooke straight in the eyes. His answer resounded loudly against Mr Cooke's question, 'None of us are, Sir.'

Exegesis

Introduction

The critical discussion of how contentious issues are, or should be, dealt with in children's fiction is ongoing and has many interested parties with widely differing opinions. At the same time that the presence of sex, drugs, alcohol and other sensitive topics in children's fiction is subject to academic scrutiny,¹¹ it is also constantly subject to opinions promoted in newspapers, and other media, where the expertise required to enter the discussion seems to require no other authority than simply being an adult. This is partly because writing for children is (almost¹²) never written by children and mostly written by anyone but them. Subsequently, there is a vibrant and energetic discourse which invites serious and critical engagement. I first entered this debate when I co-wrote a chapter entitled 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representing drugs in children's literature', which appeared in Manning's *Drugs and Popular Culture Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society*, and from which the following quotation is taken:

The coupling of children's literature with controversial subjects such as sex and drugs should perhaps be considered as a cultural oxymoron, a combination that immediately signals an end of innocence and thereby an end to childhood itself. However, there is another side to the argument which suggests when addressing such topics, children's literature is exactly where they should be located.¹³

¹¹ See Hunt (2005), Rudd (2010), Nodelman (2008), Seelinger Trite (2000), Reynolds (2007)

¹² See Kimberley Reynolds (2007) *Radical Children's Literature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.155-179

¹³ Melrose A., Harbour V., 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representing drugs in children's literature,' Manning P., ed., *Drugs and Popular Culture Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007), p.276

In this debate, the popular press most often represents the view that children should be protected, and thereby remain innocent, thus characterising the inclusion of sensitive topics in children's fiction as an unacceptable assault on that innocence. Conversely, there are others, especially writers and academic critics (including myself) who suggest that in fact fiction is an ideal place to explore such issues. Indeed, as Philip Pullman has suggested, it might be considered that fiction is the best place to explore them:

There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book...stories are vital. Stories never fail us because, as Isaac Bashevis Singer says, "events never grow stale." There is more wisdom in a story than in volumes of philosophy. And by a story I mean not only *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* but also the great novels of the nineteenth century, *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*, *Bleak House* and many others: novels where the story is at the centre of the writer's attention, where the plot actually matters...We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.¹⁴

Pullman's idea of the story being something that 'lasts forever' is an important one and one which I endorse. Engagement with fiction is immersion in a cultural space which allows us to find out who we are, or even, who we are not because stories and storytelling is all about helping all of us to make the connections. In a highly persuasive but seriously understated idea that 'Adults can nurture children... but they do not have the answers... *what they can do is tell children stories about the connections...*'¹⁵[my italics] Adam Phillips highlights the idea that storytelling is the key which opens the door to the connections that help us make sense of the world and while not exclusive, the book, the written text, plays a

¹⁴ Pullman P., <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/pullman/author/carnegie.php> (date accessed July 2011)

¹⁵ Phillips A., *Terrors and Experts*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 2

big part in this process. But it is a mistake to assume a child (just like all of us) comes to a story, in a book, say, in ignorance. They come knowing what they already know with a view to encountering that which they know not in their ever expanding experience and gathering of knowledge.

Of course, books are not the only possible 'key', Melvyn Burgess has already reflected, that there are few secrets we can keep from children these days, as '...in a world more embedded in fictions than ever, in the form not just of books but gaming, politics, film, TV, adverts, even education, kids are probably more able than their parents to appreciate the different ways *stories* are used.'¹⁶ [my italics] But it would be impossible for a thesis to cover all these routes of communication at the same time. Thus, I am concentrating on the written text, the book, the novel, as a form which enables the reader to consider how they would react in certain situations, through empathising with the characters and living the story by experiencing it vicariously.¹⁷ It is my belief that by reading such narratives readers are being given the 'tools to read this world carefully and critically.'¹⁸ Charles Sarland's work supports this idea, he suggests that, '...research evidence uncovers a complex picture of the young seeking ways to take control of their own lives, and using the fiction that they enjoy as one element in the negotiation of cultural meaning and value.'¹⁹

¹⁶ Burgess M., 'Sympathy for the Devil' <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html> (date accessed August 2011). Also see Sonia Livingstone's highly informative book, *Children and The Internet* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) for an informed and coherent reading of this

¹⁷ The vicarious experience in this situation and throughout this thesis is defined as '...knowledge is gained through some means other than your own direct experience (e.g. such as reading a book). It acts like a direct experience in its relevant aspects. It makes it possible to predict what would happen in a new situation which has never personally been experienced.' www.jsu.edu/depart/psychology/sebac/fac-sch/rm/ch3-6.html (accessed January 2011).

¹⁸ McGillis R., 'Learning to Read,' *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1997, vol. 22 (3) p.130

¹⁹ Sarland C., 'Critical Tradition and Ideological positioning', Hunt P., ed., *Understanding Children's Literature*, Second Edition, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.44

In focusing any thesis on ‘children’s fiction’, having dealt with the forms of fiction that will be examined, there remains something else that needs to be considered. If the definition of children’s literature is literature written for children and not adults, then we also need to consider the point at which childhood meets adulthood, the point at which the old child becomes a young adult (YA), before maturing into adulthood.²⁰ This is particularly pertinent when addressing issues in what has now been termed as young adult fiction (YAF). YAF is not children’s literature in the same way that it is not adult fiction: it is fiction aimed specifically at YAs and deals with issues and storylines that aim to capture their imagination. Since Burgess’s *Junk*, published in 1996, YAF has been the source of many story lines based on contentious issues, which are neither child nor adult related, but simply the explorations of fictional lives and experiences of YAs as emerging adults.

For the fiction to be a tool providing the reader with a vicarious experience, the experience must be relevant to the world of the reader, where relevance also comes to mean curiosity in adult normative behaviour as well as deviant behaviour involving sex, drugs and alcohol. But, then the child/adult dichotomy problematizes that because the adult is always seen as giver and the child receiver. I would go on to suggest that, though the YAs are still not binary opposites of ‘children’ or ‘adults,’ they are ‘other’ because to some extent the YAs are on the edge of childhood and the cusp of adulthood being neither one nor the other. Young adulthood is the bridge between the two. YAs make a lot of noise and are the target of many marketing campaigns as suggested by Martyn Denscombe who said:

²⁰ Savage J., *Teenage The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York, London: Viking, 2007) p.xv. Also see p.234 for more information on young adults.

Young people are expected to navigate through an acutely difficult social and personal context on their passage to adult status. At school treated as captives, children, and ignorant. At home, treated sometimes as dependants whose lives are to be directed, other times as responsible and independent adults. In the high street, treated as high-profile consumers, yet not old enough to be served alcohol in pubs and clubs.²¹

Yet, like the child, YAs have no collective voice. Instead they are the ‘voices in the shadows’ just waiting to come forward as childhood and young adulthood are erased and before they are ‘camouflaged as “*one of us.*”’²²[my italics]

Young adulthood is the starting point of the journey to adulthood from childhood where there is a natural yet transient gap based on experience between the child and the adult. It is a gap that is neither stable nor permanent but constantly under scrutiny and always available for mutual exploration by the writer and the reader. This gap could be considered the ‘inter’, the ‘in-between’ space as Homi Bhabha has written:

...we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture...exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity [adult/child] and emerge as the others of ourselves.²³

I realise Bhabha is writing on postcolonial theory but my [adult/child] edit shows how it can be reapplied here. In terms of experience, it is the YA who occupies that *inbetween space*, standing closest to the adult as she/he begin to negotiate the last part of the journey between child and adult, inexperience and experience. And it’s crucial to say that this meeting at the bridge, the inbetween space is not a site of

²¹ Denscombe M., ‘Uncertain identities and health-risking behaviour: the case of young people and smoking in late modernity,’ *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 52 (1) March 2001, pp.157-177

²² Melrose A., *Here Comes the Bogeyman*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p.28

²³ Bhabha H., *The Location of Culture*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p.56

adult domination but rather the site which the adult writer (in the form of a book and its characters) and the reader can jointly explore. As I said above, neither reader nor writer comes to this space empty handed. They each bring with them that which they know and in search of that which they don't know or understand... yet. For me this is the real purpose of YAF, a site of mutual exploration for the writer and the reader and like the YA, YAF can be seen to bridge the gap between children's fiction and adult fiction.

This exploration through fiction being conducted by the YA as part of a much wider cultural discourse invariably includes the search for identity, which is pivotal to their development as part of their maturation, both personally and culturally. Denscombe suggested that this identity is 'uncertain,' and it is this uncertainty that motivates YAs to experiment with it by partaking in 'health-risking behaviour,'²⁴ such as drug taking, binge drinking and underage sex. The 'partaking' can involve the vicarious experience derived through reading about such activities in YAF where they could ask questions of themselves and the text. Whilst these activities can be deemed deviant because they are illegal, their representation within YAF has to reflect the actuality and, as is borne out by my research, these activities have become culturally and socially normalised.

Using Burgess's representation of sex,²⁵ drugs and alcohol in *Junk* as a benchmark a selection of British contemporary realist YA novels²⁶ from 1996 for

²⁴ Denscombe M., 'Uncertain Identities and health-risking behaviour: the case of young people and smoking in later modernity,' *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 52, (1) March 2001, pp.57-177

²⁵ The representation of sex relates specifically to the heterosexual act. I would like to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis as I am aware that there is a bias towards heteronormative sexual activity with little acknowledgement of homosexuality, lesbianism, bi- or trans-sexuality. This is because, I believe, each one is a thesis in itself

²⁶ This exergesis will be looking at young adult fiction that is contemporary, realist, British and published after *Junk* in 1996. I am using only British texts because both American and Australian young adult fiction deals with contentious issues in very different ways for example they have a different approach to censorship. There are also specific historical and social circumstances at play, in particular, social formations that will inflect YAF with very specific sets of concerns and modes of representation. In

each subsequent year up to, and including, 2010 were chosen and compared critically and culturally from the dual perspective of writer and reader. The cultural research involved understanding society's perception of underage sex, drugs and alcohol use, including examining current statistics and government reports. The results of which were used as a form of *narrative system*;²⁷ enabling me to critically compare the representation of sex, drugs and alcohol in YAF with this 'perceived' reality. In the main the representation within the texts did not match the reality. Instead, over time they appeared to become more graphic and prevalent. When I examined the representation of sex in YAF my findings highlighted how the act of sex had become more graphic and no longer implied: for example, representations moved from the implied sex covered by a sleeping bag in Burgess's *Junk* (1996) to the more explicit and detailed sex in Nicholson's *Rich and Mad* (2010). When I explored the representation of drugs I found it useful to apply an expanded definition of normalisation, which suggested that, within popular culture (and in particular YAF), soft drug use is no longer portrayed as 'other'.²⁸ This was particularly the case with depictions of cannabis which are no longer used to indicate problematic drug use instead ecstasy and cocaine are now used to do this. As with both sex and drugs, my research highlighted how the representation of alcohol in YAF did not reflect the realities of everyday life for YAs. Instead, alcohol is often portrayed as a panacea for stress and social ills, such as exam stress, where the reality of issues such as binge drinking has yet to make a credible appearance.

addition, in Australia, the protagonists tend to be much older than in British texts see Tony Eaton's paper 'Growing Older – Young Adult Fiction Coming of age' in *Writing in Education*, November 2010) pp.50-53

²⁷ Bal M., *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of Narrative*, 2nd edition, (Toronto, London: University of Toronto Press, 1997 [1985]) p.3

²⁸ This is an expansion on the definition of 'normalisation' as given by Manning P., in 'Introduction: an overview of the Normalisation debate,' *Drugs and Popular Culture Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007), p.49

Through the exploration of risk-taking behaviours, involving sex, drugs and alcohol, in social, cultural and critical contexts, I was able to engage with, and understand, my own creative ideas as a mother, a writer and a reader. I rationalised that the relationship between criticality, including the research, and creativity was like a gyre, which has no beginning or ending, where the narrative evolved constantly, reacting to social norms and issues enroute.²⁹ It was as part of this process that the creative part of the thesis developed; from the research undertaken, *Ham and Jam*, my novel, emerged as a piece of contemporary, realist YAF to form the major part of this thesis. This research, because of the subjects it was dealing with, left me, as a writer, with many questions which I took to the pages of my creative piece and left there for the reader to explore, or interrogate, as Maurice Blanchot suggests:

...as soon as the page has been written, the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing – though he may not have been aware of it – is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work waiting for a reader to approach.³⁰

Therefore, as a novelist, I have offered the YA reader the opportunity to vicariously experience my versions of the risk-taking behaviour that developed out of the research. I have, as Susan Sontag explains, become a novelist who ‘...is

²⁹ This was a concept of creativity that Yeats used in his poetry and with regards to it. Mills Harper G., Hood W.K., eds., *A Critical Edition of Yeats A Vision*, (London, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978 [1925]) p.129. Also see Yeats’ poem ‘The Second Coming’. This idea formed the basis for a creative model which is based on the gyre and was developed by Melrose and Harbour. Melrose A., ‘Icarus in ellipses...some thoughts on textual intervention’, Melrose A., Webb J., Kroll J., May S., *Icarus Extended* (Brighton: Lulu, 2011) 2011), pp.9-19 ; Harbour V., ‘Even in Creative Writing.’ Paper presented at the NAWE Conference, Cheltenham, Nov 10 2010. Also see Appendix 2 which is a graphic of the model p.324 plus see p.294 where the model has been applied to my creativity.

³⁰ Blanchot M., Trans., Davis L., Auster P., Lamberton R., *Blanchot Reader Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed., Quasla G., (New York: Station Hill, 1999), p.359

someone who takes you on a journey. Through space. Through time. A novelist [who] leads the reader over a gap, makes something go where it was not.’³¹

The critical part of this thesis will look to explore some of the cultural, critical and creative ideas surrounding the issues of writing about contentious subjects such as sex, drugs and alcohol. The exegesis is divided into three:

1. ‘On the Border of Once Upon a Time in a Land Far, Far Away...’ which explores the relevance of storytelling for YAs. It considers the feasibility of stepping into the experiential gap³² whilst providing the reader with the opportunity for a vicarious experience.
2. ‘Young Adults and Their Fiction – A Journey Fuelled by Sex, Drugs and Alcohol’ where I start by examining the terms ‘young adult’ and ‘young adult fiction.’ This discussion then moves on to an exploration of the term ‘representation’ before stating the findings of the research into the movement in the representation of sex, drugs and alcohol in YAF.
3. ‘Considering the creative process’ which is a critical reflection on my own creative process, including an exploration into how the research undertaken informed the novel.

³¹ Sontag S., ‘Pay attention to the World’, ‘Review’ *Saturday Guardian*, Saturday 17th March 2007

³² The concept of the ‘experiential gap’ and the possibilities of moving into it was first mentioned by Andrew Melrose in his two books: *Storykeeping The Story, The Child and The Word in Cultural Crisis* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) and *Write for Children* (London: Routledge, 2002). Any future mention of the experiential gap will refer to Melrose’s original concept, which will be explained in more detail later p.225.

On the Border of Once Upon a Time in a Land Far, Far Away...

Stories are multifaceted and can be considered part of human nature because we are: ‘*homo fabula, homo historia*, we are story, story is us.’³³ We like to tell stories, and according to Walter Benjamin, the point of stories is to contain something useful.³⁴ Karen Armstrong further emphasises the importance of storytelling in her *A Short History of Myth* which tracks myth telling from the cave painting and shamans of the Palaeolithic period (c 20000 to 8000 BCE) through the Neolithic period (c 8000 to 4000 BCE) right up to the Great Western Transformation (c 1500 to 2000). Armstrong highlights the importance and development of storytelling by suggesting that ‘A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently; it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest.’³⁵ These stories can be told and re-told any number of times but each telling or re-telling will be ‘in line with contemporary axiology and epistemology.’³⁶ These stories, in the form of fiction, encourage the reader to slip into another ‘skin’ enabling them to live a new life there; where we can find ‘truths we might not otherwise stumble on.’³⁷ Further to this, Shirley Brice Heath suggests, to find these ‘truths’ readers are looking for texts that ‘ring true.’³⁸ Truth, or truths, will remain fluid and culturally based yet ‘each new generation heads [to the point of truth] in their readings as they reach young adulthood and move through the lifespan.’³⁹ But there are many and varied examples and commentaries on storytelling which lead

³³ Melrose A., *Write for Children*, (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), p.21.

³⁴ Benjamin W., Trans., Zom H., ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1956]), p.86

³⁵ Armstrong K., *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2005) p.149

³⁶ Webb J., Melrose A., ‘Intimacy and the Icarus effect’ As yet unpublished article.

³⁷ Malouf D., ‘The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World,’ *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 41, 2011

³⁸ Brice Heath S., in Foreword to *Literacy Myths, Legacies, & Lessons* by Graff H.J., (New York, London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p.xi.

³⁹ Brice Heath S., in Foreword to *Literacy Myths, Legacies, & Lessons* by Graff H.J., (New York, London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p.xi.

us in the same direction. It is finding perceived actuality that is inherent in the vicarious experience as readers 'seek the privacy of self-reflection, psychological insight, thrill of the mystery, or seductive power of narrative that stimulates inner dialogue.'⁴⁰ A potential outcome of vicarious experience, therefore, is the accrued knowledge which allows the reader to 'predict what would happen in a new situation which has never personally been experienced.'⁴¹ Perhaps this quotation should be amended, removing 'would' for 'could' but clearly, either way it allows the reader to read about things they have not yet experienced and to view the risks involved safely. But this is not a series of warning stickers or a list of do this and not this. Jack Zipes, using the example of Little Red Riding Hood⁴² has demonstrated that '[t]he social function of the story [and the wolf] was to show how dangerous it could be for children to talk to strangers in the woods or to let strangers enter the house.'⁴³ As stated, the relevance of storytelling, whether oral or printed, is that it contains – via cultural shift⁴⁴ - something useful such as contemporary mores and morals in the form of some practical advice, a proverb or maxim. According to Walter Benjamin, the storyteller provides counsel for his readers.⁴⁵ However, it is up to the reader how to interpret the information presented by the storyteller; their interpretation will be personal,⁴⁶ reliant on the cultural, economic and social experiences of the reader and also that the stories '...are culturally marked: they are informed by the language that the writers

⁴⁰ Brice Heath S., in Foreword to *Literacy Myths, Legacies, & Lessons* by Graff H.J, (New York, London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p.xi.

⁴¹ www.jsu.edu/depart/psychology/sebac/fac-sch/rm/ch3-6.html (accessed January 2011)

⁴² *Red Riding Hood* was originally a French folk tale that was adapted by Perrault to include this warning.

⁴³ Zipes J., ed., *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* Second Edition, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993 [1983]) p.19

⁴⁴ Cultural shift is taken to mean the moment that a discourse will be embedded in the cultural moment that it is either written in or read in.

⁴⁵ Benjamin W., Trans., Zorn H., 'The Storyteller,' in *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1955])

⁴⁶ Hollindale P., *Ideology and the Children's Book* (Stroud: Thimble Press, 1988)

employed, their respective cultures and the socio-historical context in which the narrative was created.’⁴⁷

In the case of YAs⁴⁸ Jack Zipes has suggested that the ability to read empowers them to make informed decisions regarding the course of their lives and deal with difficult situations that are a reality in any life. He also believes that reading encourages them to ‘...create their own plots to fulfil their desires and needs.’⁴⁹ Since Zipes began writing the environment has changed; YAs are now able to access information about many presumed ‘adult’ issues, such as sex and drugs. The editors of *Crosscurrents of Children’s Literature* suggest that YAF is a potential panacea to this unimpeded access in that including these perceived ‘adult’ issues YAF could be seen as ‘...like a vaccination, preventing worse diseases by allowing the recipient to experience a mild and ultimately protective version of the illness’.⁵⁰ Melvin Burgess has expanded on this idea, believing that if contentious issues are placed in context within fiction, YAs can deal with most things.⁵¹ YAF provides them with the opportunity to develop an understanding of how to deal with these real issues by means of the protected vicarious experience contained in and gained from the text. The vicarious experience is created by the interaction between reader and text, both of which are culturally activated. The interaction is ‘...structured by the material, social, ideological and institutional relationships in which *both* text and readers are inescapably inscribed.’⁵² Thus, when writing YAF it is clear that ideally the writer should anticipate this

⁴⁷ Zipes J., *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006) p.41

⁴⁸ I am aware that this point is not exclusive to YAs and is equally applicable to younger children and adults.

⁴⁹ Zipes J., *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* Second Edition, (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002 [1988])p.62

⁵⁰ Stahl J.D., Hanlon T.L., Lennox Keyser E., eds., *Crosscurrents of Children’s Literature: An Anthology of Texts and Criticism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.129

⁵¹ Interview with Melvin Burgess on BBC Radio 4s *Front Row* 5 June 2009 7.15pm

⁵² Bennett T., ‘Text, Readers, Reading Formation’, *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* vol. 16 (1) (Spring 1983) pp. 3-17. Accessed via jstor www.jstor.org/stable/1314830 (accessed January 2011)

interaction and understand the idea that, 'Sentences end with full stops. Stories do not.'⁵³ It is this idea of opening up an ongoing dialogue between text and reader that is pertinent to this thesis. By re-iterating Zipe's premise, which I am developing beyond childhood and the fairy tale, '[t]he social function of the story [and the wolf] was to show how dangerous it could be for children to talk to strangers in the woods or to let strangers enter the house,'⁵⁴ I suggest that representations of sex, drugs and alcohol within YAF perform the role of the metaphorical wolf.

The issue of vicarious experience is one of ongoing engagement, which can only be achieved by acknowledging the 'otherness' of YAs and their reluctance to be guided. As stated by Baudrillard in his essay 'The Declination of Wills': '...the child [YA] is the other to the adult...The child [YA] nevertheless repudiates the adult...'⁵⁵ Hence the need for a subtle approach by the writer, who is the provider of the vicarious experience, but who needs to stand well away from the didactic lesson that is being delivered by the fictional teenager (as created by the writer), who is 'othered' too and therefore, identifiable as a peer by the reader.⁵⁶ There is an intimacy in this communication between these 'others' which is personal, yet is enabled by the writer, who openly creates a world where risks can be presented to be taken vicariously.⁵⁷ The novel is central to this intimacy as the writer positions the text within the gap or bridge or 'border' between adult writer and YA reader.⁵⁸

⁵³ Rosen H., *Stories and Meanings* (1985) quoted in Melrose A., 'Reading and Righting: Carrying on the 'Creative Writing Theory' Debate', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* vol. 4 (2), 2007 pp. 109-117

⁵⁴ Zipes J., ed., *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* Second Edition, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993 [1983]) p.19

⁵⁵ Baudrillard J., Trans., Benedict J., 'The Declination of Wills', in *The Transparency of Evil Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 2009 [1990]) p.192

⁵⁶ The concept of 'The Other' is developed further in the section on Representation, p.243

⁵⁷ Webb J., Melrose A., 'Intimacy and the Icarus effect' As yet unpublished article

⁵⁸ Rudd D., 'Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children's literature,' in *Understanding Children's Literature* ed., Hunt P., Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2010 [2005]) p.21

The moment the YA engages with the text the adult writer is already standing aside, present, but as an absent presence and invisible. This gap or border is never defined or stable. Instead it is where: ‘the regulation and negotiation of those spaces are continually, *contingently* “opening out,” remaking the boundaries.’⁵⁹ Consequently, YAs grow, develop and move on, as do adults and as does culture/society, so any gap between is by nature transient. Indeed, using a Foucauldian power/knowledge relationship,⁶⁰ it is perfectly feasible for the YA to subvert the power between writer and reader if, despite entering the gap, they chose to walk away from the novel and not engage with it.⁶¹ As such, ‘those who effectively wield power – adults in this case – are never secure in their position’⁶² due to the fact that ‘it is almost impossible for adults to *avoid* addressing children [YAs], their success in doing so will vary remarkably.’⁶³ If successful, however, it is not through a ‘notion of “identification” by the child, only of “talkings to” and “responses from” different social locations.’⁶⁴ Needless to say, this success is likely to be based on the writer creating a world full of vicarious experiences that entice and retain the YA reader into the gap/bridge/border.

There is a natural, and obvious, dichotomy between the experienced writer and the innocent child reader. The gap has been acknowledged (possibly unconsciously) by writers for centuries. For example William Blake emphasises the gap and the movement between with his *Songs for Innocence and of Experience*, in particular, ‘The Little Girl Lost’ and its contrary poem ‘A Little Girl

⁵⁹ Bhabha H., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Classics, 2004 [1994]) p.313

⁶⁰ Foucault M., Trans., Sheridan A., *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1977]) Also see p.226

⁶¹ See p. 225/6

⁶² Rudd D., ‘Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children’s literature,’ in *Understanding Children’s Literature* ed., Hunt P., Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2010 [2005]) p.22

⁶³ Rudd D., ‘Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children’s literature,’ in *Understanding Children’s Literature* ed., Hunt P., Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2010 [2005]) p.23

⁶⁴ Rudd D., ‘Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children’s literature,’ in *Understanding Children’s Literature* ed., Hunt P., Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2010 [2005]) p.23

Lost' which are perceived to depict '...Innocence entering upon sexual Experience.'⁶⁵ This gap between inexperience and experience is often the basis of children's stories and is portrayed as a journey between innocence and experience, childhood and adulthood, where the writer can be seen to metaphorically lead the child reader through a passage of 'lived out experience' utilising the writer's 'lived in experience'⁶⁶ within the narrative. Prime examples of these types of 'journey' stories are Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) both written during the first 'Golden Age' of children's literature. And more recently Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2001) which portray Lyra's journey, both metaphorically in her quest and in personal terms, and her inevitable development from a wild child to a sexually aware heroine, ultimately concluding with the handling of her dæmon by Will in *The Amber Spyglass* (2001). Even Melvin Burgess's highly controversial books such as *Junk* (1996), *Doing It* (2003) and more recently *Nicholas Dane* (2009) with all their risqué and contentious themes still portray a journey between innocence and experience for the YA reader. These subjects when written about effectively can inform and encourage the child [YA] reader to join the adult writer in the 'experiential gap' - by making the unknown known and less fearful. But there is another crucial issue here which is that that the YA does not come to the text in ignorance. The YA already understands more than he/she can articulate and the reading experience is no different from that which we all experience.⁶⁷ We all come to a book, a text, etc, knowing what we know (which is sometimes articulated better than we could expect to) but also and at the same

⁶⁵ Blake W., Lee V., Willmott R., eds., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.50

⁶⁶ A point that is further developed on p.225

⁶⁷ A point that is further discussed on p.228

time hoping to learn or receive something new. It is in this sense that the experience of the writer may help the YA to vicariously expand his/her field of vision.

The experiential gap is, then, based on the gap between experienced adult (parent or writer) and inexperienced child [YA]. But it is a gap that, according to Jacqueline Rose, is impossible to enter: 'Children's [YA's] fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child [YA] comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space between.'⁶⁸ Rose appears to be setting the child [YA] up as a 'social being' but one which has no voice, and therefore silent, whilst also being expected to only listen to (and believe) whatever the adult writer/parent says. The idea that the child [YA] is 'mute' is re-enforced by Lesnik-Oberstein, who writes that oppressed people, like women in culture and history, invoked their own response, feminism for example, to speak for them in a collective voice but children [YAs] 'in, culture and history, have no such voice'⁶⁹. In contrast Adam Phillips suggests that:

Children [YA] unavoidably treat their parents as though they were the experts on life... but children [YA] make demands on adults which adults don't know what to do with... once they [children/YA] learn to talk they create, and suffer, a certain unease about what they can do with words. Paradoxically, it is the adult's own currency - words - that reveal to them the limit of adult authority... Adults can nurture children [YA]... but they do not have the answers... what they can do is tell children [YA]stories about the connections...⁷⁰

And it is these connections that could be seen as an invitation into the experiential gap by the adult writer to the YA reader, neither of whom is silent. Indeed, as mentioned previously, no one enters this space empty handed but are both

⁶⁸ Rose J., *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* Revised Edition, (London: Macmillan, 1994) p.1

⁶⁹ Lesnik-Oberstein K., *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) p.26

⁷⁰ Phillips A., *Terrors and Experts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) pp.1-2

surrounded and influenced by their own (and each other's) culture. Thereby it should be the aim of any writer to acknowledge this gap by creating an empathetic but not overtly didactic relationship between the text and the reader: encouraging the reader to join the writer by entering the gap between experienced writer and inexperienced reader and, therefore, allowing writer and reader to collide in the midst of the story 'where experience and knowledge is nurtured'.⁷¹ Writers can invite the YA into the gap by 'tell[ing] compelling stories about – what a person is, what is it to live a life, and what a life is supposed to look like.'⁷²

Foucault's ideas on power-knowledge and normativity encouraged me to consider this idea of experience and experiential gap in more critical detail. In particular as '...knowledge is something that makes its subjects, because we make sense of ourselves by referring back to various bodies of knowledge;'⁷³ this leads directly to a sense of normativity, where the adult writer can be perceived as the norm, the one with the power, who creates discourses based on, and for, the 'othered' YA. Firstly, Foucault identifies that power is everywhere.⁷⁴ Whilst power is not, for Foucault, an institution or a structure or a strength we are endowed with, but is instead 'the name attributed to a strategic situation in a particular society.'⁷⁵ On the other hand, Sinfield suggests that power is an even more far reaching form as 'power is at once, both intimate and institutional.'⁷⁶ Wherever the power is situated it is based on a hierarchy where those in power dominate and equate to the acceptable and perceived 'norm' whilst those on the margins are

⁷¹ Melrose A., McCaw N., 'Crabs (and Stories) Walking Sideways: Life Beyond the Death of the Story', in *Story: The Heart of the Matter* ed., Butt M., (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2007) p.24

⁷² Phillips A., *Terrors and Experts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p.2

⁷³ Danaher G., Schirato T., Webb J., *Understanding Foucault*, (London: Sage, 2000) p.xiv

⁷⁴ Foucault M., Trans., Hurley R., *The Will of Knowledge The History of Sexuality: 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998 [1976]) p.93

⁷⁵ Foucault M., Trans., Hurley R., *The Will of Knowledge The History of Sexuality: 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998 [1976]) p.93

⁷⁶ Sinfield A., *On Sexuality and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) p.58

'othered' as they are defined by what they are not,⁷⁷ pertaining to adult 'norm' and YA 'othered' for example. Importantly, Foucault considers that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, he suggests:

Power produces knowledge ... power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.⁷⁸

However, he contends that it is of limited use to analyse power and knowledge as elements of individual-to-individual relations and struggles, and more helpful to approach their function as part of the processes of, what he calls, governmentality. This, for Foucault, is 'the conduct of conduct', including not only self-regulation and regulation of individuals, but also the problem of constructing and regulating society more broadly.⁷⁹ Neither should it be considered as purely a repressive tool as in the main they are productive and strategic. These are important considerations as he goes on to suggest:

...it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.⁸⁰

Consequently within the experiential gap between adult writers and YA readers it is important to also consider novels as a function, and/or effects of power-knowledge. Novels contain the fictional 'othered' characters that YAs can relate to

⁷⁷ Sinfield A., *On Sexuality and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) p.7

⁷⁸ Foucault M., Trans., Sheridan A., *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1977]) p. 27

⁷⁹ Foucault M., Trans., Burchell G., *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* eds., Senellart M., Ewald F., Fontana A., Davidson A.I., (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p.186; Foucault M., 'Governmentality' in *The Foucault Effect Studies in Governmentality* by Burchell G., Gordon C., Miller P., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) p.102

⁸⁰ Foucault M., Trans., Sheridan A., *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1977]) p. 28

and who mediate or traverse the gap between adult writers and YA readers.⁸¹ The children's writer, John Gordon, has said this about such a process, 'The boundary between imagination and reality, and the boundary between being a child and being an adult are border country, a passionate place in which to work.'⁸²

Within our discourse the adult writers are assumed to be literate and knowledgeable and therefore potentially in a position of authority. They are in a situation of 'knowing' what power is characteristic of the current regime and if they chose to write about such they are, therefore, reinforcing those discourses of power. However, it could be suggested that by making the choice to write for YAs that the position of power is inverted meaning the adult writer becomes vulnerable. This would be based on the power of the potential YA readers to reject or deflect a novel and its knowledge base. The information contained within any novel is based upon the adult's understanding of youth culture, what the adults perceive YAs are like and their understanding of society's contemporary mores. However, that perception of the YA is liable to be clouded by the YAs ability to let adults including writers see only what they want them to see. It is worth considering though that by the very nature of realist YA fiction there is a tendency to focus on the 'deviant other' as this is where the interest of both potential readers and writers is likely to lie. The 'norm' is never as interesting as it is considered 'self-evident.'⁸³ The power-knowledge between adult writers, novels and YA readers can slip again based on the YAs knowledge, in that if the YAs understand more than the text offers, any potential didacticism (discrete or

⁸¹ See p. 241 where it is highlighted that British YAF tends to use a teenage protagonist that the YA reader should be able to empathise with.

⁸² Gordon J., in Blishen E., ed., *The Thorny Paradise: Writer's on Writing for Children* (Harmondsworth: Kestral, 1975) p.35

⁸³ Danahaer G., Schirato T., Webb J., *Understanding Foucault* (London: Sage, 2000) p.141

obvious) is lost and at that moment the YAs will be reading for sheer pleasure so the power-knowledge is once again in their hands.

When a child reader, according to Benjamin, comes to a book they read it with limitless trust,⁸⁴ having faith in the writer as someone who is there to entertain and inform at the same time as developing the readers' experiences. However, I would suggest that YAs may not have the limitless trust of a child but are still looking to be entertained and informed. Books, for them, can easily become an obsession. For example the recent vampire phenomenon started by Stephenie Meyers's *Twilight* series in 2005,⁸⁵ often led to shelves full of vampire books targeted at YAs. Not only did this mean there was a plethora of similar books focusing on vampires being produced⁸⁶ but also some 'classics' were being republished with '*Twilight*' style covers (black, red and white) in order to encourage the *Twilight* readers to try these books too.⁸⁷ This sense of obsession could develop out of the need for YA readers to find human beings (even in a fantasy) '...from whom [they] can derive the "meaning of life"'.⁸⁸ But in truth the books with their vampire 'thrills' provide a vicarious view of sexuality and thrill seeking – i.e. a sense of 'otherness' which the reader has yet to experience.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Benjamin W., Trans., Underwood J.A., 'Child Reading' in *One-Way Street* (London, New York: Verso Classics, 2006 [1979])

⁸⁵ First published in the United States in 2005. The series consisted of four books which have also been made into films.

⁸⁶ There was a wide range of vampire stories aimed specifically at teenagers using similar *Twilight* covers. For example Alyson Noel's *The Immortals* Series published in 2009

⁸⁷ For example *Wuthering Heights* published in 2009 by Harper Collins with a black, white and red cover disarmingly similar to *Twilight*'s cover.

⁸⁸ Benjamin W., Trans., Zorn H., 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1970]) p.100

⁸⁹ I am aware that I have only briefly dealt with the issue of vampires and teenagers but consider that it is in fact a PhD in itself and could not be dealt with adequately within the remit of this thesis and the restricted word count. There are critical sources available e.g. Wisniewski J., Housel R., *Twilight and Philosophy: vampires, vegetarians and the pursuit of immortality* (Hoboken N.J: Wiley, 2009). Halberstram J., *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Weiss A., *Vampires and Violets* (London: Penguin, 1993); Williamson M., *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy* (London: Wallflower, 2005)

We live in a culture where information moves fast and is freely accessible to YAs. Consequently it can mean that they are often aware of issues before they truly understand them; or as Melrose & McCaw have indicated, they may understand them but cannot yet articulate them in any meaningful way.⁹⁰ For example, I explore this in the creative piece by aligning sex with maturing ideas in love, empathy etc. In this thesis I am suggesting that the writer should mediate between awareness and understanding through the narrative by using knowledge and ‘authenticity’ providing an opportunity for the vicarious experience. This knowledge and ‘authenticity’ is achieved through the writer being aware of, and accessing, sociological, cultural, historical, et al, research which enables/helps the writer to ‘get inside’ the head of a fifteen year old whilst allowing the writer to write for YAs but not at them.

As the writer or reader of a text you are surrounded by the literary equivalent of a kaleidoscope of voices: the expert, the misinformed; authentic, fake; the known, the unknown, friends, family, foes; fictional, actual; reflecting and deflecting differences and all of which inform the metanarratives and micronarratives of any text. These myriad voices have something in common and that is they reflect experience: actual, vicarious, or imagined. Walter Benjamin calls much of this Babel the ‘lived out experience’⁹¹. There is an element of ‘lived out experience’ which influences both the writer as they write and the reader as they read allowing them to derive a meaning from the text. As such the texts are an experience in themselves, where the writer and reader can meet to engage.

Experience is the natural partner of a writer’s creativity, or as Benjamin suggests: ‘[e]xperience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source

⁹⁰ Melrose A., McCaw N., ‘Crabs (and Stories) Walking Sideways: Life Beyond the Death of the Story’, in *Story: The Heart of the Matter* ed., Butt M., (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2007)

⁹¹ Benjamin W., Trans., Zom H., ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1955]).

from which all storytellers have drawn.’⁹² Narratives are borne out of ‘lived out experiences’ whether out of actual physical experience or via the media driven, technologically advancing, globalised ‘virtual experience’ of the contemporary world as provided by the Internet and tele-visual communication. However the experience is achieved it has to be understood that ‘...the full meaning of experience is not simply given in the reflexive immediacy of the lived moment but emerges from explicit retrospection where meaning is recovered and re-enacted...’⁹³ This means that any experience becomes historically and culturally embedded in the moment it happens. The experience is no longer immediate for either the writer or the reader as the moment has gone. Though the ‘lived out experience’ gap exists between adult writer and adult reader it is naturally far greater between adult writer and child reader. Logically this gap is reduced as the child gets to be an adult and ‘experienced’. The young adult is not as innocent as the child but not as experienced as the adult because ‘cognitive development is experience-dependent, and older children have had more experiences than younger children.’⁹⁴ This creates a potential problem for anyone writing for YAs because they have to understand not only the position of an ‘othered’ YA but also the contingent environment they live within. For example, when considering YAF Seelinger Trites suggests that:

[YAF]-protagonists must learn about the social forces that made them what they are. They learn how to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function.⁹⁵

⁹² Benjamin W., Trans., Zom H., ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1955]). p.84

⁹³ Burch, R., ‘Phenomenology, Lived Experience: Taking a Measure of the Topic’, *Phenomenology & Pedagogy* vol. 8 pp.130-160, www.phenomenologyonline.com/articles/burch2.html (accessed April 2008)

⁹⁴ Goswami U., *Byron Review on the Impact of New Technologies on Children: a Research Literature Review: Child Development*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.1-2

⁹⁵ Seelinger Trites R., *Disturbing the Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Fiction*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p.9

Therefore the YAF writer, ideally, needs to provide opportunities for the reader within the text to ‘challenge’ who they are and the world they live in. In contrast, when considering children’s literature, Seelinger Trites goes on to say that the writer will often ‘affirm the child’s sense of Self’⁹⁶ whilst ensuring they feel more secure within their environment.⁹⁷ They cannot make the assumptions of innocence made by the writer of children’s books nor assumptions of experience and understanding by the adult writer for the adult reader. The YA is invariably in receipt of ‘lived out experience’ but often via technology, schooling and peer knowledge rather than necessarily personal experience. Indeed, the idea of technology being a source of ‘lived out experience’ is further emphasized by Baudrillard who writes that ‘it is in fact the world that imposes its will upon us with the aid of technology’⁹⁸ rather than the other way round.

Any writer who has contentious issues to deal within their narrative needs to consider Edna Hunt’s and Fiona Sampson’s suggestion that: ‘In any writing process there is always going to be a tension between our own personal needs and the need of the writing to have a life of its own.’⁹⁹ It would be too easy to allow personal prejudices or crusades to get in the way; the story has to tell the reality of it, for good or bad. As already stated, Melvin Burgess suggests that YAs can cope with most contentious issues as long as they are placed in context¹⁰⁰ thus allowing the reader to grasp the reality being presented. Writers need to allow their writing the freedom to develop in its own direction and not to force it, allow it to be real

⁹⁶ Seelinger Trites R., *Disturbing the Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Fiction*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p.3

⁹⁷ Seelinger Trites R., *Disturbing the Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Fiction*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p.3

⁹⁸ Baudrillard J., Trans., Benedict J., ‘The Radical Exoticism’ in *The Transparency of Evil Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London, New York: Verso, 2009 [1990]) p. 174

⁹⁹ Hunt E., Sampson F., *Writing Self and Reflexivity* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.3

¹⁰⁰ Burgess M., Interviewed on Radio 4’s *Front Row* 5 June 09 at 7.15pm

and not contrived, or as Foucault advocates, the writer should withdraw and let the text survive as witness rather than an authority.¹⁰¹ This ensures that the YA reader is not left feeling as if they are being talked at, down to or indeed, infantilized and patronized in some way. Instead they are drawn, willingly, into the experiential gap. Using Barthes's idea of the 'Death of the Author' where 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not...the author'¹⁰², the YA reader meets the text on the bridge, on the cusp, in the middle of the gap but does not recognize or indeed even see the writer because YAs are only met with characters they can relate to. A YA reader does not need to think about the writer and his or her views when reading. Consequently the writer needs to be 'dead' in order to leave their fictional characters space to breathe life into their own story – and in which case all the writer can do is hope the characters they have created are met with empathy. Recognizing and writing for this experiential gap is about asking the YA reader to step into it via trusting characters, who can then tell their story and where it is going, allowing the YAs to participate in the vicarious experiences without having an adult (parent, teacher, tutor, policeman, judge etc.,) looking over their shoulder or passing judgment.

Literature for YAs has a tendency to be solipsistic in a similar way that Milan Kundera sees youth itself: 'I have long seen youth as the lyrical age, that is, the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to

¹⁰¹ Foucault M. Faubion J., ed., *Power Essential Works of Foucault 1954-84 vol. 3* (London: Penguin, 2002 [1994]) p.51

¹⁰² Barthes R., Trans., Howard R., 'Death of the Author,' *Image, Music, Text* (1977) <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm> (accessed February 2011)

comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him.¹⁰³ A writer needs to be aware of this and make allowances for it in writing. Consequently, YAF is considered to be one of the most difficult, if exciting, genres to write.¹⁰⁴ Writing a narrative that maintains a verisimilitude whilst the culture is forever shifting is one of the main challenges for any writer but in particular for the writer of YAF. It requires awareness not only of the words used but also of the cultural context and of ‘the world that they compose and construct’¹⁰⁵ particularly as words are endowed with so many meanings which are dependent on the moment in time and the cultural influences.

It is the importance of stepping into the experiential gap and inviting the YA to join you that should encourage the writer to produce a narrative that is both authentic and enticing. As I have written elsewhere, and in conclusion to this section, a well written piece of YAF allows the reader to experience various situations vicariously without danger¹⁰⁶ and it is the writer’s responsibility to ensure the information provided is accurate and in context.

Young Adults and their Fiction – a journey fuelled by sex, drugs and alcohol

In recent years there has been a perceptible shift in the idea of developmental ‘age’ stages of youth, when once the child became a teenager (13-18) and then became an adult (18+) it now looks like this: the child becomes teenager (10-14ish)

¹⁰³ Kundera M, Trans., Asher L., *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (London, New York: Faber & Faber, 2007) p.88

¹⁰⁴ Morgan N., ‘Ya to You’, *Author* vol. 114, (3), 2003, pp.124-125. Melrose A., *Write for Children*, (London: Routledge Falmer, 2002)

¹⁰⁵ Irigaray L., ‘Listening, Thinking, Teaching’, in *Teaching* eds., Irigaray L., Green M., (London, New York: Continuum, 2008) p.232.

¹⁰⁶ Melrose A., Harbour V., ‘Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children’s literature’, in *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) pp.176-190

becomes 'young adult' (15-21) and only thereafter becomes adult (21+).¹⁰⁷

Although, of course, this is not fixed and in this new progressional categorization there is no defining or concrete transition point between teenager and YA or between YA and adult. In the absence of clear definitions, the terms 'teenager' and 'YA' can be (and often are) applied variously to suit the needs of interested parties (marketers, educators, legislators etc). But titles such as teenager and YA are problematized by the idea that unlike in more singular, subject and theoretical positions, such as race, gender, sexuality and class, the YAs ability to inhabit a claim to identity is muted by its own lack of a collective voice. For example, feminism offers women a collective voice. The lack of clarity around the demographic category of YA, and the apparent inability of YA to speak for themselves in society (or, at least, to be heard by those in authority) means the term is used less as a simple nomination of an age group, and more to designate, categorize and critically evaluate a collective identity. It is an identity that is constructed by many, including the individual YA self.

The 'self' is as unstable as the demographic term itself. As Foucault says, 'It [subject/identity/YA] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself.'¹⁰⁸ This is something of a call to arms, a reminder that individuals are not just substance (that is, the necessary and ahistorical product of the processes of subjectification) but form, something that has a history and a future; something that we can craft with our own efforts as an ethical response to our selves and our cultures. As form rather than substance, the self is highly contingent, always in process. YAs, like all selves, will experience and

¹⁰⁷ This is not a shift that has been reflected in the YAF within the UK as the protagonists tend to remain under 18. As Sonia Livingstone states: 'Now nearly all stay in school till 18, nearly half go to university, and they're still living at home through their twenties. In other words, it would appear that childhood is lasting longer.' See also: Livingston S., *Children and the Internet*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p.x

¹⁰⁸ Foucault M., 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' trans. Robert Hurley et al, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1: Ethics* ed. Rabinow P., (London: Penguin, 1994) p.290

perform their own identity based on where they are at a particular moment – with parents, at school, with friends, playing sport, alone etc. ‘In each case...one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself.’¹⁰⁹ Their identities are never static or established:

Men [sic & YA] have never ceased to construct themselves, that is, to continually displace their subjectivity, to constitute themselves in an infinite, multiple series of different subjectivities that will never have an end and never bring us in the presence of something that would be ‘man.’[YA]¹¹⁰

YAs never become a finished identity. They constantly evolve and change, as does the child before and the adult after.

But it is not just the identity that is constructed by the ‘self’ that is in flux. The instability and contingency of the term and the identity ‘YA’ means that those labelled as such are often perceived as ‘other’, and in need of external control. This is especially evident when considering processes such as the law, educational enforcement,¹¹¹ or, and in particular within the UK, the media, who tend to portray YAs negatively; their discourses, processes and mechanisms ‘compare, differentiate, hierarchize, homogenize, [or] exclude’¹¹² individuals, both constructing a collective identity of YAs, and seeking to control and shape them. This has meant that YAs are often perceived as ‘devils’¹¹³ thus reinforcing a

¹⁰⁹ Foucault M., Trans. Hurley R., et al, ‘The ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,’ in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1: Ethics* ed. Rabinow P., (London: Penguin, 1994) p.290

¹¹⁰ Foucault M., Trans Hurley R., et al, ‘Interview with Michel Foucault’, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 3: Power* ed. J.D. Faubion, (London: Penguin, 2000) p.276

¹¹¹ Currently the school leaving age is 16 years. The Labour Government planned to increase the school leaving age to 17 in 2013. At the time of writing the new Coalition Government is making constant changes to education but has not mentioned increasing the school leaving age (March 2011).

¹¹² Foucault M., Trans., Sheridan A., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1975]) p. 183

¹¹³ Travlou P., ‘Teenagers and Public Space Literature Review’, *Open Space* Edinburgh College of Art and Herriot-Watt University, July 2003.

prevalent stereotype in UK society¹¹⁴ where YAs, with only individual exceptions, are seen as time-wasting, violent, drug-taking, sex obsessed and selfish devilment. As such they appear a formidable group; however, their main intention, and challenge, is to develop and establish a strong sense of personal identity,¹¹⁵ which is, in reality, often embedded in rebelliousness whilst couched in insecurities. This lack of a stable identity for YAs is unsurprising considering the instability of the discourses applied to them: at once the perceived devil and the welcomed angel; one minute a villain, the next a victim; here an irresponsible almost-adult, there a child who needs or deserves a bit of slack. The effect of these contradictory discourses, along with their own psychological and neurological stages of development, results in a YA that is precariously situated within a contingent identity. It is this parlous position inherent in its readership that encourages some YAF to respond by pushing the boundaries of deviance; exploring risk-taking situations within the secure realms of page turning rebellion.¹¹⁶

As I have already said, the term ‘Young Adult’ is not fixed but can encompass adolescents and teenagers which both have more concrete definitions.¹¹⁷ YAs are looking to maintain an identity of the ‘self’ and ‘selfhood’ in a world that is also intent, as Foucault recognised, on constructing them as a collective identity through various social and cultural discourses: medical; socio-legal; education; technological, and the media. It is this idea of a collected identity that identifies them as a socio-cultural condition demographic which constructs the YA both as a consumer and, just as often, with the problems associated with the idea of what a

¹¹⁴ ‘Challenging the myth of the “terrible teens”. Leading Psychiatrist champions the younger generation.’ www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pressparliament/pressreleasearchive/pr727.aspx?theme+print (accessed August 2008)

¹¹⁵ Gross R., McIlveen R., Coolican, H., Clamp A., Russell J., *Psychology A New Introduction* Second Edition, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004 [2000]) p.531

¹¹⁶ For example: Burgess’s *Doing It* (2003), Milward’s *Apples* (2007), Burchill’s *Sugar Rush* (2004)

¹¹⁷ Adolescent is a term relating to the developmental stage of puberty whilst teenager is more directly related to age – thirteen to nineteen.

YA is.¹¹⁸ Since the year 2000 it is worth noting that the term ‘teenager’ appears to have transmogrified into the term ‘Young Adult’ as a designated term for older teen culture with spending power that is both a target and a source of dedicated product. For example, the book chain, Waterstone’s, recently announced that they were to increase the dedicated shelf space available for YAF,¹¹⁹ whilst shops like *Jack Wills*¹²⁰ are beginning to move into the High Street with YA targeted produce. This is further reinforced by Sarah Britton in her online article: ‘Young Adults – an impulsive dream for Convenience Stores’ in which it is suggested that: ‘...students and young adults take no prisoners’¹²¹when deciding what to buy¹²² thus highlighting the fact that the disposable income of YAs is a target in our consumer culture. The YAs are not treated like children or indeed adults but as a separate demographic identity with money to spend. Therefore this purchasing power is another consideration when writing for YAs. Jack Zipes, on this consumerism, notes that ‘[b]y the time a child becomes a teenager [YA] in twenty-first century America [and I would also suggest the UK], he or she is a formidable expert of market conditions.’¹²³

¹¹⁸ Kroger J., *Identity in Adolescence the Balance Between Self and Other* Third Edition, (London, New York: Routledge, 2004)

¹¹⁹ Horn C., ‘Waterstones’, in *The Bookseller.Com* 29 September 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/waterstones-teen-section-goes-piccadilly.html> (accessed March 2011); Horn Caroline, ‘YA Sales top £50m in 2009’ in *The Bookseller.com* 28 January 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/110986-ya-fiction-sales-top-50m-in-2009.html> (accessed October 2010). Horn Caroline, ‘BIC Splits Teen Category’ in *The Bookseller.com* 10 September 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/128204-bic-splits-teen-category.html>, (accessed October 2010). This further highlights the split from, child, teenager, adult progression to, child, teen (10-14), young adult (15-25), adult which now appears prevalent.

¹²⁰ *Jack Wills* for example, which markets themselves as the university outfitters. <http://www.jackwills.com/Default.aspx?wt.srch=1&gclid=CIHLv8aj56cCFchO4QodK3-QbQ> (accessed March 2011)

¹²¹ Britton S., ‘Young Adults – an impulsive dream for Convenience Stores’, in *The Grocer* 12 July 2010, <http://www.thegrocer.co.uk/articles.aspx?page=independentarticle&ID=210822> (accessed March 2011)

¹²² This is in particular reference to the idea that the purchasing power of some YAs can make or break a brand depending on its popularity. This popularity can easily be led by the celebrity culture.

¹²³ Zipes J., *Relentless Progress The reconfiguration of Children’s Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.22

Within the UK 79% of 7-16 year olds have Internet access (57% of 15-16 year olds have access in their bedroom) and 73% have mobile phones, this enables YAs to communicate at a transnational scale rather than just at a local level whilst encouraging micro moments of attention.¹²⁴ This current generation of YAs are the first to grow up with this relatively unimpeded access to the Internet. They use it as a source of information, communication; friendship/community and consumerism.¹²⁵ Lee, Conroy and Hii suggest that:

The acceleration of technology has helped define a new breed of consumers – “net generation” or “cyber-teens”, terms used to describe adolescents of this generation who are computer savvy and techno-literate, and whose abilities often exceed those of their parents and teachers.¹²⁶

This is particularly pertinent as often the YA will look to ‘experiment with identities and relationships within a peer-realm (Facebook for example) [which is] often inaccessible to the parental gaze.’¹²⁷ However, I would suggest that YAs whilst being techno-literate are also experience-poor in that they may be able to get access to all sorts of images and information which they become aware of but this awareness does not necessarily equate to knowledge. This is a contradiction to Anne Higonnet’s suggestion in *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, that it is not the case that childhood is disappearing just that the ‘knowing’ child is replacing the ‘innocent’ child.¹²⁸ She goes on to suggest that they are far from physically or sexually innocent because they have active minds and

¹²⁴ Childwise *The Monitor Report 2008-9: Children’s Media Use and Purchasing* in Livingstone S., *Children and The Internet*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p.vi

¹²⁵ This could include access to pornographic sites

¹²⁶ Lee C., Conroy D., Hii C., ‘The Internet: A consumer socialization agent for teenagers’, *ANZMAC 2003 Conference* Adelaide 1-3 December 2003

¹²⁷ Livingstone S., *Children and the Internet*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p.10. Particularly as the YA can decide whether or not to ‘befriend’ their parents on Facebook.

¹²⁸ Higonnet A., *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998) p.12

bodies. I would contend that this ‘innocence’ is not replaced with ‘knowledge’, which implies understanding but with an ‘awareness’ which at times is uninformed and naive.¹²⁹

There are many different ways for a YA to access the Internet¹³⁰ which has meant that for many YAs it is far more than just a place to shop or do research. The increase in social sites such as Facebook and MySpace has allowed YAs to foster relationships globally, exchange information, undertake problem solving and learn through communication.¹³¹ It is another area in which they can experiment with their identity whilst trying to work out where in society they fit, and indeed, adopt multiple identities.¹³² An important factor of creating identities online is that they can easily be rewritten and changed allowing the YA to represent themselves (online) in whichever way suits them at a particular moment in time.¹³³

History and Defining Young Adult Fiction:

YAF is portrayed in various ways: The *Continuum Encyclopaedia of Children’s Literature* (2005) says:

¹²⁹ I would like to acknowledge that this is a huge area, the area of knowledge and the interpretation of information based upon experience, one that could be a PhD in its own right. It would not be possible to deal with this idea within the remit and word count of this thesis adequately. For example see relevant chapters in *Cognitive Psychology* edited by Nick Braisby & Angus Gellatly, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and ‘How Far Do We Go Beyond the Information Given? The Impact of Knowledge Activation on Interpretation and Inference’ by Diederick A Stapel & William Koomen in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2000 vol. 78 (1) pp.19-37

¹³⁰ Not just via computers and laptops but via iPads, mobile phones etc Meaning that YAs can have access to the Internet even when they are in the same room as their parents but are assured that the parents are unaware of what they are looking at. They are safe from the parental gaze.

¹³¹ Lyman P., *Literature Review: Digital –Mediated Experience & Kids’ Informal Learning* School of Information Management Systems, UC Berkeley, 9 September 2004.

¹³² Williams A., Methen M., ‘A review of Online Social Networking Profiles by Adolescents: Implications for Future Research and Intervention (Report)’, in *Adolescence* vol. 43 (170), Summer 2008, pp.253-274 www.find.galegroup.com/ips/printdoc?contentSet=IAC-Documents+docType/1A (accessed July 2008)

¹³³ Livingstone S., *Children and the Internet*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p.104.

Young Adult Literature typically regarded as realistic fiction for readers aged twelve through eighteen, is an American contribution to the world of literature that emerged during the 1940s when adolescence – the period between childhood and early adulthood – came to be regarded as a separate state of human development.¹³⁴

Whereas Robyn McCallum in her entry in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* (2006) which is edited by Jack Zipes says that:

The category of young adult literature generally refers to texts addressing an audience from about thirteen upwards, including books whose themes and writing strategies suggest that their audience is at the upper end of the teenage years. In general, such texts are informed by the values and assumptions about adolescence that are dominant in the culture at the time of the texts' production...¹³⁵

Peter Hunt bases his definition on that of Frank Eyres' comment in *British Children's Books in the Twentieth Century* (1971) where he said that we were 'witnessing the birth of a new kind of book, that is neither a children's book nor an adult novel, but something in between.'¹³⁶ Hunt goes further in his definition than either of the others in that he creates a schism by defining YAF in two forms:

'Quality' Novels such as Garner's *Red Shift* (1973) or Aidan Chamber's *Now I know* (1987) which are distinguishable from adult novels, if at all, by being focused through teenage eyes, or centred on teenage characters.

'Manufactured' series novels which often have the subject matter of the adult novel and the plot shape of the children's novel. ¹³⁷[And originated in the US]

By highlighting these differences Hunt is drawing attention to a perceived hierarchical struggle, for publishers, between, as Bourdieu explains: '...the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field

¹³⁴ Cullinan B., Person D., eds., *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2005) p.839

¹³⁵ McCallum R., 'Young Adult Literature' in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* ed., Zipes J., www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t204.e3482&sm (accessed August 2007)

¹³⁶ Frank Eyre quoted in Hunt P., *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.15

¹³⁷ Hunt P., *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.4

economically... (e.g. bourgeois art [profit margins and series novels]) and the autonomous principle (“art for art’s sake” [‘loss leaders’ and quality novels]).’¹³⁸ Though it should be noted that this conflict is not confined to YAF.

The academic, Robyn McCallum, suggests that YAF originated in the US, with the first being J.D.Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951.¹³⁹ This book was initially written for adults but appropriated by teenagers as it expressed a sense of rebellion couched in teenage angst. Authors like Aidan Chambers claim to have been influenced by *Catcher in the Rye* as a seminal text.¹⁴⁰ Whilst Rachel Falconer considers that YAF emerged in the middle of the twentieth century with texts like: George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, (1954) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960).¹⁴¹ However, I would like to contend that, if we use any one of the definitions stated above, where the protagonist needs to be a teenager/adolescent, in fact YAF started in Britain before it was used in the US. Amatory novels from the eighteenth century, such as Penelope Aubin’s, have thirteen year old heroines often caught in very erotic situations such as *The Strange Adventures of Count de Vinevil and his Family* (1721). Though the book title might suggest it is about the Count de Vinevil, the adventures are actually those of his teenage daughter Ardelisa. Chris Mounsey has suggested:

She [Penelope Aubin] was indeed writing for an audience of the age (and probably sex) of her main protagonists. This would suggest that the moral machinery, which surrounds the erotic plots, might be seen (as critics have hitherto noted) as a device that might appear to educate young people in

¹³⁸ Bourdieu P., Johnson R., ed., *The Field of Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004[1993])

¹³⁹ McCallum R., ‘Young Adult Literature’ in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children’s Literature* ed., Zipes J., www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t204.e3482&sm (accessed August 2007)

¹⁴⁰ Hunt P., *An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); McCallum R., ‘Young Adult Literature’ in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children’s Literature* ed., Zipes J., www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t204.e3482&sm (accessed August 2007)

¹⁴¹ Falconer R., ‘Young Adult Fiction and The Crossover Phenomenon’, in *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature* ed., Rudd D., (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 17

proper behaviour, but it will be argued to be more likely a mechanism for getting around inquisitive mothers at the moment of purchase of an explicitly erotic juvenile novel.¹⁴²

Once again we can see YAF being used as a source of information for the YA. This is further evidenced if we go even further back, and whilst using the same definition, to the late sixteenth century when Robert Greene wrote ‘cony catching’ literature¹⁴³ which was often aimed at apprentices (generally boys between the ages of twelve and fourteen) in London. He used his stories to warn the boys about card sharks, prostitutes, gambling etc.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the contemporary argument that YAF is innovative in the way it deals with contentious issues seems erroneous in the face of key features of YAF being present in much earlier texts.¹⁴⁵ Whilst this evidence acts to reinforce the view of this critical exegesis that the features of storytelling are enduring, it should be noted here that, despite evidence to the contrary, Aidan Chambers and Alan Garner¹⁴⁶ are widely recognised as the first contemporary YAF writers in the UK.

As can be seen there is no definitive definition of YAF, only interpretations. It is a fluid term which is dependent on, and problematized by, the user. For publishers it is a term, created by them, that lends itself perfectly as a marketing tool, whereas for academics it is tied to the requirements of their research. Books for this group have always existed but were only labelled as such once the

¹⁴² Mounsey C., ‘“...bring her naked from her Bed, that I may ravish her before the Dotard’s face, and then send his Soul to hell”: Penelope Aubin, impious pietist, humorist or purveyor of juvenile fantasy?’ *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 26 (1), 2003, pp. 55-75

¹⁴³ A cony or Conie or connie or conny is the person being tricked and the conny-cathcher or cony-catcher is one or more tricksters. According to Robert Greene in *A Notable Discovery of Coosenage* 1592 (EEBO), there are a number of different types of coosenage of which cony-catching is just one. In theory cony-catching more specifically refers to being tricked at cards, but it seems to become widely used for all kinds of fraud.

¹⁴⁴ Also, in the 1600s young apprentices were thought of as a subculture because of their unusual appearance and mannerisms. (Hodkinson P., Deicke W., eds., *Youth Culture: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes* (New York, London: Routledge, 2007) p.24)

¹⁴⁵ An area worthy of further research but outside the remit of this PhD

¹⁴⁶ Hunt P., *An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)

publishers acknowledged the commercial sense of categorising YAF. This category is considered to be a ‘... marketplace phenomenon of the twentieth century.’¹⁴⁷

Though Rachel Falconer suggests the rise in YAF is not just down to a marketing campaign when she says ‘...it is part of a continuity of historical development...’¹⁴⁸

As I have written elsewhere children’s literature is often the instigator of debates on controversial subjects and perhaps this could be the reason why YAF so often crosses seamlessly into the adult market¹⁴⁹ and deals with contentious subjects so well. Rachel Falconer concurs when she says that:

YA fiction, having once been dismissed as an ephemeral and transient genre, has, by its very emphasis on transience, become a kind of cultural lightning rod, attracting to its conductive spaces questions and debates about what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.¹⁵⁰

I would also suggest, though, that some authors of YAF opt for the ‘shock’ route, aiming to create increased sales through initiating a media furore over the subject content such as Melvin Burgess’s *Junk* and *Doing It* as well as Julie Burchill’s *Sugar Rush*¹⁵¹ and Noel Clarke’s *Kidulthood*.¹⁵² Nothing is likely to make a book more desirable to a YA than a ‘Parental Advisory’ sticker.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Seelinger Trites, R., *Disturbing The Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000) p.7

¹⁴⁸ Falconer R., ‘Young Adult Fiction and the Crossover Phenomenon’, in *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature* ed., Rudd D., (London: Routledge, 2010) p.87

¹⁴⁹ Melrose A., Harbour V., ‘Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children’s literature’, in *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007)pp. 176-190

¹⁵⁰ Falconer R., ‘Young Adult Fiction and The Crossover Phenomenon’, in *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature* ed., Rudd D., (London: Routledge, 2010) p.88

¹⁵¹ For example: http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2004_34_fri_02.shtml (Accessed August 2010)

¹⁵² For example: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-and-tv/features/kidulthood-does-it-really-reflect-innecity-life-468232.html> (Accessed November 2010)

¹⁵³ It is acknowledged that a ‘parental advisory sticker’ could be used as a form of marketing. Jack Zipes has written a great deal about the commodification of the storyteller, in particular in *Relentless Progress The Reconfiguration of Children’s Literature, Fairy Tales and Storytelling*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

It could also be suggested that like the '9.00pm watershed' there has been slippage in what is deemed acceptable to be viewed/read by YAs¹⁵⁴ particularly with the advent of the Internet where the content can be seen to blur the line of what is acceptable whilst constantly causing us to redefine the term 'extreme'. News coverage prior to 9pm often has graphic images or as Jack Zipes suggests: 'Even the news is part of popular culture,'¹⁵⁵ thus accessible to all ages. The author Melvin Burgess proposes that

...we live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith, multi-value society in an age where television, radio, the press and the internet have rendered the secrets adults may wish to keep from children impossible to hide.¹⁵⁶

It is also important to realise that the characters depicted in these 'shock' books are the YAs who are least likely to be reading them.¹⁵⁷ The YAs depicted, if versions of them indeed exist, are already experiencing it. The books are appealing to other YAs looking for an understanding of who 'I' am and maybe, more importantly, who 'I am not' – the vicarious experience. This is important as, for YAs, adolescence is a time of transition where the search for an identity is pivotal to ascertaining who they are and how they fit in both culturally and on a socioeconomic level.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, and to reiterate Burgess's point, YAs can deal with most contentious issues as long as they are placed in context.¹⁵⁹ Books

¹⁵⁴ There was a report by *Which* discussing (in relation to junk food but still applicable) how programme makers/advertisers did not take into account who was likely to be watching programmes and children didn't just watch children's programmes. 'Junk food ad limits "not enough"' <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health> (accessed November 2007)

¹⁵⁵ Zipes J., *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* Second Edition, (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002 [1988])

¹⁵⁶ Burgess M., 'What is Teenage Fiction?' undated, <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html>, (accessed October 2007)

¹⁵⁷ For example characters like Ty in Keren David's *When I was Joe* (2010) and Candy in Kevin Brooks's *Candy* (2005)

¹⁵⁸ See Falconer R., 'Young Adult Fiction and The Crossover Phenomenon', in *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature* ed., Rudd D., (London: Routledge, 2010) and Prout A., *The Future of Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2004)

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Melvin Burgess on BBC Radio 4s *Front Row* 5 June 2009 7.15pm

that deal with controversial subjects are not new. There are British books from the past, which have a YA protagonist, and deal with contentious issues not only, as we have seen, Penelope Aubin's *The Strange Adventures of the Count De Vinevil and his family* (1721), but also *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe and even, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, (1847), to name but a few.

The search for identity is pivotal in the development of YAs as part of their maturation both personal and cultural. Martyn Denscombe has suggested that this identity is 'uncertain', and it is this uncertainty that motivates YAs to experiment with it. Thus they partake in 'health-risking behaviour.'¹⁶⁰ Drugs and alcohol, along with sex¹⁶¹ loom large in these experiments and have been selected in this research project, as examples of the 'health-risking behaviour',¹⁶² and as a symbol of the '...living in the now, pleasure-seeking, product-hungry, embodying the new global society where social inclusion [is] granted through purchasing power'.¹⁶³ Sex, drugs and alcohol are all weapons in the YAs armoury, potential tools that can be used by YAs to emphasise and extend the difference between them (the YA) and adults (and indeed the children that they once were). But perhaps the word here should not be 'difference' but rather Jacques Derrida's well trammelled word, 'différance'.¹⁶⁴ Loosely translated, *différance* comes to mean two things, for there is no straight English translation: it is to 'defer', to put off, and to 'differ', to be unlike. How like a young adult, no longer a child and not yet an adult, where to differ, be different, is part of the identity development and to defer is the denial of the inevitable which is that one day the YA will become adult. Thus the transition

¹⁶⁰ Denscombe M., 'Uncertain Identities and health-risking behaviour. The case of young people and smoking in late modernity,' *British Journal of Sociology* vol. 52 (1) March 2001, pp. 57-177

¹⁶¹ The issue of the representation of sex in young adult fiction will be covered further on p.258

¹⁶² There are others, of course, for example sport, music etc but this study is confined by space

¹⁶³ Savage J., *Teenage The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007) p.465

¹⁶⁴ Derrida, J., Trans., Bass A., 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) pp. 3-27

period between childhood and adulthood is fluid and ever changing, constantly in flux, ever unstable in meaning and directionless. To define it is like chasing a chimera, until the inevitable is realised by all YAs: that one day they will, indeed, emerge as adults which is just as much a construct of course (a state, arguably and equally defined by difference).¹⁶⁵

During this transition period, YAF can be used by YAs to explore and experiment in safety as ‘Reading is best done alone in the privacy of your own imagination.’¹⁶⁶ It is an experience that by its very nature can occur without the influence of peers or parents. Reading provides an opportunity for YAs to look for characters who are ‘like me’ but equally, and possibly more importantly, characters who are ‘not like me’ as the quest for an identity continues. This can enhance and inform the vicarious experience.

It is also important to note at this juncture that the vicarious experience mentioned can only relate to, and be experienced by, the ‘reading’ demographic as opposed to the ‘sociological’ demographic of YAs. The NRCL publication *Young People’s Reading in 2005: The Second Study of Young People’s Reading Habits*, which explores the reading habits of young people (not the reading ability) found that 26.1% of 11-16 year olds (Key Stages 3+4) describe themselves as ‘reluctant readers’ whilst importantly 70% considered themselves ‘average readers’.¹⁶⁷ The survey also highlighted they were not just reading books, but magazines and non –

¹⁶⁵ I am defining adult here as that legal term and taking the transition to be child to teenager to adult as a legal construct, for example my undergraduates have taken the child/teenage/student route before getting to leave to become adults in the world of employment, taking on increased responsibilities etc.

¹⁶⁶ Burgess M., ‘What is Teenage Fiction?’ undated, <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html>, (accessed October 2007)

¹⁶⁷ Maynard Sally, MacKay Sophie, Smith Fiona and Reynolds Kimberley, *Young People’s Reading in 2005: The Second Study of Young People’s Reading Habits*’ NRCL, Roehampton University and LISU, Loughborough University, 2008.

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/nrcrl/research/nrcrlpublications/index.html> (accessed November 2010)

fiction as well. The choice of books was often based on friend or family recommendation.

Following on from the survey and at a recent conference¹⁶⁸ there was a discussion on whether, within this sound bite and fast paced world, YA had the stamina to read a book. The conclusion to the subsequent debate was that, yes, this was still the case and books were still important to some, if not all, YAs; that is as long as authors continue to respond to the YAs demand for good stories. Currently though, if proof was needed that YAs still want to read books, you just have to look at the book sales of UK YAF in 2009 which topped £50million¹⁶⁹ and even if you remove the ‘Meyer vampire phenomenon’¹⁷⁰ the sales are still up and growing. The Book Industries Communication Review is also planning to split the current Young Adult classification which applies to anything that is aimed at 12+. The plan is to split YAF into two: ‘teen’ fiction which is aimed at the younger group and ‘YA’ which can then contain older content and therefore be marketed at an older group.¹⁷¹

Reading YAF provides YAs with the opportunity of creating an identity, or experimenting with identities, as Seelinger Trites suggests: ‘...the YA novel teaches adolescents how to exist within the (capitalistically bound) institutions that necessarily define teenager’s existence.’¹⁷² She continues by suggesting that it also teaches them how to adapt as: ‘Much of the genre is thus dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional

¹⁶⁸ *The Emergent Adult Conference*, Cambridge University 3-5 September 2010

¹⁶⁹ Horn C., ‘YA Sales top £50m in 2009’ 28 January 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/110986-ya-fiction-sales-top-50m-in-2009.html> (accessed October 2010)

¹⁷⁰ Meyer Phenomenon is referring to the sale of the *Twilight* books.

¹⁷¹ Horn C., ‘BIC Splits Teen Category’, 10 September 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/128204-bic-splits-teen-category.html>, (accessed October 2010)

¹⁷² Seelinger Trites, R., *Disturbing The Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000) p.19

structures.¹⁷³ Whilst '[b]ooks for adolescents are subversive – but sometimes only superficially so. In fact, they are often quite didactic...' ¹⁷⁴ thus implying that YAF is by nature self-centred and self-obsessed, however

The preoccupation with personal maturation in adolescent fiction is commonly articulated in conjunction with a perceived need for children to overcome solipsism and develop intersubjective concepts of personal identity within this world and in relation to others.¹⁷⁵

This is all well and good but it appears to ignore the main requirement for YAF and that is that it tells a compelling story that challenges the reader, or as the author, Nicola Morgan says:

I believe teenagers want....stories that take them out of the comfort zone (and definitely out of their parents' comfort zone), to the limit of fear, disgust, emotion, grief, or passion, and which then brings them safely back again.¹⁷⁶

Good stories are reliant on good writing. However, this challenge, and the constant movement in definition of the category, creates further problems for writers in what is already known as a difficult genre to write,¹⁷⁷ as they try to balance an 'authentic' voice¹⁷⁸ with a transient culture. It is only an accomplished author that can effectively achieve this.

¹⁷³ Seelinger Trites, R., *Disturbing The Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000) p.7

¹⁷⁴ Seelinger Trites R., *Disturbing The Universe Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000) p.ix

¹⁷⁵ McCallum R., *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1999) p.7

¹⁷⁶ Morgan N., 'Ya to You', *Author* vol. 114 (3), 2003 pp. 124-125

¹⁷⁷ Melrose A., *Write For Children* (London: Routledge, 2002) p.132

¹⁷⁸ This is discussed further on p.291

Representation

In the title of my thesis I use both the words ‘representation’ and ‘representing’. The first relates to research I have undertaken where I explore whether and how the portrayal of sex, drugs and alcohol in YAF has changed. The second, ‘representing’, relates to how I will portray these issues within my creative piece which will be explored in the conclusion of this exegesis. The term ‘representation’ can be defined within the remit of this thesis as the words used by an author to portray the participation in/witnessing of a sexual act and/or the taking of drugs and alcohol by fictional characters. ‘Representing’ on the other hand relates to the words that I use based on an image I wish to create as an author within the creative part of my thesis, and which is intended to ‘create’ a textual picture of a character partaking in sex or drugs and/or alcohol. It is important to realise, as Webb has stated, that: ‘Representation is not about substitution and reiteration, but it is about *constitution*: it constitutes – makes real – both the world and our ways of being in the world and in communities.’¹⁷⁹ Therefore the aim of my creative piece is to ‘make real’ for the reader the potential world of some YAs and the consequences of some risk-taking behaviour.

As Webb also suggests, crucial to any representation, are three questions: Who’s performing the representation? What does it mean? And what effect does it have?¹⁸⁰ It is with these questions in mind that I approach the issue of representation and the work of representing. In terms of representation I need to make an informed decision as to why the author has chosen particular words to illustrate a certain act. Though I cannot know the true reason why an author has chosen a word as I am not that author and am not living in the particular cultural

¹⁷⁹ Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.10

¹⁸⁰ Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.2

moment that their text was written. What I can base my decisions on is an awareness of how these acts are portrayed within the wider media combined with an understanding of what is actually happening within society. These decisions can potentially also have impact on my choice of words in my creative piece where I am 'representing' these acts. I recognise the need, whilst absorbed in the creative activity of writing, to remain conscious of the image or potential message I am portraying as a writer. Accordingly, I believe that I must also be aware of the ethics involved in any portrayal I create particularly as my characters within my creative piece are only sixteen and therefore are potentially breaking the law. As a writer I believe that my 'representing' must be as accurate and as well informed as possible as there is the potential for any reader of my text to use the information portrayed as the basis for any real life decisions.¹⁸¹ We have already acknowledged that YAs may have an awareness but not always the knowledge so therefore I, and all other writers, have a position of power which can influence and inform others and subsequently we need to consider what impact our writings may have. Writers need to be aware that any portrayal they create has the potential to encourage YAs to partake in illegal activities. They, the writers, therefore, need to understand the responsibilities involved when writing for YAs. Thus, on a personal basis, I needed to think about how I write in order to provide the 'right way of knowing' for the reader. This is applicable to aspects of both representation and representing within this thesis.

The representation, as discussed in this thesis, relates to a reality within a fictional discourse that has been written and will be read in a particular cultural moment. My research into representation and any representation I undertake in

¹⁸¹ Interview with Melvin Burgess on BBC Radio 4s *Front Row* 5 June 2009 7.15pm. And see Zipes J., *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006) p.41

my creative piece are not expected to reflect a truism within contemporary society. Instead, my representation is reflecting the truth of the fictional discourse and its multiple layers as it represents my dialogic relationship between me - the writer, the characters in my novel and my prospective reader.

I am conscious that my interpretation/construction of any representation is going to be influenced by multiple identities. The fact I am an academic, a writer, female and a mother of drug abusing and sexually active young adults is going to influence how I interpret and portray any representation. As Webb states 'What we see is not what is there, but what our social and cultural traditions and their contexts gave us,'¹⁸² as '...we constantly, if subconsciously produce meanings out of the material world.'¹⁸³ I perceive these as layers of interaction and understanding. Bakhtin, however, would call it 'heteroglossia' where the many layers become the multiple voices of the author, the characters, the narrator, the genre, and even, the reader.¹⁸⁴ These multiple voices will not intentionally 'misrepresent' an idea, however, it may be subject to an 'interested' representation that has been swayed by my myriad of identities and the particular cultural moment I am either reading or writing in.¹⁸⁵

I have previously suggested that both YA and YAF could be deemed as 'other'¹⁸⁶, and as such, a YA's identity can be defined by who they are with and is often fragmented and unstable. The identity YAs portray when with parents or teachers is likely to be different to the identity that they portray once surrounded only by peers. The sense of 'other' also applies to the issues I am looking at, as

¹⁸² Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.2

¹⁸³ Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.11

¹⁸⁴ Bakhtin M.M., Trans., Emerson C., Holquist M., 'Discourses in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays* ed. Holquist M., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008 [1981]) p.263

¹⁸⁵ Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.37

¹⁸⁶ See initial thoughts on 'other' on p. 222

underage sex¹⁸⁷, drug taking¹⁸⁸ and under age alcohol consumption¹⁸⁹ can also be deemed as such as they are examples of deviant behaviour. By being 'other' it is suggested that they are on the edge of society, well away from the perceived 'norm', where society in general sees themselves based.

From my research I have found that this 'otherness' may move towards normalisation through ambivalence within fictional discourse. As '[a]mbivalence tends not towards (argumentative or affective) closure, but towards (clinical or narrative) repetition'¹⁹⁰, meaning that a word (phrase or subject) becomes so familiar through representation in various media that despite its deviance it is accepted.¹⁹¹ This is particularly relevant when discussing drug use and sex in YAF as will be discussed later in this thesis (this is not applicable to alcohol as it is often portrayed as the panacea to all YA ills). It should be noted that this ambivalence and acceptance is not reflected in the real world necessarily, just within the safe pages of YAF, as will be seen next, when I explore how sex, drugs and alcohol have been represented.

Sex: Comes out from under the covers

Within YAF the sexual act appears to have made a definite contextual shift from under the covers; moving from an implied act hidden under metaphorical bed clothes through literary foreplay to explicit erotica. Gang bangs, fellatio,

¹⁸⁷ Sexual intercourse is legal over the age of 16

¹⁸⁸ Some drugs are illegal i.e. those classified under the 1920 Dangerous Drugs Act <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1921/jun/16/dangerous-drugs-act-1920-draft> (accessed March 2010)

¹⁸⁹ The drinking of alcohol is legal once you are over the age of 18

¹⁹⁰ McGuire J., 'The Intelligible, the Sensible, and Fictivist Through: Angela Carter's Window on the Wolves', *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* vol. 5 (2), 2008 pp. 126-139

¹⁹¹ For example the TV programme *Skins*, a programme about YAs which uses drug terminology as its title and which no one questions.

cunnilingus and prostitution are now all featuring more graphically.¹⁹² The novel *Junk* by Melvin Burgess, published in 1996, forms the starting point of this thesis, but it is Burgess' novel *Doing It* (2003) which is an influential text relating to the way sex is portrayed in YAF, as it is the first book to tell the story from the male perspective. The publication of this novel was greeted with some disdain by the then Children's Laureate, Anne Fine in an article in *The Guardian*.¹⁹³ This article was then responded to by Burgess¹⁹⁴ himself and this section will investigate and analyse the 'for' and 'against' issues that were raised.

In summary Fine said, in her article 'Filth, whichever way you look at it', that *Doing It* is a 'grubby book' which demeaned both boys and girls and was a form of sexual bullying. She considered Burgess to be a misogynist writing pornography and stated that no girl or young woman should have to read this sort of thing. Fine denied that it reflected reality in any form and believed that any publisher involved in its publication should 'be ashamed.'

In response Burgess says in his article 'Sympathy for the Devil', which is available on line, that Fine's argument has no intellectual backup and is based on an attitude that 'it is about revolting boys'¹⁹⁵ and that female sexuality is celebrated whilst male sexuality remains suspect. The presence of the bias Burgess suggested is supported by the research presented later in this section in which the majority of fiction discussed draws on portrayals of sex from a female perspective. Burgess perceived that Fine's diatribe was itself a form of bullying.

¹⁹² It should be noted that this research is not arguing that there has been an increase in the number of books that deal with sex just that the way sex is portrayed has changed; neither is it exploring the portrayal of sexuality or gender.

¹⁹³ Fine A., 'Filth, whichever way you look at it', *The Guardian*, Saturday March 29, 2003, www.guardian.co.uk/books.2003/mar/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview24 (accessed November 2008)

¹⁹⁴ Burgess M., 'Sympathy for the Devil' <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html> (accessed November 2008)

¹⁹⁵ Burgess M., 'Sympathy for the Devil' <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html> (accessed November 2008)

While he acknowledged that girls could feel demeaned if they were offended by the text, he hoped they would see the humour involved as the book is about boys and not girls, and he intended to engage honestly with the YA male sexual culture.

Burgess suggests that one of the main issues which needs to be addressed is the fact that the media makes such an issue of portraying YAs as drug taking and promiscuous, whilst 'the general public have moved on'¹⁹⁶. This confusion is compounded if you compare two recent surveys: one has suggested that for some young adults the taking of drugs and, in particular, alcohol, can lead to more reckless sexual activity,¹⁹⁷ whereas a second YouGov survey,¹⁹⁸ indicates that actually this drug taking, promiscuous YA is a media construct rather than reality. This is explained by Jackson and Scott who suggest that:

The impression of a sexually freer, more diverse society is reflected in representations of sexuality and intimate relations in popular culture and reinforced by the everyday knowledge gained from living in a social environment increasingly saturated with sexual imagery.¹⁹⁹

The concern probably being reflected is that the UK still has one of the highest rates of pregnancy and STIs²⁰⁰ (Sexually Transmitted Infections). If the statistics are to be believed, there is a dichotomy between how sexually active or not the YAs are and how the media portrays them. What these statistics do highlight is how those, who are sexually active, are not taking adequate precautions. This would suggest a failing in the provision of sex education²⁰¹ in whatever format²⁰² and

¹⁹⁶ Burgess M., 'Sympathy for the Devil' <http://www.melvinburgess.net/articles.html> (accessed November 2008)

¹⁹⁷ YouGov/Channel 4 Survey Results, www.yougov.com (accessed October 2008). It is important to be aware that with any statistics there has to be the proviso that statistics can be manipulated to fit with any agenda.

¹⁹⁸ YouGov/Channel 4 Survey Results, www.yougov.com (accessed October 2008)

¹⁹⁹ Jackson S., Scott S., 'Sexual Antinomies in Late Modernity', *Sexualities* vol. 7 (2) pp. 233-248 (234)

²⁰⁰ *Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group Annual Report 2007/08*

²⁰¹ *Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group Annual Report 2007/08*

²⁰² Once again this is not a subject I intend to address in this thesis but only to acknowledge the situation

may mean that it is YAF that is already providing a source of sex education.²⁰³ The fact that the media²⁰⁴ likes to imply that YAs are having more sex than statistically they appear to be suggests a reinforcement of the image of YAs as subversive. A cynical point of view could suggest that the increase in graphic sexual activity within YAF has a direct connection to the marketability of a book and the number of sales created. The graphic sex is accepted and not challenged because, as Judith Butler suggests:

Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performance always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value.²⁰⁵

We can see this in the way radical youth culture like ‘Punk’ (for example) is absorbed into a commodified and non-subversive version of itself and sexual imagery has gone the same way since the sexual revolution of the nineteen sixties. Conceivably, the more sexually aware a YA is the more desensitized they become to explicit sex and its shock value within a discourse. On the other hand, if sex education is failing them, the opportunity to vicariously explore sexual behaviour at a safe distance with no risks should not be dismissed. Also as will be seen in the next section, on sex in YAF, not all books are making use of graphic sex; some are taking a more sensitive approach.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Reynolds K., *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) p.117

²⁰⁴ The term media in this instance is taken to mean all forms – newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, films and books.

²⁰⁵ Butler J., *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008 [1990]) p. xxii See also the commodification of YA on p.238

²⁰⁶ See William Nicholson’s *Rich and Mad* (2010) and Tabitha Suzuma’s *Forbidden* (2010)

The portrayal of sex within the media,²⁰⁷ despite its shock headlines, tends to remain within the safe boundaries of heterosexual relationships with the implication that ‘boys/men are only after one thing’,²⁰⁸ whilst ignoring any mention of homosexual, lesbian, bisexual or autoerotic sexual practices,²⁰⁹ thus providing no source of information/forum for discussion of these aspects of sexual activity. As a result of the ‘boys are only after one thing’ attitude, it appears that the media likes to imply that boys only want to boast about their sexual prowess and have no concerns.²¹⁰ There is, therefore, no obvious traditional media forum e.g. magazines, in which boys discuss sexual concerns. In contrast, girls have established routes for the discussion of their sexual concerns within teenage magazines.²¹¹ Sue Jackson writes that: ‘Teenage magazines, in actively marketing young women’s (hetero)sexuality, offer “permission” to talk about sex through their problem pages.’²¹² This she suggests has allowed slippage in that ‘...the line between good girls (who have sex in committed love relationships) and bad girls (who have sex because they want to)’²¹³ has become blurred, thus strengthening the argument that the media construct of sex as ‘...something learned, rather than natural’²¹⁴ and something that all teenagers are involved in. Simey and Wellings in their essay ‘How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education

²⁰⁷ With particular reference to newspapers and some tv news.

²⁰⁸ Batchelor S.A., Kitzinger J., Burtney E., ‘Representing young people’s sexuality in the “youth” media’, *Health Education Research*, vol. 19 (6) 2004 pp. 669-676; Sue Jackson, ‘“I’m 15 and Desperate for Sex”: “Doing” and “Undoing” Desire in Letters to a Teenage Magazine’, *Feminism & Psychology* vol. 15(3) pp. 295-313

²⁰⁹ It should also be noted that this silence includes masturbation. Also all these issues are rarely mentioned within teenage magazines as they do not conform to the heterosexual construct.

²¹⁰ Batchelor S.A., Kitzinger J., Burtney E., ‘Representing young people’s sexuality in the “youth” media’, *Health Education Research*, vol. 19 (6) 2004 pp. 669-676

²¹¹ Batchelor S.A., Kitzinger J., Burtney E., ‘Representing young people’s sexuality in the “youth” media’, *Health Education Research*, vol. 19 (6) 2004 pp. 669-676

²¹² Jackson S., ‘“I’m 15 and Desperate for Sex”: “Doing” and “Undoing” Desire in Letters to a Teenage Magazine’, *Feminism & Psychology* vol. 15 (3) pp. 295-313

²¹³ Jackson S., ‘“I’m 15 and Desperate for Sex”: “Doing” and “Undoing” Desire in Letters to a Teenage Magazine’, *Feminism & Psychology* vol. 15 (3) pp. 295-313

²¹⁴ Jackson S., ‘“I’m 15 and Desperate for Sex”: “Doing” and “Undoing” Desire in Letters to a Teenage Magazine’, *Feminism & Psychology* vol. 15 (3) pp. 295-313

in England?’ propose that national newspapers with their sensationalized headlines were deemed ‘highly influential’, when at the same time, teenage magazines were ‘broadly criticized’ for their content.²¹⁵ However, there seems to be an inherent contradiction here, as Simey and Wellings again suggest that many articles take issue with what is considered to be ‘overly explicit’ sex and relationship education in school while employing sensationalizing headlines regarding in-appropriate YA sexual activity, thus reinforcing its perceived place in society.²¹⁶ They have also highlighted the lack of articles which portray ‘any positive aspects of teenage sexual activity’,²¹⁷ suggesting that the media ignores the reasons why YAs get involved in sexual activity. The implication being that it is inappropriate or deviant behaviour, therefore by default unpleasant and certainly not to be enjoyed.

The Education Act of 1996 introduced the sex education elements to the National Curriculum science and made them mandatory in both secondary and primary schools. The elements of education included covered only anatomy, puberty, biological aspects of sexual reproduction and use of hormones to control and promote fertility. Other items that were considered statutory, but which were not included in the National Curriculum for science were education on HIV, AIDS and STIs. Parents had the right to withdraw their children from specific classes if they so wished.²¹⁸ There was a further Education Act in 2002 where every local authority was ‘...required to have regard to the sex education guidance issued by

²¹⁵ Simey P., Wellings K., ‘How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education in England’, *Sex Education* vol. 8 (3) pp. 357-370

²¹⁶ Simey P., Wellings K., ‘How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education in England’, *Sex Education* vol. 8 (3) pp. 357-370

²¹⁷ Simey P., Wellings K., ‘How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education in England’, *Sex Education* vol. 8 (3) pp. 357-370

²¹⁸ ‘Sex education legislation for England and Wales’ www.avert.org/legislation.htm (accessed October 2008) It should be noted that a review of sex education provision was announced on 23/10/08

the Secretary of State for Education'²¹⁹ However, the provisions for sex education in schools appear to be failing as:

Research among pupils aged 13-14 has shown that SRE [sex and relationship education] is considered insufficiently informative on sexual practices (including masturbation, oral sex and anal sex), homosexuality and sexual pleasure.²²⁰

The YouGov/Channel 4 survey suggests that 'nearly three in ten teenagers say they need more sex and relationship education' and 'more than a third of teens rely on getting advice from friends, the internet, magazines and via pornography',²²¹ all sources which it is suggested are constructed and inappropriate.

The media that we have so far considered when discussing issues of YA sexuality are hampered by being written by adults about YAs, or are intentionally didactic, by being deliberately educational, or in the case of 'shock' YAF, could be seen to be negatively impacted by a desire to use extremes as a marketing tool. It is, then, not surprising to suggest in this thesis that YAF can be more appropriately used to explore issues of sex and sexuality only when the fictions written place an emphasis (or responsibility) on the author to communicate the truth about sex. To be effective in this respect YAF would have to aim to depict sex without either inappropriate scorn, or through rose tinted glasses. This role for YAF has been recognised in the scientific community, as *The British Medical Journal* suggested that when authors write on teenage sex an understanding of young adult psychology would be of benefit, allowing risks to be highlighted

²¹⁹ Sex education legislation for England and Wales' www.avert.org/legislation.htm (accessed October 2008)

²²⁰ Simey P., Wellings K., 'How do national newspapers report on sex and relationship education in England', *Sex Education* vol. 8 (3) pp.357-370

²²¹ YouGov/Channel 4 Survey Results, www.yougov.com (accessed October 2008).

effectively.²²² The author, then, could make allowances for the fact that the part of the brain which controls sexual drive, reasoning and planning, is not fully matured until 14 or 15 years of age. My research suggests, therefore, that guidance offered in YAF can be delivered in a format that is accessible to YA's 'level of cognitive development,'²²³ and inside a narrative that is written with its audience firmly in mind.

Sex in YAF

The portrayal of sex in YAF has changed since Burgess' *Junk* in 1996, appearing to become more graphic, though this is not necessarily a reflection of society. The research undertaken so far suggests that this change in portrayal within YAF is a reaction of writers to the availability of information and influences within the youth culture – that YAF is attempting to compete for sales by giving readers what authors think readers want and will buy. Importantly, reading about sexual activity has been shown to be highly valued as a means of learning about sex education by YAs.²²⁴ Reading allows them to take what they want from the narrative, to explore vicariously and in private, whilst they can read it over and over again for pleasure, and if necessary, without fear of embarrassment.

In *Junk* Burgess first portrays sex as implied and within a sleeping bag without any specific detail: it is a gentle but furtive scene, and initially it appears that Tar and Gemma do not have sex as they have no access to a condom (and that Gemma was underage). However, the reader is led to believe they finally do have sex when:

²²² Stuart-Smith S., 'Teenage Sex: Cognitive Immaturity Increases the Risks', *British Medical Journal Online* www.student.bmj.com/back_issues/0496/teensex.htm (accessed September 2008)

²²³ Stuart-Smith S., 'Teenage Sex: Cognitive Immaturity Increases the Risks', *British Medical Journal Online* www.student.bmj.com/back_issues/0496/teensex.htm (accessed September 2008)

²²⁴ Reynolds K., *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) p.117

We cuddled and it got very warm and then a bit steamy and pretty soon my jumper found its way up around my neck...²²⁵

Even when the girls turn to prostitution to support their drug habit the sex happens elsewhere, out of sight of the reader. Gemma, however, implies that her form of prostitution is safe, as she works from ‘Dido’s Health Parlour,’ and that she has been taking care of herself:

The thing is, I [Gemma] know my limits. I’m sensible about it. Lily says I do everything sensibly even when I go over the top. Too right. I take care of myself. I eat well. Always make the punters use a condom. I don’t work on the streets. I do it through the massage parlour. I don’t share needles, except with Tar. I’m not a junkie. I can stop whenever I want...I don’t have Aids. I don’t even have non-specific urethritis.²²⁶

Whereas Lily’s form of prostitution that involves working on the streets is not safe. It is Gemma who highlights how Lily was beaten up whilst she appears to remain unscathed.²²⁷

Prostitution is a theme used in other YAFs, for example *Candy* (2005) by Kevin Brookes which follows the efforts of Joe to rescue Candy from her heroin addiction which has forced her into prostitution. However, in Noel Clarke’s *Kidulthood* (2006) and Judy Waite’s *Game Girls* (2007) the girls are not forced into prostitution in order to support a drug habit, but instead use prostitution to enhance their lifestyle as it provides them with an income. In *Kidulthood*, two of the female characters go and see a drug dealer, where in exchange for performing oral sexual acts on the dealer and his friend they are given drugs.²²⁸ These drugs they proceed to sell in order to finance a shopping expedition to buy new clothes

²²⁵ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Puffin Modern Classic, 2003 [1996]) p.95 Gemma had put the jumper on having got cold waiting for Tar to get a condom so was naked underneath

²²⁶ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Puffin Modern Classic, 2003 [1996]) p.229

²²⁷ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Puffin Modern Classic, 2003 [1996]) p.230

²²⁸ Clarke N., *Kidulthood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p. 52

for a party they are going to. Judy Waite on the other hand has her girls almost fall into prostitution. The book starts with Fern, a 17 year old girl, meeting a man she met in a chat room. Their meeting results in her pleasuring him manually and him panicking that she is under 18. He gives her a wad of cash:

‘That was good.’ His voice is flat now. ‘Shall I see you again?’

‘I...’ She needs a reason to get away and the truth is the best she can dredge up. Will he try to stop her if she reaches for the door handle? Maybe he’s locked the door from the inside. ‘... I’m not as old as you think I am.’

‘Shit. How old?’

‘Seventeen. Just.’

‘Shit.’

This is all her fault. She lied to him. She put herself here. ‘It’s fine.’ She edges sideways slightly, leaning away from him. ‘But I want to go now.’

He grabs hold of her arm and his grip is tight and she winces. Now she’s scared.

His other hand is digging in the pocket of the khaki jacket. ‘Look – take this. Forget it all happened.’ He is holding the wallet and pulling out a wad of notes which he pushes into her bag.²²⁹

This experience and idea of prostitution is further developed following a drunken party where one of the other girls, Alix, ends up having sex with two boys at the same time whilst totally inebriated:

She lies back down, grips the crucifix tightly, the diamond-hard edges pressing into her skin. Dale has moved away slightly, pulling off his shirt. Tom moves one leg over, pressing down on her. ‘We’ve both got condoms,’ he says.

Alix squeezes her eyes tight shut. She would like her Mum to appear out of the haze. She’d like to hear what sort of fairy tale she weaves around this.

When Tom or possibly Dale presses his lips against hers, she lets her mouth open slightly. Lets herself sigh. Her fingers release the crucifix and it slides away. She circles her arms around Tom or possibly Dale. Valuable. Very valuable.²³⁰

²²⁹ Waite J., *Game Girls* (London: Andersen Press, 2007) p.12

²³⁰ Waite J., *Game Girls* (London: Andersen Press, 2007) p.62

The storyline develops into a situation where Alix introduces the idea to the others in a matter of fact and businesslike way:

‘Inside, it’s actually better to charge for sex than it is for cooking. You need certificates and inspections and things to sell cooked food.’...‘It’s a client-based business strategy, so you obviously try to meet the customer’s needs...’²³¹

The idea of prostitution is given a positive slant with the perception that the girls have control and it is ‘only’ their bodies they are selling. It should be noted that the sexual activity in this book tends to have negative connotations as the girls commodify their bodies and the males are portrayed, in the main, in a predatory fashion. However, the end of the book does not sanctify this behaviour as acceptable and attempts to reinstate the ‘norm’ with Courtney informing her mother of the abuse she has suffered at the hands of her father and the assumed arrest of Alix for the murder of Fern after she is attacked by a punter.

Seelinger Trites has demonstrated that: ‘Most YA novels about [YA] sexuality have at best a conflicting ideology and at worst a repressive ideology that both reflects and perpetuates Western Culture’s confused sexual mores.’²³² It is perhaps for this reason that contraception is something that is often hidden and appears assumed, or as in Milward’s *Apples*, where it is portrayed to be normal to go to the clinic and queue for the morning after pill;²³³ thus appearing to condone having unprotected and/or multiple partner sex. Some YAF mentions the need for a condom but it is certainly not a general requirement for fictional sex. In Burgess’s *Junk* (1996) Tar and Gemma initially refrain from sex because they do not have a condom and the others in the house won’t lend them one as they are

²³¹ Waite J., *Game Girls* (London: Andersen Press, 2007) p.104

²³² Seelinger Trite R., *Disturbing the Universe Power and Repression in Adolescence Literature*, (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2000), p.95

²³³ Milward R., *Apples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p. 32

underage.²³⁴ Whilst as seen in the quotation, in Judy Waite's *Game Girls* (2007), the two boys who are having sex with Alix reassure her that they both have condoms.²³⁵ In William Nicholson's *Rich and Mad* (2010) Maddie, the main female character, goes to the doctors to get the pill and is warned about STIs.²³⁶ By contrast, Malorie Blackman's latest novel, *Boys Don't Cry* (2010), notably (because of its unusual approach) provides a salutary tale of what happens when you do not use contraception, even if it is your first time, when the main character, Dante, finds himself landed with a child that is apparently his after a one night drunken fumble with a previous girlfriend.

In addition to this lack of development in depictions of appropriate contraception, portrayals of sex are also more likely to be presented from a female perspective than a male point of view. The only notable book which takes the male perspective is Melvin Burgess' *Doing It* (2003). Indeed, Malorie Blackman's *Boys Don't Cry* is the first to deal with the issues of being a teenage parent from a male perspective. She does mention the sexual act which resulted in the birth of Emma in such a way that many male and female readers' could empathise with:

And the whole thing . . . well, it was over before it'd barely begun. It had been a blink-and-you'd-miss-it sprint, not a practised and polished marathon. To tell the truth it'd kind of put me off. I remember thinking, *Is that it then? All there is to it?* So how could *one* encounter that lasted . . .²³⁷

Blackman highlights how it can take just one time to create a baby. It is interesting that in such a fast moving publishing environment Blackman's book may be marking a development in the depictions of sex, as it is not the only book published within 2010 to take a slightly more sensitive approach to sex. William

²³⁴ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Puffin Classics, 2003 [1996]) pp. 93-94

²³⁵ Waite J., *Game Girls* (London: Anderson Press, 2007) p.62

²³⁶ Nicholson W., *Rich and Mad* (London: Egmont, 2010) p.159

²³⁷ Blackman M., *Boys Don't Cry* (London: Random House, 2010) p.20

Nicholson's *Rich and Mad* (2010) explores the sexual experience of the two main characters Rich and Maddy as, independently, they build up to losing their virginity together. As opposed to Dante's experience in *Boys Don't Cry*, Maddy and Rich take the time to explore each other's bodies.²³⁸ There is nothing sensationalised about their sexual act, it is innocent and naive as they ask each other what they like. Without any pressure they consummate their relationship reminding each other this was not a one off. They were practising:

He moved, and suddenly was all the way in.
 'Warm!' he exclaimed again.
 'There,' she said 'You're there now.'
 I can't hold out much longer,' he whispered.
 'That's okay.' She found his cheek with her lips and kissed him. 'Only practising.'²³⁹

Nicholson does contrast this sympathetic sexual relationship with an alternative one, highlighting, that not all sex is good. The relationship between Leo and Grace is a sexual relationship that is based on violence (though as a reader you never witness the sexual act between Leo and Grace, just the consequences²⁴⁰) which, understandably, is portrayed as unacceptable and contrasts with the more acceptable and gentle sexual experience of Maddy and Rich. However, the way the sexual act is written you have the distinct feeling that it is the author is giving the reader instructions on how it should be done. You could, metaphorically, feel the writer on their shoulders as the act is described. On the other hand, Tabitha Suzuma's *Forbidden* (2010) which also takes a slightly more gentle approach to sex, but without the author's metaphorical intervention, uses short sentences to

²³⁸ Nicholson W., *Rich and Mad* (London: Egmont, 2010) p.359

²³⁹ Nicholson W., *Rich and Mad* (London: Egmont, 2010) p.438

²⁴⁰ Nicholson W., *Rich and Mad* (London: Egmont, 2010) p.388

highlight the tension between Maya and Lochan.²⁴¹ However, this sexual relationship is deviant as it is between brother and sister and can never have a happy ending despite how gentle and passionate it may be.

Drugs – everyone does it!

The consumption of drugs may be limited to a minority of people but as we will see its influences are widespread within popular culture, which according to Paul Manning, is dependent on the normalisation of drug use which he defines as: ‘recreational drug use is now so familiar to those aged below 35 years that it should be regarded as “normal” rather than an activity confined to minority subcultures.’²⁴² It is this definition of normalisation that I will use within my thesis. It should be noted that the disagreements between academics hinge on what definition of normalisation is employed and whether or not ‘normalisation’ is to be assessed simply in terms of quantitative measures – in which case the argument hangs on whether around 30% in most quantitative studies can be interpreted as ‘normal’ – or whether there is another more qualitative dimension to ‘normalisation’ which cannot be simply counted but which involves the embeddedness of drug use in popular culture. As such I will be looking at the ‘embeddedness’ in YAF. There is a concern, as stated by Shiner and Newburn, that the term normalisation is reliant upon the youth culture enjoying a unity of views instead of acknowledging that there is often a disparity in the approach to drug use by YAs.²⁴³ An important term in the definition is that of ‘familiar’ as it is suggesting increased knowledge rather than increased usage of drugs. It is also

²⁴¹ Suzuma T., *Forbidden* (London: Definitions, 2010)

²⁴² Manning P., ed., ‘Introduction: an Overview of the Normalisation Debate,’ *Drugs and Popular Culture, Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.49

²⁴³ Manning P., ed., ‘Introduction: an Overview of the Normalisation Debate,’ *Drugs and Popular Culture, Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.54

important to differentiate between frequency and normalcy in that YAs may encounter environments where drug consumption is common but this does not imply an acceptance of drug use. It should be noted that the use of drugs by YAs is different to that of adults, in that addiction to Class A drugs is rare²⁴⁴ whilst cannabis and VSA (volatile substance abuse)²⁴⁵ tend to be the drugs of choice for YA drug users.²⁴⁶

Hammersley *et al* consider that drug use has become normalised because drugs are used by ‘normal people’.²⁴⁷ This therefore suggests that deviant behaviour such as excessive drinking and casual sex as well as drug taking are moving, or have already moved, to the centre of youth culture from the margins. However, the terms ‘normal’, ‘margin’ and ‘centre’ are in themselves immediately problematic in such a debate and Hammersley *et al* do not define them in any real sense. It could mean that ‘normal’ fits into a dichotomy with ‘deviant’ in that the people Hammersley *et al* are suggesting are using drugs are not from the margins of society, instead stereotypically “white, middle-class and educated” and thus normalised. But surely the issue here is that there is no margin or centre just that there are simply drug users in all walks of society, disenchanting junkies living in squats on deprived sink estates vie with merchant bankers to purchase what the supplier can provide.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, *Getting to Grips with Substance Misuse among Young People. The data for 2007/08* (accessed via www.drugscope.org.uk March 2009)

²⁴⁵ Volatile Substance Abuse is the deliberate inhalation of the chemicals found in everyday products such as deodorant, hairspray and cigarette lighter refills. <http://www.re-solv.org/> (accessed January 2011)

²⁴⁶ Fuller E., ed., *Drug Use, Smoking and Drinking Among Young People in England in 2007*. (accessed via www.drugscope.org.uk March 2009)

²⁴⁷ Hammersley R., Khan F., Ditton J., *Ecstasy and the Rise of the Chemical Generation* (New York, London: Routledge, 2002) p.85

²⁴⁸ Melrose A., Harbour V., ‘Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children’s literature’, *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.176 Plus see later in this section where drugs within YAF is discussed p.269

Therefore these definitions of normalisation, flitting between binary oppositions of ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’, ‘margins’ and ‘centres’, allows for the dichotomy of illegal/legal, illicit/licit, to be blurred.²⁴⁹ The portrayal of prescription drug use is rare within popular culture whilst the ‘normal’ use of illegal drugs reinforces the lack of differentiation between the two thus emphasising the blurring. This is of particular relevance in the case of cannabis where it is illegal yet used for medicinal purposes. There is potential for a situation where a parent (for example) is taking it for pain control through self medication in their own home, whilst their child [YA] is taking it for recreational purposes in a social situation e.g. a party. Both are illegal, as the parent and the YA are in possession and using, but are likely to be treated differently by the police with potentially more leniency being shown to the parent who is self medicating. Parker *et al* suggest that ‘the close relationship and pick-and-mix approach to drinking alcohol and recreational drug use is an example of illicit/licit being blurred.’²⁵⁰ Normalisation, as such appears to be culturally constructed and time specific, often influenced by ‘fashion and variation,’²⁵¹ for example the dance culture of the early 1990s where ecstasy was the drug of choice.²⁵² An expanded definition of normalisation that I apply in this critical exegesis is that within popular culture the portrayal of soft drug use is no longer portrayed as ‘other’. Instead it is normal and has been assimilated within the discourse of popular

²⁴⁹ Parker H., Aldridge J., Measham F., *Illegal Leisure: The Normalisation of Adolescent Recreational Drug Use* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998) p.157 Illegal/legal refers to such thing as legal/illegal drugs, alcohol/drugs. Sexual encounters are often a result of participating in blurring of the legal/illegal. Also Measham F., Aldridge J., Parker H., *Dancing on Drugs, Risk, Health and Hedonism in the British Club Scene* (London, New York: Free Association Books, 2001) p.16

²⁵⁰ Parker H., Aldridge J., Measham F., *Illegal Leisure: The Normalisation of Adolescent Recreational Drug Use* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998) p.157

²⁵¹ Blackman S., “‘See Emily Play’”: Youth Culture, Recreational Drug Use and Normalisation,’ in *Drugs in Britain Supply, Consumption and Control* ed., Simpson M., Shildrick T., Macdonald R., (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.46

²⁵² Hammersley R., Khan F., Ditton J., *Ecstasy and the Rise of the Chemical Generation* (New York, London: Routledge, 2002)

culture, in particular YAF, thus reinforcing the blurring between illicit and licit 'drug' use. The definition, however, does not imply a normalisation in the reality of drug use. This is further reinforced by the fact that the number of 16-24 year old drug users has declined from 11.6% in 2002/2003 to 7.3% in 2007/2008.²⁵³ Teenage drug use in the UK has fallen since 1995²⁵⁴ something that is not reflected within YAF but perhaps that is where the education lies as '...drug (and alcohol) education has a very poor track record has been ended for decades.'²⁵⁵ The imagery of widespread drug addiction has become normalised within the cinema, television, and popular fiction, according to Manning, as media they appear '...more capable in dealing with themes of drug consumption...'²⁵⁶ The implication being that the portrayal of drug use within popular culture is the area that has become normalised thus creating a balance between the hysteria of the media and the actuality of drug use. An awareness of drugs does not make you a user. On this basis, I would suggest, that through a cultural construction, it is society's awareness of drugs that has been normalised rather than its actual physical use and this I believe is reflected in YAF.

Drugs in YAF

Previously I have written ²⁵⁷ that the first book to really break the mould and deal with drugs in depth, causing substantial controversy, was *Junk* (1996) by Melvin

²⁵³ Plant M., Robertson R., Plant M., Miller P., *Drug Nation Patterns, Problems, Panics and Policies* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.47

²⁵⁴ Plant M., Robertson R., Plant M., Miller P., *Drug Nation Patterns, Problems, Panics and Policies* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.63

²⁵⁵ Plant M., Robertson R., Plant M., Miller P., *Drug Nation Patterns, Problems, Panics and Policies* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.149

²⁵⁶ Manning P., ed., *Drugs and Popular Culture, Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.3

²⁵⁷ Melrose A., Harbour V., 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children's literature', *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007), pp.176-190

Burgess, which won the prestigious CILIP Carnegie Medal (1997). It is a harrowing tale, set in a squat in Bristol, where the voice of Tar and Gemma are mixed into a multi-voiced, cross section of inner-city drug taking. Julia Eccleshare said Burgess's handling of the subject was 'an open-minded and non-judgemental stance on the way of life of the young addicts and their various, largely unsuccessful, attempts to break out of the cycle of drug use.'²⁵⁸ It is hard not to agree with this but the problem with the novel is the overbearing, reified idea that drug taking is something that happens elsewhere.

...this was different from the usual kind of squat because this little notice appeared on the front door, announcing that the place was squatted and that the police had been informed.²⁵⁹

Even notifying the police of the squat does not move the narrative from the margins of society to a 'liveable with' acceptability. Burgess's drug culture, for all its representational bravery, becomes 'other', something that happens over there and elsewhere, on the margins of an otherwise civilised and moral society. Smith and Fitchett in their 2002 report identified that: '...the use of illicit drugs is now simply perceived to be part of growing up for many young people,'²⁶⁰ which implies that there has been a normalisation in drug use. I would suggest, however, and as has been discussed earlier, this is not the case. Drug use has not been normalised in reality. Drug awareness has. This awareness is reflected in YAF, with particular reference to cannabis, which appears to have become almost

²⁵⁸ Eccleshare J., in *International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* ed., P. Hunt, (London: Routledge Farmer, 2003) p.548

²⁵⁹ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Penguin Books, 2003[1996]) p.40

²⁶⁰ Smith A., Fitchett J.A., "'The first time I took acid I was in Heaven": A Consumer Research Enquiry into Youth Illicit Drug Consumption', *Management Decision* vol. 40 (4): pp. 372-382, 2002 www.nottingham.ac.uk/mumba/P372.pdf (accessed May 2006) quoted in Melrose A., Harbour V., 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children's literature', *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society*, ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p. 183

invisible and subsumed within the plot. In some books²⁶¹ the portrayal of cannabis is neither negative nor positive; it is just there, part of everyday living and part of the culture. For example in former Children's Laureate, Jacqueline Wilson's book *Kiss* (2007) a character when asked a question states: "Oh, my parents are too involved in getting stoned with their boring buddies upstairs,"²⁶² the implication being that even in Wilson's saccharine creations there is potential for getting stoned to be deemed normal behaviour and part of everyday culture.

Following on from *Junk*, there has been an increase in the number of books that include drugs. These are often written by authors who base them in the area where they live thus identifying problems and providing empathy with teenagers of the area. It needs to be noted that their portrayal of hard drugs tends to fit into the symbolic frameworks which are often reproduced by the media – conforming to the stereotypical 'location, behaviour and identities, substance images, causes and consequences.'²⁶³ For example: VSA tends to be portrayed as happening in a deprived location such as back alleys, sewers etc. As Manning suggests, class, gender and racialised identities work with location. For behaviour and identities an example is that ecstasy is often seen as the drug that fragments families, damages the innocent (consider the media²⁶⁴ coverage of Leah Betts' death from

²⁶¹ Books such as: Alan Gibbons' *The Lost Boys Appreciation Society* (2004), Anne Cassidy's *Looking for JJ* (2004), Rachel Anderson, *This Strange New Life* (2006)

²⁶² Wilson J., *Kiss* (London: Doubleday, 2007) p.45

²⁶³ Manning P., 'There's No Glamour in Glue: News and the Symbolic Framing of Substance Abuse'. *Crime Media Culture* vol. 2 (1) April 2006, pp. 49-66

²⁶⁴ For example see <http://ecstasy.org/info/dangers.html>, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/leah-betts-link-to-triple-killing-1524576.html> or http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/13/newsid_2516000/2516593.stm (both accessed July 2011)

ecstasy in 1995).²⁶⁵ Whilst for substance images the syringe in heroin use is seen as the ultimate violation of the body²⁶⁶ as is indicated by this quote from *Junk*:

And jacking up when she was breastfeeding. I've seen her. All the veins in her arms and behind her knees have gone where she's poked around with the needle so much, so she injects into the veins between her breasts. I've seen her sitting with the baby on the breast poking about to find a vein. "Nice fat veins when your tits are big and milky," she said. And no one said a word.²⁶⁷

It is understood that the symbolic frameworks: location, behaviour and identity and substance image and their consequences construct the final symbolic framework – cause and concerns. These symbolic frameworks, according to Manning, inform both fictionalised and non-fiction (news) discourses regarding drug use. However, he continues by highlighting the fact that these frameworks are not static. They are products of specific historical and social conditions which are, consequently, influenced by cultural changes.²⁶⁸

Candy by Kevin Brooks, published in 2005, appears to take its lead from *Junk* as it deals with heroin addiction, a runaway and a dysfunctional family. Candy is the runaway, who has fallen into prostitution and heroin addiction and is controlled by a thuggish pimp called Iggy. There is a graphic and harrowing description of the withdrawal symptoms that Candy suffers whilst trying to come off heroin:

²⁶⁵ Manning P., 'Truth, Fiction and Myth in the Symbolic Framing of Drugs and Substance Misuse in Contemporary Popular Culture.' *RKE Day*, University of Winchester, 3 February 2008

²⁶⁶ Manderson D., 'Metamorphoses: Clashing Symbols in the Social Construction of Drugs', *Journal of Drug Issues* vol. 25 (4), 1995, pp. 799-816

²⁶⁷ Burgess M., *Junk* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1996]) p.298

²⁶⁸ Manning P., 'Truth, Fiction and Myth in the Symbolic Framing of Drugs and Substance Misuse in Contemporary Popular Culture.' *RKE Day*, University of Winchester, 3 February 2008. Historical changes have included the change of attitude regarding Opium use between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The movement in cocaine use between being a 'yuppy' problem in the 1980s to being a problem associated with black urban working class users.

She couldn't keep still for a second. She was either too hot or too cold. She was sweating ... then shivering. Sweating...shivering. Hugging herself. Bashing the pillow. Swearing... cursing... shouting... screaming... spitting... coughing... sniffing... sobbing... Suffering.
It wasn't pretty.²⁶⁹

Nothing in this text glamorises drugs. Instead the narrative highlights the criminal aspects and the desperation of a drug addict to good effect. However, once again the drug addict is portrayed as 'other' and apparently removed from 'normal' everyday life consequently not a perceived threat. Thereby conforming to the media's concept of 'them' ('othered' drug users) and 'us' ('normal' non-users).

Bali Rai's *The Whisper* also published in 2005 takes an uncompromising approach to drug dealing in a multi-cultural society. The language used is a streetwise dialogue aimed presumably at attracting teenagers. It continues the story of a group of youngsters who are accused of being informers. One of the 'crew' has become involved in a family drug-dealing business and abandons his friends. The readers become aware of his increased need for drugs as they have less and less impact when he takes them, in particular with reference to cocaine:

Jas watched Dee, as he copped up lines of coke, desperate for some. His head was crawling with spiders and that sweet voice, the whisper that called to him all the time, sounded like it was a siren going off in his brain. He leaned over quickly and snorted two fat lines of white powder, hoping for the rush to be instant, like the first time. It wasn't.²⁷⁰

In the main you are witness to cocaine being used whilst being aware of heroin being sold. The society this is centred within is a deprived area with an ethnic majority which once again conforms to the symbolic frameworks of drug use as

²⁶⁹ Brooks K., *Candy* (Frome: Chicken House, 2005) p.279

²⁷⁰ Rai B., *The Whisper* (London: Corgi Books, 2005) p.201

suggested by Manning.²⁷¹ It is worth noting that where cannabis is used it tends to be by the adults and almost implied as incidental and acceptable. Once again there is no glamorisation of the drug world; it is seen to be violent and destructive.

Whilst undertaking the research, Bali Ria's *The Whisper* (2005), was found to be one of the few books, along with Richard Milward's *Apples* (2007)²⁷², that actually mentions VSA.

...walking past a gang of youths who, if they had been rich, would have been at home in bed by midnight. Thirteen-year-olds on the prowl, looking for people to mash up just for the hell of it. Bored and high on home-grown or glue.²⁷³

This portrayal conforms to the symbolic frameworks. The characters are young and underprivileged, hanging around a grimy deprived area.²⁷⁴ Writers seem to be automatically picking up on a moralising message without appearing to be dictatorial. These books connect drugs with violence and crime thus reinforcing government messages relating to drugs issues. But the reified issue of drug culture as 'other' still persists.

Conforming to the symbolic frameworks and continuing this uncompromising approach to drug dealing in a multi-cultural society is *Kidulthood* (2006) written by Noel Clarke and based on his screenplay. It has to be asked whether it has been written for shock value rather than realism. As has already been seen, the ease with which two of the female characters offer sexual favours in exchange for drugs which can then be sold in order to fund a shopping expedition certainly wakes the

²⁷¹ Manning P., 'There's No Glamour in Glue: News and the Symbolic Framing of Substance Abuse'. *Crime Media Culture* vol. 2 (1) April 2006, pp. 49-66

²⁷² Milward R., *Apples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p.36

²⁷³ Rai B., *The Whisper* (London: Corgi Books, 2005) p.169

²⁷⁴ Manning P., 'There's No Glamour in Glue: News and the Symbolic Framing of Substance Abuse'. *Crime Media Culture* vol. 2 (1) April 2006, pp. 49-66

reader up.²⁷⁵ The story is based around a group of 15-year-olds who are having a day off school after one of their classmates commits suicide following severe bullying. The story is driven by sex, violence and peer pressure all of which teenagers can relate to. The blurb on the back maintains it is a tale of 'powerful modern-day morality' though this could be arguable as it seems to be couched in violence, portraying possibly an acceptable view of violence and drugs. Needless to say, the book and the film courted controversy which of course is an added incentive for any teenager to seek it out. The fact that the novel has an incredibly large font size, making it easy to read, also seems to target the story away from adulthood and straight to *kidulthood* and there is a sense of cynical marketing manipulation on view.

Kidulthood is not the only book to have warnings of explicit content on the front or to have courted such intense controversy. Julie Burchill with *Sugar Rush* (2004), was slated for a liberal attitude to drugs and alcohol, though it is nowhere near as explicit as any of the other books mentioned previously. *Sugar Rush* follows Kim whose mother has run off with a toy-boy and she is forced to change from her private school to a local comprehensive where she develops a crush on Sugar. The reader experiences through Kim's point of view the conflict of having feelings for another girl. Alcohol and cannabis are used in abundance in order to ease Kim's problems which is a likely if somewhat disturbingly realistic approach. Kim does take an ecstasy tablet whilst at a disco against drugs,

...in a kind of kaleidoscope of loneliness as I wandered around the big, dark, strobing space, spaced out on that amount of drink and E that's both too much and not enough.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Clarke N., *Kidulthood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p.52)

²⁷⁶ Burchill S., *Sugar Rush* (London: Young Picador, 2004) p.135

Burchill's portrayal complies with the symbolic framework of ecstasy being 'represented as a threat, which can destroy the innocent and fragment families'.²⁷⁷ The fact that Burchill handles this threat by ensuring that ecstasy is not glamorised, as Kim collapses in the middle of the dance floor therefore highlighting the dangers, still allows the representation of hard drugs within YAF to appear as showing no signs of normalisation or acceptance. Though more recently in Richard Milward's *Apples* the portrayal of ecstasy is confused. Initially, it is portrayed in a positive light:

We found ecstasy in Year Nine. Me and the girls started getting in on a small scale from Fairhurst every other week to take round someone's house and mess around or hang about the street. Everything changed – all at once we weren't fighting any more we kissed each other, we said we loved each other and we had the best fun in our lives...we knew something about being happy that our mams and dads and the other kids at school wouldn't understand.²⁷⁸

This ties in with Manning's suggestion that '...ordinary and normal, rather than innocent or vulnerable, young people *chose* drugs, such as ecstasy, as a way of planning their recreation.'²⁷⁹ However, two pages later the threat and destruction of innocence is reinstated as an issue when Eve is talking about losing her 'pill virginity' at the same time as her actual virginity:

Fairhurst slung a clear teeny bag on the dashboard and I saw these tiny white pills with a picture of an apple on the side. He asked if I'd ever done ecstasy before; all I could think of was all those girls killed on the news. But it was exciting too, and we swallowed one down.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Manning P., 'There's No Glamour in Glue: News and the Symbolic Framing of Substance Abuse'. *Crime Media Culture* vol. 2 (1) April 2006, pp. 49-66

²⁷⁸ Milward R., *Apple*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p. 22

²⁷⁹ Manning P., 'Truth, Fiction and Myth in the Symbolic Framing of Drugs and Substance Misuse in Contemporary Popular Culture' *RKE Day*, University of Winchester 3 February 2008

²⁸⁰ Milward R., *Apples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p. 24

Thus, in part, acknowledging the media's sensationalised portrayal of ecstasy.²⁸¹

This highlights how the author, consciously or unconsciously, encourages the reader to enter the debate on ecstasy vicariously, allowing them to explore the dangers and debates without actual participation.

YAs and, I would suggest writers as well, '...see cannabis as different from the literary portrayal of other drugs, almost innocent and on a par with tobacco and alcohol.'²⁸² This in part is due to the fact that 'there is rarely violence or even drug dealers involved in the chain that links them to [cannabis] because often a YA's first experience is with friends or family.'²⁸³ Therefore the reality of cannabis being '...entrenched and, in effect, "normalized" among many groups in British society'²⁸⁴ is reflected as a truism in YAF. Books which imply the normalisation referred to, and, where cannabis is mentioned but plays no real part in the story, it is irrelevant and invisible are: Anne Cassidy's *Looking for JJ* (2004), that is about a child murderer who is trying to re-establish a new life as a teenager. There is no mention of drugs except in one incident in order to provide a stereotypical portrayal of students:

The argument at the table had finished when she got back and the lads were sitting quietly, their beers in front of them. One of them was passing a joint around, each person inhaling and passing it on.²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Reference Leah Betts see: Manning P., 'The Symbolic Framing of Drug Use in the News: Ecstasy and Volatile Substance Abuse in Newspapers', in *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.159

²⁸² Melrose A., Harbour V., 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children's literature', in *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.183 ; See also: *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008;

²⁸³ Melrose A., Harbour V., 'Junk, Skunk and Northern Lights – representation of drugs in children's literature', in *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* ed., Manning P., (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007) p.183

²⁸⁴ Plant M., Robertson R., Plant M., Miller P., *Drug Nation Patterns, Problems, Panics and Policies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.42

²⁸⁵ Cassidy A., *Looking for JJ* (London: Scholastic, 2004) p.61

The story could quite easily proceed without this incident. The mention of cannabis is used to imply normality. Rachel Anderson in *This Strange New Life* (2006) also uses cannabis to stereotype students in her story of a family whose two sons develop ME, which is once again incidental to the story. Andy's father implies that it is because of cannabis that he has become ill but can no longer justify this when his other son who has never used drugs or alcohol experiences the same symptoms. The idea that taking recreational drugs is not the same as taking hard drugs is illustrated in *Broken Soup* (2008) written by Jenny Valentine when Rowan (the main character) is discussing going to see a friend: 'I reminded her that most of the girls walking down there were working pretty hard to pay off their drug debts,'²⁸⁶ the implication being that taking drugs is once again 'othered' by relating it to another illegal act - prostitution. Whilst within the narrative the concept that cannabis is a drug is never mentioned. Secondly, when cannabis is mentioned it is just seen as part of culture, it has 'living with' acceptability. The reader is informed that both Jack, Rowan's dead brother, and Carl, her friend's father, use[d] cannabis and it is portrayed as a perfectly natural act.

The blurring of the illicit/licit is further highlighted in *Broken Soup* as when the reader sees Carl consuming cannabis it is portrayed positively: 'When it was as tidy as it was going to be, Carl said, "Time for some sugar," and he started rolling a joint.'²⁸⁷ Whilst Rowan's mother's reliance (unsuccessfully as perceived by Rowan) on prescription drugs is portrayed with negative connotations:

Every so often, Mum had to go to the doctor to prove she was taking her medicine and not selling it on the black market...I swear she had the wrong prescription because the only thing different about Mum since she'd starting taking it was that she'd got thinner.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Valentine J., *Broken Soup* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2008) p.49

²⁸⁷ Valentine J., *Broken Soup* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2008) p.78

²⁸⁸ Valentine J., *Broken Soup* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2008) p.45

This blurring appears to be particularly effective between cannabis and prescription drugs, which could relate to the potential medicinal properties of cannabis as previously mentioned. A blurring which does not involve cannabis is illustrated in *Apples* when Eve talks about Fairhurst going to get his 'prescription' when actually he was going to get drugs [ecstasy] from a dealer.²⁸⁹ In Burgess's latest book *Nicholas Dane* (2009) this blurring is further reinforced when a character is reluctant to sell prescription drugs that have been stolen²⁹⁰ but readily supplies cannabis as he sees that as 'herbal' rather than chemical and therefore acceptable. He applies this logic to other drugs as well:

'Powders ain't natural man,' he exclaimed, when one of his clients asked him if he could get some speed. 'And I am a natural man. I'm here doing mankind a service. We only do the best quality, high-class ganja. It clears the lungs and lightens the spirit. A stoned man is closer to God, but speed is the devil's drug man!'²⁹¹

The character puts almost a religious connotation on using cannabis with the implication being that it is acceptable to use cannabis as a form of relaxation like drinking alcohol.

Jenny Downham's *Before I Die* (2007) cannot avoid blurring illicit/licit drug taking due to the subject matter as Tessa, the main character, is dying of leukaemia. Philippa, the nurse who will look after Tessa at home whilst she dies, explains that the forms of pain control they will use are morphine sulphate and Oramorph both of which are morphine based.²⁹² Heroin is a derivative of

²⁸⁹ Milward R., *Apples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p.23

²⁹⁰ Burgess M., *Nicholas Dane* (London: Andersen Press, 2009)p.303

²⁹¹ Burgess M., *Nicholas Dane* (London: Andersen Press, 2009) p.294

²⁹² Downham, J., *Before I Die* (Oxford: David Fickling, 2007) p.281

morphine.²⁹³ Despite the morphine having obvious medical connotations it still conforms to the symbolic frameworks as it is often administered as the patient deteriorates via a drip - the ultimate violation of the body again.²⁹⁴ I would also suggest that the morphine is 'othered' like heroin because of the implications of its use. In preparation for her death Tessa has created a list of things she wants to do which includes taking drugs:

“Would you take drugs?”
“I *want* to take drugs!”²⁹⁵

Before I Die explores a range of drugs and the possible consumption, and is the only novel found in this research to directly mention ketamine, though Tessa, the main protagonist, does not take it, opting instead for cannabis and magic mushrooms; she also considers ecstasy as an alternative but never takes it. Tessa states that she is not going to take alcohol but the reason for this is the way it reacts with the drugs she is taking for radiotherapy. Not a choice based on abstinence.

The research I have undertaken implies that the representation of drug use, with particular reference to cannabis, has become assimilated within the text of YAF and therefore shown to be normalised to an extent. Cannabis, in *Junk* was used to illustrate recreational drug use; that same drug is now portrayed as part of 'normal' life, part of the YA culture. Instead it is cocaine and/or ecstasy that are used in contemporary books to illustrate a character using recreational drugs. The representation of heroin remains unchanged as 'othered' and a symbol of ultimate deviant behaviour, though no longer used as often as a story line in YAF.

²⁹³ <http://www.acde.org/common/Heroin.htm> (accessed March 2009)

²⁹⁴ Manderson D., 'Metamorphoses: Clashing Symbols in the Social Construction of Drugs', *Journal of Drug Issues* vol. 25 (4), 1995, pp. 799-816

²⁹⁵ Downham J., *Before I Die* (Oxford: David Fickling, 2007) p.61

Consequently, I am suggesting that it is the knowledge and awareness of drugs that has been normalised in these representations and not actually usage – indeed this also creates slippage as the Myerson debate²⁹⁶ ably demonstrates. Cannabis too (as skunk) is beginning to become topical and is moving the debate on again. Interestingly, the book *Boys vs Girl* by Na'ima B. Robert and published in the summer of 2010 has reinstated cannabis's position as an indicator of drug use²⁹⁷ – it is only one book so far but there appears potential for movement of cannabis back out to 'other' rather than 'normal'. This could be related to the re-classification of cannabis to a Class B drug; however, at this point I have come across no other books that have used cannabis in this 'othered' way again.

The symbolic frameworks used normally to analyse the news media proved an effective tool for the analysis of the fictional texts. They illustrated how authors either consciously or unconsciously conform to these symbolic frameworks when portraying drugs. There is a significant overlap between non-fiction news and fictionalised patterns of representation, precisely because these symbolic frameworks or discourses, which are circulated through popular culture inform both fictionalised and non-fictional news narrative. Journalists for example frequently draw upon references, to and images from, film and television drama in constructing their 'stories'.²⁹⁸ This is currently outside the remit of this project but worthy of investigation, especially since the Myerson debate has opened it up

²⁹⁶ The Myerson debate is based around the controversy that was created after Julia Myerson wrote a book entitled *The Lost Child* talking about her son and his drug habit. Unfortunately he chose to object and deny the story which fuelled a debate thrashed out within the media as to the ethics of writing about family and contentious issues like drugs. For example: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2009/apr/08/skunk-class-myerson-debate>; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article5908290.ece> (both accessed January 2010)

²⁹⁷ Robert N., *Boy Vs Girl* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2010) p.145

²⁹⁸ Manning P., 'Truth, Fiction and Myth in the Symbolic Framing of Drugs and Substance Misuse in Contemporary Popular Culture' *RKE Day*, University of Winchester 3 February 2008; Manning P., *Drugs and Popular Culture Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007)

again – allowing me to repeat the assertion that even the previous representation of cannabis as normalised is still being questioned.

This change in drug representation within YAF/popular culture appears to tie in with the reduction of drug use by young adults. Accordingly drugs in YAF potentially do have their place as YAF continues to provide an opportunity for YAs to experience vicariously and safely the consumption of drugs. The normalisation of drugs within popular culture could be seen to encourage YAs to make informed decisions whilst not being aggravated by didactic messages for which their automatic reaction is likely to be to rebel against them. This effective assimilation of the drug culture into YAF ensures that the narrative is not a diatribe but approachable and understandable providing an effective source of tacit drug education for YAs which needs to be developed, encouraged and acknowledged. Thus, the debate ensues, there is not closure but an ongoing issue of awareness.

Alcohol – always the bridesmaid...

Alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug.²⁹⁹ *The 2007 ESPAD Report: Substance Use Among Teenagers in 35 Countries* highlights the only increase in drug use within the UK is in ‘heavy episodic drinking’³⁰⁰, which is binge drinking. Andrew Tyler suggests that young adults perceive alcohol as ‘...just one item in a repertoire of mind bending substances from which they demand a good value-for-money blast.’³⁰¹ It is also worth considering at this point that the concept of

²⁹⁹ Plant M., Robertson R., Plant M., Miller P., *Drug Nation Patterns, Problems, Panics and Policies* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.17

³⁰⁰ Hibell B., Guttormsson U., Ashlöstöm S., Balakirera O., Bjarnason T., Kokeri K., Kraus L., *The 2007 ESPAD Report: Substance Use Among Students in 35 countries*, 2009, Modintrjckoffset AB, Funded by The Swedish National Institute of Public Health

³⁰¹ Tyler A., *Street Drugs The Facts Explained The Myths Exploded* (London: Coronet, 1995 [1986]) p.56

general excess consumption of alcohol is only just being seen as a problem.³⁰² Even then it is perceived that drinking alcohol including whilst under age is deemed acceptable according to the report on use of alcohol among young people by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in October 2008.³⁰³ The report suggests that generally it is believed that introducing YAs to alcohol at an early age will enable them to be able to ‘handle’ their drink³⁰⁴. This corresponds with a report edited by Elizabeth Fuller, for The NHS Information Centre, which includes statistics that show that by the age of 15, 41% of YAs have had a drink in the previous week, with boys more likely to drink than girls, whilst 17% of 15 year olds will have taken cannabis in the previous month.³⁰⁵ It is worth noting that it is only in recent years that there has been a realisation of how much a problem alcohol is for YAs. The latest report (at the time of writing) by Alcohol Concern has highlighted the latest health statistics where on average 36 under 18s per day are admitted to hospital with alcohol related issues but this figure does not include visits to Casualty.³⁰⁶ This is of great concern as alcohol contributes to 5% of young people’s deaths and the UK has the highest rate, in Europe, of YA alcohol-related injuries and yet YAF is only just beginning to see it as a relevant story line.

³⁰² As suggested in *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008

³⁰³ *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008

³⁰⁴ *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008

³⁰⁵ Fuller E., ed., *Drug Use, Smoking and Drinking Among Young People in England in 2007*. (accessed via www.drugscope.org March 2009)

³⁰⁶ Smith T., Curran A., *Right Time, Right Place. Alcohol –Harm Reduction Strategies with Children and Young People* Alcohol Concern Youth Policy Project funded by Comic Relief and the Tudor Trust, October 2010

Alcohol in YAF

Alcohol is perceived to be the poor relation in that binge drinking does not appear to be prevalent in YAF despite it being rife within youth culture.³⁰⁷ Teenagers within YAF are shown to be drinking but it does not appear to be worthy of a dedicated story line of its own. That appears to be saved for sex and drugs. It is rarely portrayed negatively, for example in Joanna Kenrick's *Screwed* (2008): 'I smiled. She looked completely off her face, glowing with alcohol.'³⁰⁸ Alcohol is frequently portrayed as being a panacea to problems. For example, Kim in *Sugar Rush* is seen to consume alcohol in order to deal with her confused feelings and unhappy home life: 'Forget WANT, I NEED a drink. I want to forget, need to forget...'.³⁰⁹ This is further confirmed in *Apples* when Eve states: 'The plan was to get drunk and block it out...'³¹⁰ This is at the beginning of the book when Eve has just found her mother has lung cancer. Once again alcohol is portrayed as a solution and an escape from unhappiness. Thereby, adhering to the view that alcohol is not a drug and there is always justification for its consumption, whilst not acknowledging the issues of excess consumption.³¹¹

However two books that have come out over the summer of 2010 that deal with alcohol differently are Tabitha Suzuma's *Forbidden* (2010) and, importantly, Nicola Morgan's *Wasted* (2010). Both of these books approach the 'absent parent' conundrum by making both mothers alcoholics. Consequently they are present yet 'absent' as they are incapable of behaving like a normal parent:

³⁰⁷ *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008.

³⁰⁸ Kenrick J., *Screwed* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) p.55

³⁰⁹ Burchill J., *Sugar Rush* (London: Young Picador, 2004) p.99

³¹⁰ Milward R., *Apples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p.2

³¹¹ *Use of Alcohol Among Children and Young People – Final report*, Research Report DCSF – RW043 October 2008

‘Mum!’ hisses Jess. ‘You want to know why we didn’t wake you? We couldn’t! You were rat-arsed, if you must know. God, you could have died or burnt the house down or something. Not to mention that I was ashamed.’

Sylvia is momentarily stunned but her alcoholic’s deceit quickly kicks in. ‘I was waiting up for you, really...’³¹²

Nicola Morgan’s book *Wasted* is one of the first books that I have come across that deals with alcohol as a main theme. It should be noted that it is not relating to binge drinking, which has yet to be dealt with in YAF, instead it is dealing with the issues of a drink being spiked. This is another important and potentially dangerous aspect of drinking alcohol. Morgan also portrays alcohol as something that is not a necessary part of life or the panacea for all ills:

With a blank expression, he picks up the bottle [of vodka] and puts it back in the cupboard. ‘Me neither’. He sits back down next to her. ‘That bottle has been there since my eighteenth birthday. Someone gave it to me.’

‘So you don’t drink?’

‘Actually, no, I don’t, mostly. Except sometimes, a bit, when I want to. It’s a control thing. Alcohol removes free will.’³¹³

Though this book does deal with the issues of a drink being spiked, I have yet to come across a book written on the issues surrounding binge drinking.

Considering the creative process

In this creative writing PhD I am conscious that my final thesis is a hybrid of ‘self-reflexivity, creativity and experimentation as well as scholarship. It is a polyphonic discourse that addresses multiple audiences;’³¹⁴ but one which is also a distillation of the research undertaken. I am aware of Jacqueline Rose’s much repeated

³¹² Morgan N., *Wasted* (London: Walker Books, 2010) p.214

³¹³ Morgan N., *Wasted* (London: Walker Books, 2010)p.53

³¹⁴ Kroll J., ‘The resurrected author: creative writers in twenty-first century higher education,’ *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* vol. 1 (2), 2004, pp. 89-102

assertion on the “impossibility” of writing for children³¹⁵ and also of Philip

Pullman’s statement that:

My only real claim to anyone's attention lies in my writing. I've published nearly twenty books, mostly of the sort that are read by children, though I'm happy to say that the natural audience for my work seems to be a mixed one - mixed in age, that is, though the more mixed in every other way as well, the better.³¹⁶

But I have very deliberately and consciously tried to write for a YA readership, based on extensive research in writing for YAs and a body of work which has been written for and around them. Consequently this final part of my thesis addresses my creative processes whilst ensuring that any portrayal of sex, drugs or alcohol is realistic and relevant.

I approached the writing of the novel from many angles and by using a multitude of voices, and identities.³¹⁷In part these identities are constructed in order to enable me to enter the experiential gap between my YA readers and myself, the adult writer. As a writer of YAF it is necessary for me to ‘impersonate’ YAs by creating characters, in order to engage them and encourage the YA readers to join me in the aforementioned gap. Each identity has a separate power base that engages and influences the discourse and is ‘intricate, involved, interlaced, with each part entangled with the rest dependent on it...’ thus creating ‘...threads of [my] epistemology based on autobiographical experience...’³¹⁸ and are therefore providing additional depth to my research. Further to this, my writing will be influenced by ‘the conditions of its production’³¹⁹, as Jack Zipes writes:

³¹⁵ Rose J., *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* Revised Edition, (London: Macmillan, 1994) p.1

³¹⁶ <http://www.philip-pullman.com/about.asp> (Accessed January 2011)

³¹⁷ This is discussed earlier on p.230

³¹⁸ Griffiths M., *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995) pp. 2-3

³¹⁹ Mills P., *The Routledge Creative Writing Course Book* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2006) p.7
Also, much of Jack Zipes’ later work concentrates on this idea.

I am not being coy – children’s literature does not exist. If we take the genitive case literally and seriously, and if we assume ownership and possession are involved when we say “children’s literature” or the literature of children, then there is no such thing as children’s literature, or for that matter, children... “children” and “childhood” are social constructs that have been determined by socioeconomic conditions and have different meanings for different cultures... ³²⁰

which is a consideration as writing for YAs ‘...often shows how social [economic, cultural political and other such] problems bite into private experience.’³²¹ Indeed it is “impossible to discuss children and children’s literature today without situating them within the complex of the cultural field of production...” ³²²

The creative part of my thesis is a novel for YAs entitled *Ham & Jam*. As a published work it would be labelled YAF according to the Book Industries Communication Review which states that YA can contain older content rather than being aimed at younger teenagers.³²³ The narrative, as James suggests, ‘...pushes boundaries, reflecting precisely what the young adult does.’³²⁴ However, *Ham & Jam* is not issue driven, it is story driven. This was a deliberate choice on my part. *Ham & Jam* is my second attempt at writing a novel for my PhD: the first was a reaction to the issues I was researching, but I found that instead of developing the novel the impact of the research was to have a stupefying effect on the story. It just did not come alive. Instead the story felt forced and where the issues of sex, drugs and alcohol had been shoehorned into the narrative it felt stifled making the story itself difficult to write. The ideas just did not flow as the research undertaken for this thesis intervened with my creative process, rather

³²⁰ Zipes J., *Sticks and Stones, The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge 2002) p.40

³²¹ Mills P., *The Routledge Creative Writing Course Book* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2006) p.176

³²² Zipes J., *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children’s Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge 2009) p.1

³²³ Horn C., ‘BIC Splits Teen Category’, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/128204-bic-splits-teen-category.html>, (accessed October 2010)

³²⁴ James G., ‘Writing for Children and Young Adults,’ in *Creative Writing Guidebook* ed., Harper G., (London, New York: Continuum, 2008) p. 100

than informing it, and did not allow the narrative the freedom to evolve. The publisher David Fickling suggests that the ‘... danger of issues is that you appear to know what is good. And then you are not writing a story but a lecture.’³²⁵ That is exactly what I found myself doing, I was writing a lecture. A new approach was needed and thus the aim was to write a novel that ‘...create[d] a sense of identity and community’³²⁶ but was not a rule book. *Ham & Jam*, by comparison to my first attempt, is founded on inspiration and informed by research.

My inspiration, in regard to this exegesis and relating to the creative piece, is understood to be ‘...the notion of composition as dictation by an other.’³²⁷ It is this ‘otherness’ that is reflected, via inspiration, in my imitation of ‘YA characters,’ as previously discussed, where it could be suggested that the ‘YA characters’ are the ones dictating the narrative. This ‘dictation’ is further informed by research undertaken, which was driven by the metanarrative; the story of children being trafficked for sex, and the micronarrative, which was an incident that had been told to me and was based on personal experience. The metanarrative included not only the story of children trafficking but also the issues surrounding the conflict in Afghanistan from the perspective of a child (and her mother) living under the Taliban. This is further intertwined with the issues of war: World War II and Afghanistan in this case. In particular the loss of identity following a debilitating injury: two characters have lost legs (Ben’s brother Dan and Finley McGinley, a veteran of the D Day Landings). The new creative piece, *Ham & Jam*, attempts a more balanced approach that is embedded in research but not driven by it. As such, the narrative was being driven by story, plot and characters rather than

³²⁵ David Fickling quoted in Newbery L., ‘Writing for Teenagers’, in *The Handbook of Creative Writing* ed., Earnshaw S., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p.173

³²⁶ Eco U., Trans., McLaughlin M., *On Literature* (London: Vintage, 2006 [2002]), p.4

³²⁷ Clark T., *The Theory of Inspiration*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.282

being forced to fit in with a set of issues that I wanted to include. As a writer it allowed me more freedom so the story could take, me, as the writer, and eventually, the reader, on a journey. When issues did occur it was because they were a plot device to move the story forward rather than being the main focus of the discourse. Another reason it was easier to achieve the balance when writing *Ham and Jam*, rather than the earlier attempt was because, in effect, it was later within the PhD process; hence I had greater knowledge and awareness of my subject area, as well as my skill as an author, which had been further developed through writing and critiquing more. Indeed, my writing consists of the layers of interaction and understanding within a heteroglossic space comprising me as the author, characters, narrator, genre and, eventually, the reader. The aim being, to coin Webb's phrase, is to 'constitute' a perceived reality within the narrative.³²⁸ The influence of these layers in the form of my identity, metanarratives and micronarratives are woven into the creative gyre influencing both my creativity and criticality.³²⁹

In consideration of the Foucauldian approach, mentioned earlier³³⁰ in this thesis, I am aware that within the discourse I am perceived, as the adult writer, to be knowledgeable and therefore potentially in a position of authority. By choosing to write about the current 'regime'³³¹ I am reinforcing the discourses of power. However, I am also making the choice to write about 'the deviant other' as this is where the interests of potential readers are likely to be.³³² I understand that the YAs potentially hold power over me and my novel as they have the opportunity to

³²⁸ Webb J., *Understanding Representation* (London: Sage, 2009) p.10

³²⁹ See p.217 and Appendix 2 on p.324

³³⁰ For a more detailed explanation of the Foucauldian approach undertaken see p.225

³³¹ By using the term 'regime' in this case I am including current laws and social expectations

³³² See p.226 for a more detailed discussion of power/knowledge

refuse to read the novel I have written which subverts the power/knowledge between adult writer and YA ‘othered’ reader.³³³

With *Ham & Jam* it was my aim, as John Gardner states: ‘...to make up convincing human beings and create for them basic situations and actions by means of which they come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader.’³³⁴ This is particularly relevant when writing for YAs as they look for characters that resemble themselves and are imaginable; whilst providing opportunities for the vicarious experience within a world that ‘rings true’.³³⁵ *Ham & Jam* is based around a school trip to Normandy for History GCSE as they are studying the D Day Landings. It is told from the point of view of four of the main protagonists: Ben, Matt, Thea and Amina. Each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the characters so readers actively have multiple points of view throughout the book. The characters are all, in their own and very disparate ways, ‘An Innocent Abroad’³³⁶ and it is whilst on the school trip that they explore their own sense of identity with each being dichotomously opposed as they search for new experiences and a sense of understanding. The characters have an opportunity to bridge the generation gap too when Finley McGinley helps the students to smuggle the rescued Saba (an 11 year old girl from Afghanistan being sold for sex) into Britain.

Ben is the ‘bad lad’ who the teacher, Mr Cooke, was determined should not be allowed to go on the trip, but who is also trying to come to terms with the return of his hero brother, now a broken man following injury in Afghanistan. He is forced

³³³ There is also the potential for slippage in power/knowledge between adult writer and YA reader when the YA have greater knowledge and understanding than the adult reader. Though at this point the YA may start to read for the sheer pleasure of it.

³³⁴ Gardner J., *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Vintage books, 1991) p.15

³³⁵ Brice Heath S., in *Literacy Myths, Legacies and Lessons* by Graff H.J., (New York, London: Transaction Publishers, 2011) p.xi

³³⁶ Twain M., *The Innocents Abroad* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2010 [1867])

to share a room with Matt, the class swot and only child of very protective parents. On the other hand, Matt is delighted to be sharing with Ben, who does not share his joy, as Matt wants to have a go at ‘everything.’ He wants to use the opportunity of being abroad to break the rules and be whoever he wants to be, and cannot understand Ben’s reluctance to be part of his rebellion. Thea is a former girlfriend of Ben’s and has had more experiences than she is proud of. To her disgust Thea’s roommate is Amina or ‘Terrorist’ as she calls her. Amina is a Muslim girl who at home wears the hijab and is very respectful. Indeed, Amina suddenly finds she is free of the shackles of parents and religion and decides to make the most of it. These fictional characters are ones that I believe I have given space to, enabling them to breathe life into their own story - ready to meet the YA reader in that perceived experiential gap. Therefore, as a writer, I can hope that the characters I have created are met with empathy in this perceived gap because they are showing similar cognitive development to those of the readers. They start to develop identities, and form a code of ethics, but most importantly, for this narrative, ‘... the use of systematic thinking begins to influence relationships with others.’³³⁷ Consequently, allowing me, as the writer, to withdraw and the text to survive as a witness but not an authority.³³⁸

I did not set out to deliberately create characters that were the opposites of each other. They just evolved as the plot developed. I had this story and ‘I took it for a walk’³³⁹ and these are the characters it gave me. Each character could be accused of being stereotypically ‘other’ and constructed at the start of the novel; by the end, however, I hope, through natural assimilation, they have subverted any

³³⁷ <http://www.lpch.org/DiseaseHealthInfo/HealthLibrary/adolescent/cogdev.html> (accessed February 2011)

Also see p.235

³³⁸ Foucault M., *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-84 vol. 3: Power* ed., Faubion J., (London: Penguin, 2002 [1994]) p.51. See p. 233

³³⁹ This relates to the Paul Klee quote ‘A drawing is a line simply going for a walk.’
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/p/paulklee378929.html> (accessed January 2011)

pre-conceived ideas the reader may have had. Morwenna Griffiths suggests that in a successful narrative each of the characters ‘...is made of nearly invisible, very strong threads attached to the circumstances of its making and under the control of the maker.’³⁴⁰ Therefore their personal identities are made of their past, their future, their dreams and aspirations and their fears as decided by me, the writer.

Importantly, I have used the idea of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque as a narrative device. It has allowed me to interpret reality as if through a distorting mirror, showing plot lines that only deviate slightly from the ‘norm’, therefore allowing me the freedom from perceived social restrictions.³⁴¹ This approach meant I could write openly about potentially illegal pastimes in an informed but not didactic way. Amanda Boulter offers an explanation of the process for the author:

We need to find some distance between our own point of view and our characters’ and this can only come through the deliberate work of critical-creative imagination: exploring our own perceptions, cultural prejudices and social ideologies and thinking and feeling beyond them.³⁴²

The research that I undertook for the critical part of the exegesis informed the identities and narratives I was creating. This allowed me to distance myself from the characters, whilst informing the story, and at the same time ensuring depth in the authenticity by reacting to the ever changing contemporary social and cultural mores.

In order to achieve the ‘authentic’ voice within a narrative for YAs it is important to undertake extensive research which is then embedded within the

³⁴⁰ Griffiths M., *Feminism and The Self: The Web of Identity* (London: Routledge,1995) p.2

³⁴¹ See Bakhtin M., Trans., Iswolsky H., *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and Nikolajeva M. *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2010) p.10

³⁴² Boulter A., *Writing Fiction Creative and Critical Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) p.92

discourse. The research should not be obvious but subsumed within the text so that the reader merely perceives a depth of narrative whilst encouraging them to step into the ‘experiential gap.’³⁴³ Therefore for my creative piece I undertook wide-ranging research beyond the textual analysis. This included a trip to Normandy.³⁴⁴ I needed to be able to get the feel of the environment so I could use all of my senses to describe it within the narrative. I wanted the reader to get a real ‘sense of place’ so that they could imagine where the characters were even if they had never been to Normandy themselves. I also used the trip to go to various museums where I was able to observe school trips such as mine. It gave me an opportunity to develop my characters both major and minor based on what I had seen. For example there was a group of school children that I followed at the Museum of Peace. The children were kept under tight control by the teachers and appeared to be very well behaved. However, when I was sitting in the main atrium I became aware that the teachers in charge of this school party seemed very agitated. I then overheard a conversation between two teachers: they had lost one of the pupils. This made me realise how difficult it is to keep an eye on all children regardless of how well behaved and controlled they may appear. It was this sort of observation whilst in Normandy that I was able to use to inform and add depth to my creative piece. It meant I could visualise where my characters, including the adult ones, were and what they were doing; what they could see and smell and hear the whole time wherever they were within the novel.³⁴⁵

McKee says, when creating a story

³⁴³ Experiential gap on p.225

³⁴⁴ Research trip to Normandy: I travelled to Caen by ferry from Portsmouth and stayed there from the 30 June-3 July 2010.

³⁴⁵ For example see Chapters: 1,7, 12, 27 & 32 in *Ham & Jam*

We put each and every moment under a microscope of thinking, rethinking, creating, recreating as we weave through our characters moments, a maze of unspoken thoughts, image, sensations and emotions.³⁴⁶

Whilst Boulter suggests when we are writing,

We muse, we read, we research and we plan, building upon the fragments in our head until we begin to shape those glimmers and flashes into fiction.³⁴⁷

I did all of these things throughout my writer's journey. My approach could be explained further by considering the creativity model based on the gyre, where I had a spark of an idea that then evolved and developed.³⁴⁸ But, as a writer, I am conscious that I write 'cold' then edit 'hot', which tends to be the opposite of a perceived 'norm' where people over-write and then have to edit hard.³⁴⁹ For me this means I get the bare bones of a story arc down quickly, which is vital because 'if you can't tell a story, all those cultural images and subtleties of dialogue [that I might add]...waste the paper they are written on'.³⁵⁰ These bare bones of story are then developed through research and rewriting, adding layers to the story. It is like a painting, where the outline of the image is drawn first then it is filled in adding colour and depth or perspective. Writing is a journey, about knowing what you know and finding out what you don't or, as Foucault suggests: 'it would probably not be worth the trouble of making books if they failed to teach the *author* something he hadn't known before.'³⁵¹ [My italics]

³⁴⁶ McKee R., *Story Substance, Structure, Style, and the principles of Screenwriting*, (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1999), p.172

³⁴⁷ Boulter A., *Writing Fiction Creative and Critical Approaches*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p.11

³⁴⁸ See p.324 for a more detailed explanation and visual example of the creative model based on a gyre

³⁴⁹ Books like such as James Scott Bells' *Revision and Self-editing*, tend to make assumptions that stories are going to be over-written.

³⁵⁰ McKee R., *Story Substance, Structure, Style, and the principles of Screenwriting*, (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1999), p.19

³⁵¹ Rabinow P., ed., *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Random House, 1984), p.339

By using this method of ‘writing cold, editing hot’ also meant I could do further research when a weakness in the story was highlighted or I felt the narrative had become baggy and needed to be brought to life. Philip Pullman also uses a similar method. On a visit to *Seven Stories: The Centre for Children’s Books* in Newcastle I was given the opportunity to look at one of Philip Pullman’s original manuscripts from their archive.³⁵² He handwrites the complete story, and then goes back and puts in notes at the side, illustrating where he needs to do further research. For example, the manuscript I saw was for a book in the *Sally Lockhart* series. One of his notes stated that he needed to check what the weather was like at that particular moment of the Victorian era. This approach to research is one I have imitated to a certain extent. For example: the incident with the knife on page 113. Originally, I just used the term ‘knife’, but on re-reading I realised there needed to be a more detailed description, so placed a note in the margin reminding me to research this further. I am aware of how important research can be, particularly in relation to writing YAF, because of the potential impact any idea within a story can have.

Sex

My initial aim was to highlight the difference between the de-sensitised approaches to sex that are prevalent on the Internet (pornography) for example.³⁵³ The Internet (via pornography) is often seen as a source of sex education particularly as it is so readily available. In 1978 Aidan Chambers wrote a book

³⁵² January 2009. I was attending a round table session at Newcastle University part of which was a visit to *Seven Stories: The Centre for Children’s Books* and an opportunity to look at their archives.

³⁵³ I am aware that I have only briefly dealt with the issue of pornography and the Internet but consider that it is in fact a PhD in its self and could not be dealt with adequately within the remit of this thesis and the restricted word count. There are critical sources available e.g. Weiss R., Schneider J., *Untangling the Web: Breaking Free from Sex, Porn and the Fantasy in the Internet Age* (New York: Alyson Publication, 2006); Naughton J., *A Brief History of the Future: Origins of the Internet* Second Edition, (London: Phoenix, 2000)

called *Breaktime* in which he portrays two of his characters experiencing sex for the first time. He portrayed this by splitting the page into two. On one side was the description of how it was for the characters, in the second column Chambers has taken the detail from *A Young Person's Guide to Life and Love* by Dr Benjamin Spock and published in 1971. I found this approach fascinating and something I initially tried to emulate. Instead of dividing my page into two columns I divided it into three. The central column used words that were often found on pornography sites so were harsh and aggressive. The columns on either side were how the actual sexual experience was felt by Thea on one side and Matt on the other:

The fantasy images battled with reality for Matt and Thea as they started to explore...

www.anyporn.com

Do you have idea how
much I want to fuck you.
His mouth was greedy as
he pushed hard against
me

Matt wondered if it
would matter that he
couldn't be like a porn
star. He hadn't got a huge
dick and wasn't even sure
what to do with it. What
if I do it wrong? Will I
know if she doesn't want
to? So many questions
and no answers.

Matt pulled her towards
him as his tongue
explored her mouth.

Thea wondered if Matt
would mind that she
hadn't got huge boobs.
She knew she'd been with
lots of boys but still didn't
know what to do. What if
he didn't like what she
did? Should she do
anything? Should she go
down on him? She
couldn't be like a porn
star.

Oh that kiss again. How
does he do it? I just want
more. He is so gentle.
Thea lent in to him as he
pulled her in. She wanted
so much more.

We like big boobs. Fake

boobs. Show us your tits.
Let me feel your
funbags³⁵⁴

However, as this was the only piece of experimental writing within the narrative it came across as clunky and ineffective. I have since rewritten the piece with the aim of portraying sex in a more positive, if inexperienced, light by emphasising the sensitive approach, as per William Nicholson in his book *Rich and Mad* (2010). Though, hopefully, without the metaphoric hand on the shoulder as previously discussed.³⁵⁵ I have written it from the male perspective and have made a deliberate decision to make it slightly stumbling and unsuccessful. Within the new piece I have used a sentence with a succession of words that either begin with or contain plosive 'P's. The idea behind this was to indicate the panting/short breaths leading up to and including Thea's orgasm. The sexual act within my piece intends to offer a more sensitive and realistic approach in contrast to those that are often portrayed within the media, in particular, in pornography, which many YAs use as a source of sex education (boys in particular).³⁵⁶ The sex within this text is confined to the heterosexual act. I originally had Amina questioning her sexuality:

Millie bounced up and down on Amina, who knew she was going red. She couldn't move. She could see Millie's breasts jiggling under her T shirt. Millie bent right down towards her so her nose briefly grazed against Amina's. She was convinced that Millie was going to kiss her. She quite liked the idea. Her own breasts were squashed between Millie's thighs as she sat back up. There were feelings coursing through Amina that she had never experienced before but she really liked them.³⁵⁷

However, this came across as forced and contrived particularly as I had left the thread hanging at the end of the story with no resolution. As per my research I felt

³⁵⁴ Harbour V., *Ham and Jam* first polished draft

³⁵⁵ See p. 265 where I discuss *Rich and Mad*

³⁵⁶ See <http://sexperienceuk.channel4.com/education/about/performance> (accessed December 2010) and /Channel 4 Survey Results, www.yougov.com (accessed October 2008).

³⁵⁷ Ham & Jam first Draft polished. Note: Millie's name was changed to Thea in subsequent versions, as was Amina to Amina.

that writing about lesbianism or homosexuality is worthy of a stand alone story.³⁵⁸ I am also conscious of the silence around masturbation. However, again I felt it was inappropriate to include it; not through a sense of taboo but rather a sense of forcing the narrative to 'tick as many boxes' as possible, which can only detract from the authenticity of the story. As discussed earlier contraception³⁵⁹ remains an issue in contemporary YAF and I have addressed this specifically by ensuring that my characters have got, and consider using, condoms therefore showing awareness, without the narrative being didactic.

Drugs

Whilst writing about drugs I had to be conscious of the ethics involved in creating a narrative that deals with illegal substances. But this isn't unusual and Bakhtin points to this in his musings on the distorted reality of ideas in his carnivalesque, as already mentioned. In the same way that Bakhtin addressed these ideas, I felt similarly able to offer a 'distorted reality.' I accept I am writing about YA issues but my aim has always been that the story is not to be issue driven. Indeed to be effective the story must not be overtly didactic, as McKee also points out '[d]idacticism results from a naive enthusiasm that fiction can be used like a scalpel to cut out the cancers of society.'³⁶⁰ By using this distorted reality I was able to create scenes based around issues which offered the reader a potential vicarious experience that may be used to inform their decisions in reality. For example the

³⁵⁸ As per footnote 25: The representation of sex relates specifically to the heterosexual act. I would like to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis as I am aware that there is a bias towards heteronormative sexual activity with little acknowledgement of homosexuality, lesbianism, bi- or trans-sexuality. This is because, I believe, each one is a story in itself. Also see p. 253 for a further discussion on heterosexuality

³⁵⁹ See p.264

³⁶⁰ McKee R., *Story, Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1999), p.121

scenes that revolve around the Meow Meow incident as well as Sam Jones being caught having smoked cannabis.³⁶¹

As has been discussed previously in this exegesis, cannabis appears to have become part of the plot in YAF through assimilation and normalisation via the symbolic frameworks.³⁶² This is reflected in the way I have referred to cannabis within my plot as I deliberately chose not to have my characters use cannabis.

Instead it was used by some minor characters:

Amina didn't need to worry about Cooke picking on Ben, or so she thought, as Sam, Courtney and Brittany turned up at the restaurant really drunk. They were falling over and giggling lots. Both the girls had huge love bites on their necks and Brittany appeared to have lost her bra at some point by the looks of it.

'They're really pissed, aren't they?' Amina hadn't seen many really drunk people. 'I didn't behave like that did I?'

'No, you didn't,' Ben smiled at her for a moment, his mood seemed to have lifted slightly, 'But look, they're not just pissed, they're stoned. Look at their eyes.'

Amina did as she was told and looked at Sam's eyes, they were jet black pools.

'Can you see how dilated their pupils are?'

'Yes, does that mean they've taken...' she lowered her voice, 'drugs?'

'Yeah, probably Henry.' Ben was watching the scene carefully.

'Henry?' Amina had no idea what he was talking about.

'Oh for fucks sake I forget you are such an innocent. Cannabis, weed.'

Amina felt stupid, 'Oh right.' ³⁶³

I wanted to highlight how easy it is for a writer, and logically therefore, characters to utilize cannabis within a plot in the same way alcohol can be employed. It is an 'accepted' view of drug taking. It also allowed me to highlight the perceived blurring between illicit and licit drugs, in particular cannabis, alcohol and, as detailed below, mephedrone,³⁶⁴ which was in fact legal at the time of writing *Ham & Jam*.

³⁶¹ See pages: 33 and 104 in *Ham and Jam*

³⁶² Manning P., 'There's No Glamour in Glue: News and the Symbolic Framing of Substance Abuse'. *Crime Media Culture* vol. 2 (1) April 2006, pp. 49-66. Plus see p. 268

³⁶³ Harbour V., *Ham and Jam* first polished draft

³⁶⁴ See p.278

Meow Meow or mephedrone was a legally high giving substance that was available over the Internet. In April 2010 mephedrone became classified as a Class B drug and therefore as illegal. However, I have left my representation of mephedrone as it is. I wanted to highlight how easy it can be to get hold of drugs if you happen to have access to the Internet and knowledge of your parents' credit cards:

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him move his hand slowly to the centre of the table. It was covering something. When she looked up he was looking round making sure no one was looking. When he was sure no one was he lifted his hand revealing a small clear plastic bag with some off-white powder. She couldn't stop herself, she gasped,

'What's that?'

'I want some fun on this trip so thought I'd share.'

Amina stopped mid-spoonful and looked at the small bag. It looked like icing sugar.

'See Ben, I'm not the geek you think I am!' said Matt, who seemed very pleased with himself.

She'd never seen stuff like that before, except on TV and the videos they saw in the PSHE classes on drugs. She had no idea what it was except it had to be illegal. She felt a twinge of curiosity deep in her stomach and the bold girl from the stairs wondered what it would feel like to take some.

Matt continued 'You're not the only drug dealer at this table.'

Everyone stared at the packet for what seemed like an age, everything around them seemed to stop. Amina knew it could only have been seconds but it felt like forever.

Ben moved first. He snatched the plastic bag off the table and hid it. He looked round to see if anyone had seen but they hadn't so far.

'What the fuck, Matt? What are you doing with Charlie? How did you get it?'

Ben's words were like a verbal slapping. His eyes were hard and angry. Amina watched the two boys aware that Mr Cooke was now looking.

'Ssh' she said, 'Cooke's watching.'

Matt looked at him and tried to laugh. He then spoke to Ben through a strained smile.

'Give it back.' He held his hand to Ben, 'I thought you knew about drugs. It isn't Charlie, it's Meow Meow – mephedrone – you know the legal drug.'

Amina listened fascinated. She didn't remember it being mentioned at school,

'Legal?' she asked.

'Yeah,' Matt was still staring at Ben with his hand held out, 'I just bought it over the Internet using my mum's credit card. She hasn't a clue

what I get up to on the computer. I've memorised her numbers and security codes, it's easy.'³⁶⁵

I was aware that however I wrote about drugs I had to be sure that I used a realistic 'authentic' voice. This could only be achieved by extensive research which informs my writing and therefore cannot mislead the reader. YAs are very quick to spot fakes particularly when a writer is trying to use the YAs own vernacular, although I am conscious of the fact that I did not want to go down the route of creating an alternative language either, as had previously been done by Rowling; Pullman and Burgess, et al.³⁶⁶

Alcohol

As has been discussed earlier there are few books that actually portray alcohol as the problem it has become,³⁶⁷ there is a more general focus on alcohol being a panacea for stress and social ills. I made a very deliberate decision to allow Amina to drink and become drunk despite her religious convictions. In addition, the kissing 'incident' between Matt and Thea happens as an illustration of how easy it is to behave in a way you would not normally under the influence of alcohol. This episode also allowed me to portray how awful it is possible to feel after a night of drinking, particularly if you are not used to it thus showing action and consequence, rather than avoiding the issue, and consciously emphasising the negative rather than the positive. This approach enabled me to realistically use Amina to illustrate that it was acceptable to turn down alcohol and still have fun.

³⁶⁵ Harbour V., *Ham and Jam* first polished draft

³⁶⁶ For example, in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, Harry takes "Felix Felicis" which is also called "liquid luck" and seems to have similar properties to "jellies" which is a vernacular for "Temazepam"

³⁶⁷ See p.284

In many books alcohol has been portrayed as a panacea for the stresses of being a YA, which was something I had not intended to do. However, on reading through my manuscript I realised I had unconsciously done precisely that:

He watched them whilst his resolve to be good vaporised in front of him when temptation took over.
'Anyone fancy some vodka with their coke? I feel like I need some.'³⁶⁸

Again, I decided against removing this scene as it offers the opportunity for development of the characters, as further on in the text Amina points out to Ben that alcohol is not the answer:

Ben, she noticed, had been quite happy to finish the rest the alcohol off. It made his mood worse. His eyes looked so hard and angry now. They were black instead of warm hazelnut colour. He kept clicking his knuckles and his leg was twitching the whole time. Amina was sure he could explode at any moment so she decided to help,
'You know alcohol doesn't solve anything.' Then wished she hadn't.
Ben looked at her and snapped 'What would you know? You with your nice cosy life.' Amina felt stung by his words but was more cross with herself. What a stupid thing to say.³⁶⁹

As a writer it is important to acknowledge the reality of life for YAs which, for some, includes using alcohol as a form of escape. It is not my intended role, as the writer, to preach. Scenarios and alternatives can be offered but the narrative must not be didactic but real and really representative.

For this thesis I have succeeded in producing a piece of YAF that is not issue driven but is driven by plot and characters. The issues feature in the story but not in the form of a didactic message to YAs. Instead I believe the piece reflects a perceived and potential reality for many YAs which does not sensationalise sex, drug taking or excessive alcohol consumption.

³⁶⁸ Harbour V., *Ham and Jam* first polished draft

³⁶⁹ Harbour V., *Ham and Jam* first polished draft

Finally, in *On Creative Writing* Graeme Harper highlights how as a practice Creative Writing never stands still.³⁷⁰ Jeri Kroll in her article ‘Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education’ in *Text* develops this further when she suggests that by ‘...exploiting a concept of writing research as fluid and multifaceted it enriches the discipline’s study and practice at all levels.’³⁷¹ I feel this is reflected in my research and my creativity neither of which have stood still during the period of study. As a writer and a researcher I have had to be prepared to be flexible. Quoting Delueze and Guattari, Jeri Kroll implores us to understand that writing research is more about ‘surveying [and] mapping...’ rather than rigid templates or methodologies. A better description Kroll also uses is the idea that writers use research guides as if they were travel guides allowing them to explore new frontiers.³⁷² This is how I have approached my thesis. I have developed the skills that allow my research to inform my work but not to ‘form’ it. I have used the research as a starting point to move forward and explore other avenues which, as can be seen in my creative piece, has not involved making the representation of sex, drugs and alcohol more extreme. Instead they are part of the plot but not the driving force.

YAF is still a source of information for YAs and its ongoing influence should not be ignored. Those of us who write for YAs need to continue to produce exciting story driven narratives which open vistas for YAs to vicariously explore activities which will help to inform their future choices. As writers we need to acknowledge the need to do research but also the need to accept that the world around us is fluid and therefore we have to be prepared to respond quickly to any changes. As a

³⁷⁰ Harper G., *On Creative Writing* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010) p.xi

³⁷¹ Kroll J., ‘Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education’, *Text* vol. 14 (1) <http://www.textjournal.com.au/> (accessed September 2010)

³⁷² Kroll J., ‘Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education’, *Text* vol. 14 (1) <http://www.textjournal.com.au/> (accessed September 2010)

writer, I need to understand and accept that ‘the writer never knows if the work is done’³⁷³ and that ‘...the work of art, the literary work – is neither finished nor unfinished: it is.’³⁷⁴ But this is just the beginning of my journey as the critical enquiry continues.³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Blanchot M., Trans., Davis L., Auster P., Lamberton R., *Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* ed., Quasla G., (New York: Station Hill, 1999) p.402

³⁷⁴ Blanchot M., Trans., Davis L., Auster P., Lamberton R., *Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* ed., Quasla G., (New York: Station Hill, 1999) p.402

³⁷⁵ Harper G., *On Creative Writing* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010) p.xi

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Appendix 1

YAF Novel

56,000 words approx

Age 14+

HAM & JAM

Synopsis

The girl just stared at him.

‘What?’ Ben mouthed at her through the coach window but she didn’t reply.

Her staring made him feel uncomfortable. It was as if she had crawled inside him, sliced him wide open with an eight inch knife, and ripped her way into his soul.

Could you leave an 11 year old girl behind if you knew she was being sold for sex? Four students decide that even though they are on a school trip to Normandy they can’t. They are determined to find a way to smuggle her back to the UK and safety.

Ham & Jam is a piece of young adult fiction told from multiple points of view: Ben, Matt, Thea and Amina, who each tell their own story. They are all, in their own and very disparate ways, ‘An Innocent Abroad’³⁷⁶ and it is while on the school trip that they explore their own sense of identity. They search for new experiences and understanding. There is an opportunity to bridge the generation gap too when Finn McGinley, a veteran of the D Day Landings, helps the students to smuggle the rescued Saba into Britain.

Ben, trouble maker and gang member, is trying to come to terms with the return of his hero brother, now a broken man following injury in Afghanistan. He is furious when he is forced to share a room with Matt, the class swot and only child of very protective parents. On the other hand, Matt is delighted to be sharing with Ben as he wants to have a go at ‘everything.’ Matt wants to use the opportunity of being abroad to break the rules and be whoever he wants to be. He cannot understand Ben’s reluctance to be part of his rebellion. Thea is a former girlfriend of Ben’s and has had more experiences than she is proud of. And to her disgust Thea’s roommate is Amina or ‘Terrorist’ as she offensively calls her. Amina is a Muslim girl who at home wears the hijab and is very respectful. Yet she suddenly finds she is free of the shackles of parents and religion and decides to explore this new found freedom.

It is a story that challenges stereotypes where no one is what they seem. The four students use the trip to explore who they are and to establish some truly unlikely alliances. The school trip gives them all the chance of a new beginning.

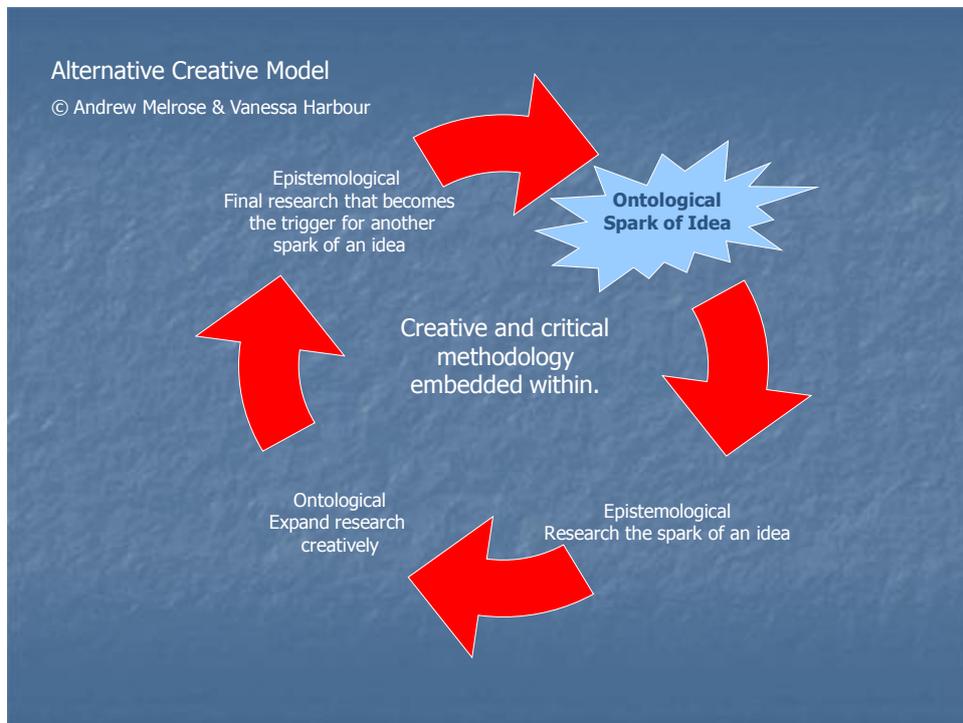
‘Thank you,’ Ben continued to watch the soldiers. He wasn’t really interested in what Mr Cooke had to say and neither was his Mum who was engrossed in watching her other son. Undaunted Mr Cooke continued,

³⁷⁶ Twain M., *The Innocents Abroad*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2010 [1867])

'Ben, I have to be honest, you are not the person I thought you were.'
Ben looked Mr Cooke straight in the eyes. His answer resounded loudly
against Mr Cooke's question, 'None of us are, Sir.'

Appendix 2

Creativity Model



This is a 1D illustration of the creative model mentioned on page 3. It would normally be in 3D and form part of the gyre (see the diagram below). As you can see there is no beginning or ending to the gyre it just evolves constantly. The creative writing develops out of the ontological initial spark of an idea followed by the initial epistemological research into the spark of an idea. By writing creatively about the research you move back into the ontological. When the piece is completed it becomes final research and therefore epistemological again. At this point there is potential for the final research to spark another idea thus becoming ontological again. This allows for creativity to feed off criticality, which in turn feeds off creativity. This is a continuous process with the creative and critical methodology at the core. Inherently creativity is embedded within research, which in turn, is entrenched within creativity, both of which are encompassed by criticality.

