

# 1

## Prologue

Finch gripped the controls and peered into the blackness. He didn't know where he was, nor did he want to know: that sort of thing got you into trouble.

"Take the shunter down the abandoned track for three miles," Pickering had told him. "There's an old quarry where the track ends. When you get there, give the signal. Stay out of the way and you won't come to no harm."

The thick roll of fifties — Pickering's way of getting what he wanted — bulged in his pocket and stopped him leaning any further forward in the cab. Suddenly a set of buffers appeared in the shunter's headlamp and Finch rammed the brake lever over hard. The engine juddered to a halt centimetres from the barrier. He wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve.

Right on cue, out in the darkness, there were three flashes, a space then two more. Finch fumbled for his torch, fingers slipping on the switch. He flashed four times, left a gap and flashed four more. A light came on by a big building ten metres away. Hand still shaking, he poured himself a coffee. A gang of men emerged and began unloading the van coupled to the back of the shunter. Finch sunk down low in his seat and switched the cab light off. The men ignored him and worked on in near silence. People like that scared him, in fact, this whole place scared him. The sooner he got away, the better.

A black Range Rover, its occupants hidden behind tinted windows, pulled to a halt on the cliff top above. The driver killed the engine and switched off the lights. He waited for a moment, watching the men working below. His companion shifted nervously in the seat next to him.

“Once we’ve unloaded, I want the CM50 finished, Clarkson,” the driver said his fingers twitching as if they were searching for something that wasn’t there.

“Yes sir,” Clarkson answered. “The thing is I...”

“You’ve got three days.”

“What? Three days? I can’t possibly...”

“This failure must be put right,” the driver said coldly. “We’re running out of time.”

Clarkson slid a finger under the collar of his shirt. This wasn’t going well. He glanced through the window as if he expected something to jump out from the bushes and attack him.

“The thing is, sir,” he hesitated, knowing the risk he was taking, “I want to quit.”

The driver didn’t react.

Clarkson pressed on.

“Don’t get me wrong, sir, it’s been a fantastic honour and I won’t forget it for the rest of my life, but I never thought people would have to die! I can’t be a part of it... I can’t!”

The driver continued to stare out of the window. “I’ve paid you well haven’t I?”

Clarkson’s eyes fell to his lap. “Yes sir, you have.”

The driver nodded and turned back to watch the gang, fingers still twitching. “I accept your resignation,” he said nodding slightly.

“Sir? Are you sure you understand what I’m asking?”

“Yes,” the driver said flatly. He held out his hand. “Thank you for what you’ve done.”

Clarkson wiped his palm on the seat cushion. “No! Thank you, sir! I’m sorry to leave you like this.”

The driver shook his head. “You’ve made up your mind and I respect that. There is one thing I would like you to do for me, though.”

“Of course,” Clarkson said, relief moving his tongue too quickly.

“I’ve been having trouble with my near-side indicator. It’ll be a few days before I can get it looked at. I wonder if you’d mind checking it out for me before we go.”

“Of course,” Clarkson replied eagerly. “It’s probably just a loose wire.” He shook his head. “You know, I can’t believe it’s taken me so long to ask you about this.”

The driver nodded, a thin smile flickering on his lips.

Clarkson stepped out into the night feeling light-headed. He walked around to the front of the Range Rover and peered over the 20m drop down to the quarry below. The men had finished unloading and the shunter was already pulling away. He laughed to himself: some poor soul was going to have to work his fingers to the bone getting that thing going in three days. He wasn’t even sure it was possible.

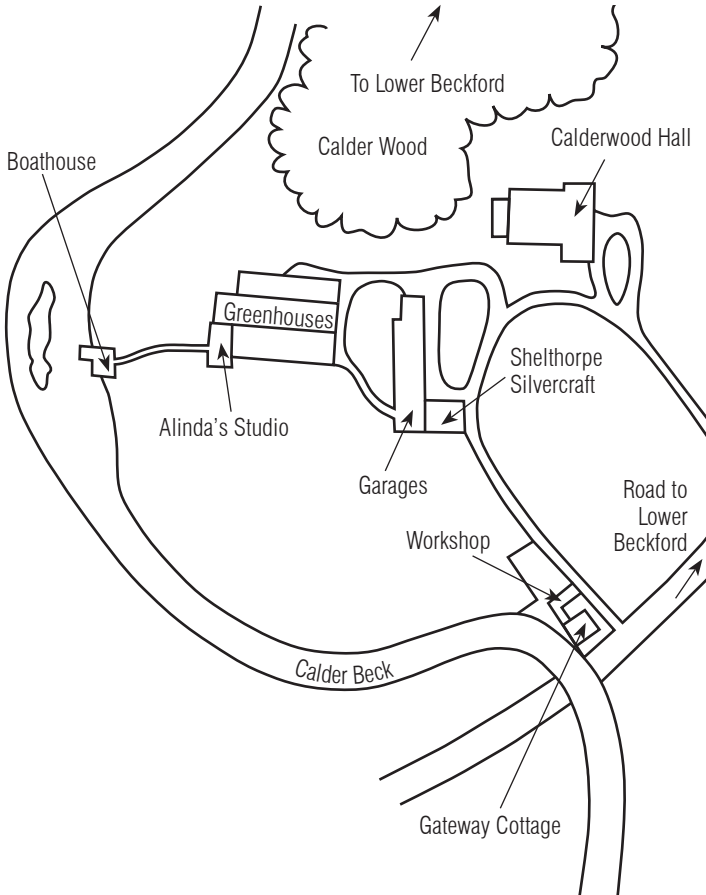
He signalled to the man behind the wheel to try the indicators. There was a pause and then both headlights came on, full beam. The engine burst into life and Clarkson realised his mistake, but it was much too late.

An owl, startled by the interruption to her hunt, flew out into the night and screeched as she glided over the quarry. She came to rest on a ledge 10m from the tracks. The lights in the building went out; a car revved its engine on the cliff top then drove away. The old quarry descended back into silence.



# **PART I**

Calderwood Hall



Calderwood Hall

# 1

## Chequered flag

The front page of the Daily Mirror shifted restlessly in the light air. It drifted across a race track and settled next to a row of tyres at the side. The tarmac shimmered in the heat. Appropriately enough for such weather, the main picture showed a large house gutted by fire with the headline:

*FIRESTARTING CAR THIEVES STRIKE AGAIN!*

On the sports pages opposite was a picture of a tall blonde man pointing at an impressive looking grandstand. He was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to smile, something the caption writer had made good use of:

*LAUGHING BILLIONAIRE SET TO STAGE  
BRITISH GRAND PRIX*

The newspaper had caught the national mood: everyone was talking about both stories, but few ever realised just how horribly connected they both were.

A shrill whine ripped through the silence and a 60cc 2-stroke cadet-class kart tore round the empty track, its driver fighting the forces trying to snatch the wheel out of his hands. The newspaper was sucked up in the passing whirlwind and shredded in the slipstream.

The driver was Charlie Lining. He settled into the long straight and plunged across the open track like a flame in a forest fire.

A broad curve opened out into a series of tight bends and he swung his kart between them with intoxicating speed. The backs of his hands burned with fire. They always did when he was about to win: it was a feeling like no other. He was comfortably in front and very close to the finish. He could almost taste qualification.

He turned the corner into the final long straight and a knot of back-markers appeared on the track ahead. Using his superior speed, Charlie put his foot down and accelerated into a convenient gap. Just as he did so, a straggler pulled out without looking trying to overtake the kart in front. Charlie was completely blocked. He thrust his left boot onto the brake pedal and gripped the shuddering wheel. His tyre rammed into the straggler's rear wheel sending him up into the air and back down with a sickening thud.

For a moment he was disorientated then a whining roar over his left shoulder brought him back to reality. His two closest rivals, Alex Shredder and Hannah Thorn, shot past picking his pocket and stealing victory. He clenched his glove and thumped the wheel furious with himself for his lack of concentration. Tearing after them, he headed into a half-gap just as the chasing pack led by Anhil Patel and Fraser Catch ripped past on the opposite side. They both converged on the same bit of track at the same moment. Patel jerked his machine clear, but Fraser Catch wasn't so quick. He embedded his kart into Charlie's front wheel locking the two of them together and sending them fizzing across the tarmac like a couple of badly nailed-on Catherine wheels. Charlie slammed into the tyre wall taking the full force of the impact on his front axle. It snapped jolting him over the barrier and into the bushes beyond.

Two hundred metres up the hill, Shredder took the chequered flag with Thorn in second place. Charlie pulled himself out of the vegetation and took off his helmet. He threw his gloves inside in frustration. The race was lost, his kart was ruined and now, there would be hell to pay.



# 2

## Suspect

“I’ve had enough,” Sid said, slamming the spanner back into the metal tray. “This axle’s ruined, look at it! I can’t keep paying out, Phil. It’s too much!”

Charlie’s Dad ran his fingers over the kart. “You must still be feeling dizzy,” he chuckled ignoring Sid and ruffling Charlie’s hair. “That was quite a spin.”

“I didn’t see him coming,” Charlie mumbled.

“You had a brilliant lead!” Sid said rubbing his eyes. “You’ll be lucky if you qualify for the UK Finals now.”

Charlie said nothing. He had been leading the table up until the last round and now he was in fourth and, as things stood, wouldn’t qualify. The UK Finals brought together the top karters from across the British Isles along with all the sponsors, keen to discover the next big thing.

“This is his last year of cadet racing,” Sid reminded them unnecessarily. “I can’t afford to run a KF3 kart next season unless he gets some sponsors, Phil!”

“I know that, Sid. I know,” Dad said calmly.

“I still don’t understand why you blew Glenda’s money on that stupid garage. I mean, why Derbyshire for goodness sake? You’re a Londoner not a country bumpkin!”

“Do we have to go through all that again?” Dad sighed.

Sid glared at him, but Dad just shrugged. “It was something I had to do, that’s all.”

Charlie swung his legs restlessly from his perch on the top of the steel tool trolley. It was hard not to agree with Sid. He wanted his Dad to be happy, but he still couldn't understand why his mum's inheritance had been spent all in one go.

Mum had been a singer on a cruise ship and had gone missing over a year ago - missing presumed drowned. As far as Charlie was concerned she'd been missing for a lot longer than that. They'd not seen her since she'd walked out on them five years earlier leaving Dad in a real mess. When she died, she left them a diamond necklace worth £50,000. Dad had spent the money without telling anyone about it.

"You'll never make that place work," Sid said glumly. "Nobody buys petrol stations these days, especially not in remote Derbyshire villages. Everyone goes to Tesco."

"I had to get out," Phil responded staring across the field next to the car park. "We can't stay cooped up in the city any longer. Charlie needs a new start...we both do. A bit of country air might improve his chances."

Sid snorted. "Charlie's not short on talent, Phil, he's just short on cash!"

"Look, I'm doing my best," Dad sighed. "It was the cheapest house at the auction, I liked the feel of it and I just couldn't turn it down."

"Cheapest house?" Sid laughed humourlessly. "I wonder why?" He stomped over to the open doors of his transit van and threw a crate of tools noisily inside. "All I know is that £50,000 could have gone a long way to keeping Charlie on the track. I'm going to get a coffee." He trudged off towards the burger van and disappeared.

Dad tried to catch his son's eye, but Charlie pretended to be preoccupied with his boots and continued banging them rhythmically into the tool chest. Half of him wanted Dad's dreams to come true, but the other half couldn't help feeling as though his own were slipping away.

“I know what you’re thinking mate,” Dad reassured him. “But if I stay in London, it doesn’t matter what I do, the police will find something to pin on me and I’m not going back to prison!”

Charlie sighed heavily: the bleak years he’d spent in the children’s home waiting for Dad to come out of jail, were not ones he cared to remember.

“I just want to win, Dad. That’s all,” he said trying to change the subject. “I want to go fast and win races. Nothing else matters.”

Sid suddenly reappeared looking nervous.

“He’s...er here,” he said, beckoning to someone over his shoulder. He pulled a face and mouthed a silent sorry in Dad’s direction. A uniformed policeman stepped into view followed by a handsome black man in civilian clothes. He leant against the door of Sid’s van and waited for the officer to speak.

“Are you Philip Lining?” the officer asked.

Dad sighed heavily, but wiped his fingers on a rag and held out his hand to be polite. “Yes, yes I am.”

The uniformed officer looked down through his nose without moving. “This isn’t a social call, sir,” he said witheringly.

“No, I don’t suppose it is,” Dad replied letting his hand fall away.

“My name’s Sergeant Gibbs, Bedfordshire police and this is DI Chatham, London CID.” Chatham nodded briefly and Sergeant Gibbs pulled out a notebook. “We understand you’ve served a sentence for attempted armed robbery, is that correct?”

Dad nodded.

Charlie closed his eyes his heart sinking.

“I was the driver,” Dad said sighing deeply, “I didn’t know they had guns.”

“Indeed,” Gibbs replied looking back down at his notebook. “The thing is, sir, there’s been another one of those so-called Firestarter car thefts; you might have heard about them. All

the victims are connected to a car club by the name of LGCM. Are you familiar with that club, sir?

“Yes,” Dad nodded. “They’re a bunch of millionaire vintage-car owners. Sir Nathan Kant, the chairman, was kind enough to ask me to look at his Alfa at one of their car weekends.”

“Know a lot about vintage cars then do you sir?”

“I can find my way around under a bonnet, yes,” Dad replied.

“I see,” Gibbs said making a note in his book. He held up a photo of a tall man in his fifties with a bushy beard. “Am I right in assuming you’re aquatinted with this gentleman?”

“Not exactly,” Dad said frowning. “I think he was the bloke who owned the house we went to.”

Gibbs nodded and held up a second photo. It showed the man’s fire-gutted home. Dad winced.

“Unfortunately, the owner died in the blaze,” Gibbs said, “and one of his vintage cars went missing as well. All very much characteristic of the er... Firestarter’s methods.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Dad replied. “He was a decent bloke, but what’s it got to do with me?”

“Oh, just routine enquiries, sir,” Gibbs replied lightly. “We’re contacting anyone who had a link with him, so to speak. Anything you can tell us? Anything at all?”

“No, of course not,” Dad said frowning heavily.

“Right,” Gibbs said nodding and packing away his notebook. “That’ll be all for the time being. We’ll be in touch.”

As Gibbs turned to go, DI Chatham peeled himself off the van and walked over to the kart crouching down in front of it. “You drive like a maniac,” he laughed shaking his head at Charlie. “I didn’t know these things could go so fast!”

“Thanks,” Charlie said a little uncertainly.

“I’m JC,” Chatham said shaking Charlie’s hand.

“Phil,” Dad said cautiously, offering his own.

“Listen,” JC continued. “I’ve just got one question for you,

Phil, and then I'm done. Have you heard of a man named Arthur Mainwaring?"

Dad sighed. "Yes, he owns the Motor Racing Museum at Dannington. He's got a big collection of vintage racing cars. A mate of mine, Jim Clarkson, used to do a lot of work for him."

"Really?" JC asked, looking a little alarmed. He glanced over at Gibbs who raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Phil, but the Jim Clarkson who used to work for Mainwaring, is dead."

"What? He can't be!"

JC nodded. "We fished his body out of the canal yesterday. It looks like murder." He put his hand on Dad's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Murder?" Dad said slumping down into a camp chair the colour draining from his face. "Who on earth would want to murder Jim?"

"No motives as yet, but we think there might be a link to the Firestarter thefts." JC pulled a card out of his pocket. "You'll let us know if you hear anything, right?"

"What? Oh, yeah..." Dad replied emptily.

"Look, it's a nasty business all this," JC said. "You guys take care, okay?"

Dad didn't respond.

JC nodded to Gibbs. "We'll see you around."

When they'd gone, Sid bit his lip. "Listen, I'm sorry, about Jimmy," he said. "I liked him."

Dad still didn't look up.

Sid sighed heavily. "I had to tell them where you were. You've only just reached the end of your probation."

"Don't worry about it..." Dad said trailing off. There was a long pause. "I just can't believe Jim's dead. I was only speaking to him a couple of weeks back."

“Listen, Phil,” Sid said nervously. “If you’re in some kind of trouble...”

“I’m not!” Dad snapped.

“I’m just saying. If you are, then, well...you know.”

“Look, Sid, I really appreciate what you’ve done for Charlie and me. You gave me a job when no one else would and you’ve supported Charlie’s racing for nearly two years now: he wouldn’t have got anywhere without you.”

“Yeah, and now he’s on the verge of the UK Finals and I’ve run out of money. I can’t magic it up out of a hat you know. I’ve got bills to pay!”

“What are you saying?”

“You should’ve thought it through before you blew all Glenda’s money, that’s all.”

Dad didn’t say anything.

Sid sighed. “I know her death hit you hard mate, but couldn’t you have waited, just a little bit.”

Dad shook his head. “Every cloud has a silver lining, Sid, and I just needed mine.”

“Oh give me a break, Phil!”

A tall blonde man leaned his head round the side of the van. He coughed politely. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he said with a thin smile.

Dad stood up looking surprised. “Mr Kant, sir, what an honour! I didn’t know you were here.”

“Oh I take a keen interest in karting, Philip. Indeed, the next meeting is at my new track, did you know?”

Dad nodded: “Yes, of course.”

Kant took a cigarette lighter out of his pocket and began fiddling with it. “Anyway, I thought I’d stroll by and meet your son while I had the chance.”

“Charlie!” Dad said a little flustered, “This is Sir Nathan, son of legendary driver Jonathan Kant and owner of Kant Mining. He’s about to host of this year’s F1 British Grand Prix at the JKMT.

Charlie was overawed. The JKMT was the country's newest and best motor racing circuit. At kart meetings all the drivers boasted that they knew more about it than anyone else, but, of course, none of them did. The whole place had been fenced off and kept secret for months. Charlie's mouth went dry. He slipped off the tool chest and stuck out his hand.

"I very much hope that one day you'll be driving your F1 car across my finishing line," Kant said lightly.

Charlie felt his face go red. Ever since he'd heard about the Jonathan Kant Memorial Track, he'd dreamed of just that. But with Dad's problems and their lack of sponsorship, that dream was a long way from reality.

"We're more focused on winning the next kart race, Sir Nathan," Dad said as if he could read Charlie's thoughts.

"So, you'll be coming to my kart track next week, then?"

Dad nodded.

"Good. My father wasn't just an excellent driver, he could also spot young talent. Unfortunately, I was his chief disappointment in that regard: my talents lay elsewhere. Even so, building the kart track next to the F1 circuit was done in his honour. I'm sure he would have loved to watch."

"Will we get to see the circuit?" Charlie asked excitedly. "Everyone says it's built out onto a lake."

"Charlie!" Dad said a little embarrassed.

"Ah! Yes, well that's supposed to be a secret," Kant said looking annoyed. "But that's partly why I'm here." He put the lighter away and looked up. "I'd like to give the two of you an exclusive tour when you come for the karting race next week."

"That would be fabulous!" Dad said grinning. "What do you think Charlie?"

"Wicked!" Charlie laughed.

"Good," Kant said smiling. "The thing is, I'm er... planning to start my own team, and I'll be bringing a few people along

to the UK Finals to take a look at one or two drivers, Charlie included.”

Dad laughed. Charlie stared with his mouth open.

“He has to win his place there, of course,” Kant said looking slightly uncomfortable with the excitement he was causing. “But I believe that is still possible, is it not?” There was a short burst of piano music. He pulled out an iphone and glanced at the screen. “Excuse me, I must take this. Shall I see you both next week?”

“Yes, sir you will,” Dad said beaming.

“Good.” Kant said and walked away.

Charlie leapt into his Dad’s arms and gave him a bear hug.

“Well you two have just landed on your feet.” Sid said shaking his head. “Clean me out and jump straight into the arms of a billionaire – I like your style!”

“It’s not like that, Sid!” Dad protested.

“Huh? Right!”

Dad stared at Sid intently. “If Kant wants to sign Charlie, and it’s still only an if, then he’s going to have to sign you too.”

“Be realistic Phil, you’re not going to turn him down if he doesn’t want me, you’d be mad.”

Dad didn’t say anything. He just raised an eyebrow.

Sid laughed. “Philip Lining, you’re as daft as a brush; you waste far too much of my money and virtually all of your own; but for some stupid reason, I like you!”

Dad turned to look back at the kart. “For the time being, Kant’s millions aren’t going to put this thing back together. How about you come up to the garage in a couple of days and we can have a go at that axle?”

“Sure,” Sid said. “I’ll bring my miracle dust with me.”

Charlie looked at his kart. Money problems or not, the next race had just become the most important race of his life.

# 3

## Teabags

Charlie pulled on the dust mask and wrapped his fingers around the hammer's huge handle; it was nearly up to his waist!

"That's it!" Dad beamed peering through a small hole in the plaster. "Just give the wall a whack and we'll see what happens. I've got the roof prop just in case."

Charlie licked his lips and swung the hammer back.

It wasn't difficult to see why Dad had got the petrol station so cheaply: the whole place was a mess! Gateway Cottage, as it was called, consisted of a two-storey house, a workshop full of junk, two petrol pumps and an overgrown garden next to a river. Built just after the war on the site of an old gatehouse, the cottage stood at one end of a long drive which led to Calderwood Hall, a grand house some way off through the trees. The old butler, Mr Gordon, had built the garage when Lord Calderwood could no longer afford to employ him. He'd lived there, with his son, for 50 years making a living selling fuel and fixing cars. Now both of them had died and the house had been sold to Dad at auction. Charlie could see the spark in his Dad's eye, but looking at the state of the cottage, it was hard to know whether he'd done the right thing. The biggest problem was woodworm. The staircase had gone, most of the roof needed replacing and whole walls were waiting for destruction. Some of the wall timbers were so rotten you could almost walk right through them.

Charlie smashed through the plasterwork and it disintegrated with a low rumble and a cloud of dust. Dad stepped through the gap looking like a snow-capped mountain; little grit-lined canyons opened up next to his eyes every time he blinked.

“Fancy a cup of tea?” he said, flicking a speck off his eyebrow and making Charlie laugh.

There was an ominous groan from the ceiling above.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked anxiously.

“Nothing,” Dad said shoving a roof prop underneath the floor joist. “I think it just wants a cuppa.”

They didn’t exactly have a kitchen yet, it was just a tap and a camping stove. Charlie put some water on and searched for teabags.

“We’re out of PG!” he called.

“Oh!” Dad said sounding disappointed. Then he clicked his fingers. “I know! Why don’t you go and ask the neighbours?”

“I can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“They might be too posh to drink tea.”

“Don’t be daft! No one’s too posh for tea. What do you think Prince Charles makes his mum when she pops round?”

“All right then,” Charlie laughed. “But I’m taking some money just in case they make me pay!”

“Good idea mate. Don’t want to get locked in the dungeons, do you? And don’t be too long, I’m gagging.”

Charlie stepped out into the sunshine. The summer had been hot; the grass was brown and parched. Lower Beckford, with its general store, was about a mile away through the heat. The Hall on the other hand, lay just a short distance down the shady drive. Charlie crunched along the gravel towards the nearest building, a renovated barn which had been converted into a craft shop.

“Hello?” he called stepping through the open door. “Anyone in?”

He looked around him and stared in amazement. There was no one about, but the shop was filled with beautiful paintings and glittering silverware. The pictures were covered with flowers looking fresh enough to pick and the silverware was so skilfully crafted some of it actually looked alive. There were cups, bowls, plates, spoons, knives and picture frames all glinting under the lights. He ran his fingers over a fish-shaped jug. Somehow the craftsmen had made it look as though the fish was leaping out of a stream; it was beautiful. A small card was attached to the handle:

*FISH JUG £260.*

Charlie jumped backwards in shock. £260 for a jug! It was no wonder there were no customers. He stepped nervously away. If anyone came in now, he'd probably get arrested. To his left was a small glazed door opening out onto some gardens. He decided he'd be safer on the other side and stepped through. He found himself on a path leading to three of the longest greenhouses he'd ever seen. Curious, he went towards the nearest and opened the door. Two massive benches stretched nearly 30m to where another door was half open at the far end. Bits of old tubing hung from the ceiling, remains of the irrigation pipes that used to keep hundreds of plants watered. Now there were just a handful of old pots and lots of broken glass where the panes had dropped out through neglect. Charlie wondered how fast he'd be able to drive his kart through such a tight space.

Something clattered to the floor out of sight at the far end.

“Hello?” he called “Anyone there?”

There was no answer. He shrugged and set off through the gap, whistling loudly. He was hoping someone might come out, but no one did. He pushed the door open and walked into a small room.

“Anyone at home?” he called cheerfully.

The room was completely different from the rest of the greenhouse. It was a small comfortable conservatory with a polished wooden floor and a fine view of a boathouse and the river beyond. It was quite pretty. A lady, with her back to him, was sitting at an easel staring intently at a bowl of flowers. A battered set of drawers lay to her right and scattered over the floor lay pieces of a broken pot mixed with brushes, tubes of paint and sketching pencils. The lady appeared not to have noticed it.

“I’m... I’m sorry to bother you,” Charlie began awkwardly, “but would you happen to have any teabags?”

She ignored him and dipped her brush into a jar of green-coloured water. Charlie noticed a box of PG Tips behind the easel. He wondered whether the lady was deliberately trying to make him feel uncomfortable for coming so far onto her property without being invited. If she was, it was certainly working.

“I know I probably shouldn’t be here,” he said turning a little red, “but we’ve just moved in and...”

She continued painting without even turning round. Stroking the paper gently with her brush, her hand moved in a hypnotic rhythm.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

He turned round to find an attractive red-haired girl, about his own age, glaring at him. She barged past and laid her hand, rather more gently, on the lady’s shoulder. The lady turned round. Too young to be the girl’s mother, she nevertheless had a family resemblance. The ginger-haired girl began making signs with her arms and hands as the lady watched intently.

“She’s deaf,” the girl said bluntly without looking back at Charlie.

“Oh,” Charlie said feeling a little stupid. “Are you signing?”

“No, I’m air-knitting,” the girl said sarcastically.

Charlie grinned, but the smile faded as she turned back to him. Her face was like thunder.

“You haven’t answered my question,” she snapped.

“I’ve...er run out of tea,” he said awkwardly.

The women at the easel looked him up and down, then, nudged the girl making a chopping action with her hand.

The girl sighed heavily. “She wants you to know that her name’s Alinda and that she’s my aunt. She welcomes you to Calderwood Hall. For some stupid reason she trusts you.” Charlie grinned again. “But I don’t!” the girl added. “In fact, I ought to ring the police?”

“No, don’t do that,” Charlie said a little too quickly. “I just want teabags, honestly.”

“And I suppose you’re going to tell me you weren’t sneaking around looking for something to steal?”

The lady behind the easel frowned and grabbed the girl’s arm, but she ignored it.

“I wasn’t sneaking anywhere,” Charlie said. “You can check my pockets if you like? I just want some tea, that’s all.”

“And why on earth would I want to give you teabags?” the girl asked.

“I’ve...I mean, we’ve just moved in.”

The painter tapped the girl’s arm and began signing again.

“He wants your teabags,” the girl answered signing and talking at the same time.

The lady grinned and leaned over to pick up the box of PG. Charlie felt a little guilty for some reason, but then she tipped it upside-down and shrugged. A little tea dust floated down to the ground, but otherwise it was empty. Alinda grabbed the girl’s arm and pointed in the direction of the trees beyond the greenhouse.

“It looks like you’ve wasted your trip,” the girl said cocking

her head to one side. "You'll have to go into the village, and pay for them like everyone else does."

"Er, right," Charlie said rather relieved. He leaned forward and held out his hand to Alinda. "I'm Charlie," he said looking her in the eyes. "Charlie Lining."

Alinda laughed.

"I don't care if you're Batman's auntie," the girl said pushing his hand out of the way, "you don't come walking through my house without asking first! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Charlie said embarrassed by her rudeness.

"Just because Alinda's a bit of a dope, it doesn't mean we all are. Next time, I really will call the police."

Charlie nodded and turned to go. The girl pushed past him. "Come on, I'll show you a short cut through the woods."