

## Prologue

Luke Woods stood with his back to the mould-spotted shower wall. Three racist thugs had just walked in fully dressed and ready for trouble, one holding a broken metal bed leg in his right hand, once hidden inside a rolled up white towel but now fully exposed and exuding menace.

“We told you to get yourself moved from the wing, what’s wrong with you? This wing is run by white people for white people,” one of them said, his voice booming around the room unafraid of who might hear. Luke moved forwards and hurriedly made a grab for his own towel to cover himself up, but it was too late. A thick set skinhead with ugly tattoos covering every inch of his muscular arms grabbed it, along with his tracksuit which was sitting on an old, soap-stained, wooden slatted bench.

Standing naked and vulnerable, Luke cursed to himself about how life had got to this stage, his mind buzzing as to how he could call for help. The only route out was blocked and this whole area had become a no go zone for staff to patrol. It was futile to try and cry out for the officers, as from the safety of their own wing office he knew they wouldn’t hear a thing. The warm water continued rolling from his shoulders unnoticed as it managed its own escape down a filthy drain hole. The other two prisoners who were just frightened onlookers in the shower area got dressed hurriedly, racing back onto the prison landing before trouble struck. Only one person stayed, a much shorter Nigerian boy named Chris. At five foot five, he was short in stature for an eighteen-year-old, but his solid muscle mass made up for his lack of height. He stood, dressed only in blue prison shorts, and stepped in between Luke and the thugs.

“You fuck with my friend, you need to take care of me too.”

The three boys looked at each other. “Ok, if you want to be a hero, you can die like a fucking hero.” The leader, a young thug named Shamus McCann jumped forwards, the bar smashing into Chris’s forehead. He dropped instantly onto the wet tiled floor, unmoving. Luke stared down in disbelief, blood seeping out from a long deep split in Chris’s scalp, the white fragments of skull washed clean by the hot water forming a grotesque scene. A thick red river merged into the soapy suds creating a delicate pattern seen all too frequently in the steamy shower room of this stinking shit hole of a prison.

Luke bent down, feeling for a pulse. “He’s dead, you’ve fucking killed him.”

He looked accusingly at the three thugs, expecting to see some kind of reaction or guilt.

They didn’t care; instead McCann came forwards again, smashing the bar into Luke’s leg, the bone shattering with a sickening crack as he fell in a heap, screaming in agony. He could hear a distant alarm bell sound as the thugs casually walked out, dropping the bed leg and disappearing back onto the landing. The last one to leave turned around to deliver a parting shot. “Try kicking a ball now when they put that leg back together, you mug. Tell them you need to move wings.” The door swung shut seconds before health care staff raced in with their emergency bags.

## Chapter One

### *Six Months Earlier*

Jake and Luke Woods, seventeen-year-old identical twins stood in the December freezing rain as it came sheeting over the Reading FC training ground in the small village of Sonning, Berkshire. They didn't care about the cold, or the fact that it was New Year's Eve. It had taken them five years since moving over from Jamaica to be able to train with the first team and this was their chance to shine.

Jake's hundreds of goals scored for the youth teams, and Luke's ability to defend at the other end of the field had quickly brought them to the attention of the coaching staff. This could be the year they finally got to run out onto the pristine pitch in front of twenty-four thousand supporters. At least that was the plan. Another more pressing plan was also on their minds, what to do for New Year's Eve. An invitation to the pub in town or welcoming in 1997 at a friend's house party. Which one would it be? Luke tossed a coin as they dried themselves in the changing room. "Heads the pub, or tails the party," he said as the coin spun in the air.

The Snooty Fox pub in Newbury's main street was jumping, the long narrow bar having the reputation of a place that never seemed to close. Music bellowed out through the door as the twins entered, spotted straight away by a group of friends congregating at the far end by the pool table.

Dave Shipton, a stocky little boxer stood and met them with an enormous smile. He had become friends with them both at school. People who knew things thought that he was going to be a boxing star and the signs were looking good with an impressive amateur record building up behind him. A few promoters were looking to sign him, and one had offered him a debut fight at

the MEN Arena on the same bill as Rick Hatton. As always Dave was cool and calculated and he was still undecided as to whether he was ready for the step up in class.

“Are you two drinking tonight?” he asked as he headed towards the bar with them.

“No mate, we have a game tomorrow, but we’re here until the end whatever.” Luke was the one with the self discipline, Jake was the opposite, and sometimes the devil sat on his shoulder whispering sweet nothings in his ear.

“Anyway, I thought that you were in training for a fight?” Luke added. Dave laughed. “No mate, I haven’t decided what to do yet, my old man wants me to wait another year.” The DJ seemed to whack up the volume, almost drowning out the conversation and he had to shout to make himself heard. “The promoter phoned and offered me three grand for the fight last night, but I’ve told him that I want five and it’s a deal.”

Jake looked around, and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m having one Luke, even if you lot are drinking Coke.” At the bar he noticed a girl standing alone, he didn’t recognise her but the smile she offered was the only invitation he needed. Standing beside her he gave his bar order before looking her in the eye. “Hi, I’m Jake, are you alone?”

She gave a sigh. “No, afraid not.” She pointed over to a group of drunken guys sitting around a table. “My boyfriend and his arsehole mates have been drinking all day. I’m so bored with them,” she continued, rolling her eyes as she spoke. One of the drunks looked up and noticing Jake, he stood up unsteadily and pushed his way through the crowd before grabbing the girl in a bear hug. “Oy, piss off and find your own girl,” he told Jake before staggering back to his friends and a table full of beer bottles. Brushing him off the girl looked back at Jake.

“Sorry about that, normally he’s a nice man, but when he gets with this lot.....” Another shout went up from the table and she gave a further look of displeasure.

“I have to go - my name is Chloe by the way, nice to meet you.” Jake nodded and gave his biggest come and get me smile.

“Maybe chat later?” She half nodded before turning to leave.

Taking the drinks over to his brother and friends, Luke gave him the eye before whispering into Jake’s ear. “Yes, I know, I saw her. She’s fit, but those guys she’s sitting with are cussing you. We better drink up and get gone, I can smell trouble.”

Almost before he finished the sentence a fight broke out at the far end of the bar. It was Chloe’s table again and bottles crashed onto the floor and chairs were tossed across the bar before security staff came running in and escorted the drunks out. Luke nodded towards them. “See I told you, just trust me brother. Drink that beer, we’re going.”

Putting their jackets back on, to the disappointment of their friends, they forced their way back out through the dancing crowd and over the broken glass, until the winter air outside persuaded them to find a cab instead of the usual walk home. The large market square was still busy with diners insanely eating outside under heat lamps that would melt an ice cap, the chatter reaching all corners of the square as the smell of seared steaks drifted around on the cold breeze. Luke looked around for a waiting cab but the rank was empty, the exhaust from the last departing car still hanging around the edge of the car park they frequented.

“Are you hungry Jake? We could have a long wait.” He looked around at the options for a takeaway.

A small Kebab shop close by, normally empty at nine thirty was packed and Luke saw why. Chloe was standing outside while the rest of her party were arguing with the shop owner over the price of a bag of chips. She spotted the twins and walked over, pressing her number into Jake’s hand. “After tonight I’m done with him. Maybe phone me sometime?”

Just then the shop door burst open, her boyfriend running towards them. “I fucking told you,” he yelled, squaring up before throwing a wild punch towards Jake. The pair tussled, Jake trying desperately to avoid a fight but the ferocity of the attack making that option impossible. Grabbing onto his jacket, the drunk bundled Jake over a hastily abandoned dinner table, plates and glasses crashing to the floor as more clients sped away from the fight. An older man, possibly in his sixties

screamed at Luke to *Fuck Off*, as the plates on his table hit the floor spilling the food onto the wet cobbles.

Luke looked up at him, wanting to apologise but the intensity of the violence was growing as once again he tried to separate Jake and the drunk.

“Jake, leave it. Let’s go home.”

The drunk sneered. “Yeah, both of you fuck off back to where you came from.” He punched Jake again, the blow deflecting off his shoulder before Jake responded with a full punch to his face, splitting the man’s nose instantly. Bending forwards for a second the man watched the blood drip down onto a pile of food on the ground as Jake stepped back, looking for a way to leave. He had no time to move before the drunk sprang forwards again as a girl’s voice from the distance screamed for them to stop.

Another roar went up as the twin’s friends appeared, Dave leading the charge, and soon ten men were fighting before the sound of a police van winding its way down the busy high street made the crowd disperse. All except one guy, the drunk boyfriend. He stood looking accusingly at Jake, before putting his hands down to his own stomach where a large serrated steak knife protruded from his blood stained shirt an inch above his belt, a dark red stream flowing over his dirty jeans. Seeing the knife, Luke moved to help him as the man fell to his knees placing his bloody hands on Luke’s white jacket, leaving a red smear from chest to waist before falling face down onto the wet cobble stones, dead.

Everything fell silent before havoc erupted.

A shout came from the restaurant where one of the diners who had fled inside pointed out Luke and Jake to the approaching police officers.

“It was them, I saw them stab the lad. The one in the white jacket started the trouble.”

Luke put his hands up. “I haven’t done anything; he must have fallen on the knife in the fight.”

In a haze of slow motion confusion they were surrounded by police officers, the flashing blue lights from the van casting an eerie glow over the watching, shocked faces. Radios crackled as an ambulance raced to the scene, a police sergeant taking control as friends of the dead man returned to the square, adding their voices to the demands to lock up the killers.

“Get these two searched and into the van before we have another fight developing. Cordon off the area and find out if any of the customers saw the killing,” he ordered his men. Jake looked at him in horror before glancing back at the body on the ground.

“No, he can’t be dead, no one stabbed him.”

The slam of the van door abruptly cutting them off from the chatter of the excited crowds forced them to face reality as faces from the street tried to peer in towards the killers, the outside noise replaced with a constant hum of radio traffic from the unseen police officers in the front.

The boys sat silently in the back of the police van, the handcuffs digging into their wrists before Luke finally broke the silence. “What happened Jake? I saw you fighting and the next thing he is stabbed.”

Jake looked up, eyes filled with tears. “I honestly don’t know, you had hold of him while he tried to hit me. We all fell on the table and the next thing I saw, he was wiping blood down your jacket.”

Luke stammered, trying to hold back the fear that was gripping his stomach. “I know, it was all madness but I didn’t see the knife at all. This is fucked up, all I did was try and protect us both from that drunk guy. The CCTV will show that we didn’t stab him. That old man shouting that he saw us do it, what the fuck was he going on about?”

The sudden halt of the vehicle stopped the conversation as the van pulled up outside the police station. A team of officers wearing forensic suits waited for the order from the person in charge before opening the doors and leading them into the harsh white lights of Newbury Police Station. A young looking inspector stood by the custody desk waiting for them.

“You’re going to be placed in separate cells, but first my staff are going to take your clothing from you for evidence. They will be returned to you once the investigation is complete. Do you understand?”

They both nodded before being led separately to different areas of the building, neither one thinking of looking backwards to see what was happening to the other, both caught up in the magnitude of their own crazy situation. Luke arrived at his cell door, a blue paper suit waiting for him on a hard bed. The young male officer who had accompanied him spoke to him gently.

“We need all of your clothing Luke, then put on the suit. You can have your own clothes to wear when your parents come to see you.”

In a daze Luke nodded. “When will that be?” he asked, his voice trembling as he tried to control his terror. The officer put his hand on Luke’s shoulder, a gesture of his kind nature.

“If you give us your home number, I will ask them to bring some things down for you. After your court appearance tomorrow you will get a chance to talk to them.”

Luke gasped in shock, realising he wasn’t going home any time soon. “This is getting out of control, we haven’t done anything. The guy has had an accident somehow.” He ran his hands through his hair in disbelief. “Shit this is crazy.”

The officer didn’t change the tone of his voice as he explained the situation to the frightened boy.

“Luke, a man has received fatal injuries in a fight with you and your brother. He was stabbed in the stomach and has died as a result. You need to understand how serious this is.”

Luke’s knees buckled slightly before he regained some control. “I know how serious it is but we haven’t done anything. Why will no one believe us?”

Just then, the door opened and two more officers entered the cell.

“We need your clothes Luke, place them in the bags and we will seal them and then we all sign this label.” The officer pointed to a white label, already covered in writing. As though in a daze, Luke dropped all of his clothing into separate paper bags, signing each time it was sealed. Eventually he was just left in the forensic suit given to him on arrival as the two officers left without another word.

“Now what?” Luke asked, more from confusion and shock than anything else.

“Everything will be sent for examination,” the officer explained, “and you and your brother will remain for questioning and will appear before the Magistrate tomorrow. It looks like you’re going to be charged with murder.”

“Fucking murder? No way!” He tried to call out to Jake but there was no reply. A hundred metres away in the same police station Jake was facing the same nightmare.

## **Chapter Two**

Desmond and Kim Woods sat in Reading Magistrate’s court awaiting the first hearing. A door opened at the opposite side of the room and their sons, Luke and Jake, were led into the dock, both wearing the black tracksuits Kim had dropped off at the police station earlier. Another door opened behind the judge’s bench and two middle aged men and a much younger woman filed out and took their seats, briefly looking at the defendants before hearing the charges against them. The clerk of the court confirmed the boys’ identities and addresses before reading out the charge, *that on December 31st 1996 in the town of Newbury Berkshire, between the hours of 21.30 and 21.50 they murdered Mr Robert Bell.*

Kim took a sharp intake of breath as these words were read out. The magistrates listened before the woman spoke. “This case will be heard at Reading Crown Court at a date to be arranged. The defendants will be held in custody.”

The boys looked shocked as the words sank in, their solicitor standing quickly to address the court.

“Having spoken to the prosecution team and the police, we feel that there is no reason why the defendants can’t be released on bail pending the hearing. They have good character, they live three miles outside the town centre and both have employment as professional footballers. They represent an extremely low risk to the public.”

After a brief discussion the lead magistrate spoke. "As you are aware we do not have the authority to bail those charged with murder. This can only be authorised by a Crown Court judge. In this case, I'm content that Jake and Luke Woods will return to the custody of the police until this decision is made. If successful, the defendants can be bailed to their home address; however there will be strict conditions that they must not enter the town, nor leave the approved address between the hours of six in the evening and six in the morning. That is unless they need to for the purpose of work, in which case we will look at those reasons case by case."

"All rise."

The look of anguish on the boys' faces drove Kim to tears as she watched her sons led from her sight again and into the grim darkness of the police cells. She tried to call out but the words stuck in her throat as the solicitor approached, her smile seemingly out of place given the circumstances." It will be fine Mr and Mrs Woods, I'm sure your boys will be granted bail today, I'll make it a priority."

A member of the court staff then approached them. "There is no more you can do for the moment, the next case is due to be heard so you have to leave. I'm sure your solicitor will contact you when there is news."

Numbly, they left the building, the bright daylight hurting Kim's red eyes as she stepped out on to the pavement as a white prison van pulled out on to the road at the same time. She knew her babies were behind the black glass but just couldn't bring herself to look. The drive back to Newbury was tortuous but the wait was worse. Every second without news seemed like a day as they sat silently in the kitchen, the clock ticking relentlessly through the afternoon. Eventually her phone rang with an unrecognisable number.

"Hello, Kim Woods speaking."

"Mrs Woods, I have good news, bail has been granted. You'll need to go to Newbury police station and sign the paperwork. I'll meet you there."

Des and Kim rushed to get ready, driving directly to the station where a young woman in a police uniform stood behind the desk.

"Good afternoon, how can I help you?"

"We've come to take our sons, Luke and Jake home on bail. Our solicitor phoned us twenty minutes ago and asked us to come here."

The external door opened behind them and Kim turned to see the solicitor from court earlier.

"Hi Mr and Mrs Woods, I was as quick as I could be," she told them before turning to the desk officer. "Are the bail documents prepared yet?"

The woman left for a few minutes before returning with a police sergeant. He gave them a form to read while he instructed them about the bail conditions.

"Neither of your sons are able to enter the town centre of Newbury, they must reside at your address and not leave that address between the hours of six in the evening and six in the morning. They are not to contact any witnesses to the alleged offence or to use any social media while under these conditions. Do you understand?"

Kim and Des both nodded.

"If the bail conditions are broken, they will be taken into the custody of Reading Prison. Please sign here."

A side door opened and Luke and Jake came out together, the sergeant repeating the instructions to them as they both signed, the solicitor watching as they did so.

"Okay everyone, let's just have two minutes outside before I go," she suggested. They walked out towards the family car where the solicitor stopped and turned towards the boys. "Please stick by these rules, I can't emphasise how lucky you are to be bailed on a murder charge, it's almost unheard of."

Luke thanked her, but something else was pressing on his mind.

"How is this looking for us?"

"It's not looking good, I have to say. You will both be on trial for murder and without some substantial evidence emerging which clears you two boys of any involvement in Mr Bell's death, you stand a very good chance of conviction. That will mean a long period in prison and you need to be aware of that."

Luke listened to what she had to say before speaking again.

"You're talking as if we did it - what happened to innocent until proven guilty? If you don't believe us, what chance do we have with a jury?" She didn't respond directly to Luke's question, instead speaking to them all.

"The evidence as it stands is straight forward. In plain sight of fifty diners, you were both involved in a fight with Mr Bell. Everyone else ran away as the police arrived and one minute later Mr. Bell received a single knife wound to the stomach resulting in his death. You were the only three people present. Of course it's going to be difficult to prove that you were not involved but our team will try persuading the jury to see it from a different angle - maybe a tragic accident or at worst, self defence." She looked back at the boys. "Do you have any more questions?"

Luke spoke again. "But how can we both be found guilty? I don't get that."

"If the jury does believe that Mr Bell was killed unlawfully, they can find you both guilty as you were both heavily involved, or they can find one of you guilty and the other not guilty. It's a bit too early to second guess until we have seen the full case against you. Now please excuse me, I have to be back in court in a few minutes." She left, leaving a scent of despair in the air.

#### *5 Months later*

Luke and Jake sat outside court number one at Reading Crown Court. Hearts trembling and struggling to compose themselves, a court usher came out to talk to them.

"The jury are coming back in and they have a verdict." Luke nodded as the man re-entered the court, expecting them to follow.

"Here we go Jake, our fate is in the hands of those twelve people. Are you ready?" His face looked grey from worry as he stared at his brother.

"No, I just need a second," Jake told him as the usher came back out.

"Please, we need you in here at this moment. Follow me."

Jake leaned over and whispered to Luke. "Sorry mate, I have to tell you now, it's been eating away at me and I haven't slept thinking about this. It was me who stabbed him."

Luke looked at him unable to comprehend what he had just heard. Five months of denial, and here he was confessing to the killing one second before the jury were going to give their verdict.

Without time to reply they were hurried into the dock as the jury sat watching them, Luke seething but unable to talk as the judge came out.

"All rise."

He sat behind the high bench, looking over the courtroom as he spoke.

"Have you, the jury come up with a verdict on the charge of murder against both defendants?"

The foreman of the jury stood. "Yes your honour."

"In the case of Jake Woods, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty of murder?"

"Not guilty." The sigh from Kim was audible from across the courtroom.

"In the case of Luke Woods. Do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty of murder?"

"Guilty."

Kim let out an anguished cry as Luke's legs almost buckled, hardly able to comprehend what he was hearing.

"Very well. Jake Woods, you may leave the court a free man." The court officer opened the door for him to join his mum and dad. Luke's eyes follow his every step into freedom, watching as the guilty man was hugged by his parents, seething with rage as Jake's last words ran amok in his head.

His attention returned to the judge as he spoke in an almost theatrical manner.

“Luke Woods, you have been found guilty for the murder of Robert Bell. The mandatory punishment is life in prison and I will set the tariff which you must serve at tomorrow’s hearing. Take him down.”

The judge sat staring at Luke as the staff ushered him towards the stairs heading into custody. The family of Mr Bell cheered as he was taken down towards the prison cells for the first time. Luke looked up and caught Jake’s eye, just long enough for him to shake his head before a court officer led him away towards his first experience of incarceration.

A well dressed official from the football club appeared in the public gallery and shook Jake’s hand, before consoling his parents. “I’m sorry for what has happened Mr and Mrs Woods,” he said before turning back to Jake.

“Take a couple of days at home, then phone me on Thursday and we will talk about training.” He looked back at Kim and Des. “If there is anything that we can do, please call me.” He handed them his card. “We’ll need to make a club statement at some point today as obviously we’re going to have to tell the supporters that Luke is no longer part of the football club. I’m truly sorry for what has happened.”

Neither Kim nor Des were fully taking the words in and they nodded weakly as Jake spoke to the club official.

“I’ll be okay, just feeling it for my brother. I need to get back into training so I’ll be at the training ground tomorrow.” The heat from the June day seeping into the courtroom seemed to make Jake sweat as he spoke and the haunted look permanently etched over his young face since the start of the trial had not vanished, in fact he was looking worse. Des took his arm.

“Come on Jake, there is nothing more you can do, don’t blame yourself son.” The words felt very hollow within the oak confines of the courtroom and Jake was blaming himself but also plotting how to keep himself out of prison.

It was a very different feeling twenty feet below where he stood as Luke sat in a small cell underneath the court room by himself, the words from Jake still ringing in his head, hardly allowing him to contemplate the consequences of the moment. The solicitor, Sue Cotton came down to see him and tried to reassure him.

“I’m lodging an appeal straight away Luke. Jake was found not guilty so how the hell can they pin this on you?”

He shook his head. “Thanks Sue,” he said, his voice sounding dead. “I guess one of us was going to get convicted - two black guys with a knife in Berkshire. It was never going to end well was it?”

She gave an apologetic smile. “Come on, head up. Let me lodge the appeal straight away. Let’s try get you back on the pitch.”

The door opened and an old, craggy-faced court officer poked his head in. “The van is going in ten minutes, if he misses this one, he will still be here at six this evening.” He closed the door, leaving Luke and his solicitor alone again for the last time that day. Luke let out a sigh, the reality of the moment finally resting on his tired shoulders

“Thanks for all that you have done. Try to get me out of here, I can’t cope with spending my life in prison. I’d better get on this van Sue, I need to face up to the fact that I’m not going home for a while.” The words drifted into silence as he reached the end of the sentence before breaking down with a sob.

“I’m not sure that I can deal with prison Sue. Please get me out, at least on bail until an appeal....please Sue, I’m begging you.” The tears were flowing freely down his crumpled cheeks as he spoke and holding his hand, Sue Cotton spoke like a mother to a child.

“I’m going to do my best, but for now you’re going to have to go with the van Luke. Just be strong and know that I will be doing all that I can out here.”

She stood and picked up her bag, hardly able to look at the top of Luke’s head as he rested it on the table, almost hoping that the situation would dissolve if he didn’t accept it was happening. Craggy-faced man appeared again.

“Get on the van son, it’s in your interest to get your shit sorted out and stop sobbing. The people upstairs have lost their son to your actions and now you need to pay the price for what you did.” He didn’t hear Luke mumbling as he climbed onto the white van and into the tiny box cell wearing heavy handcuffs.

“I didn’t do it.”

The mechanical rumble of the heavy, sliding, brown wooden doors signalled that the van had entered H.M.Y.O.I Reading. It had seemed strange watching the streets which they used to drive along while heading for training disappearing behind him, but for how long? He would find out in the morning, however the figures that he had heard thrown around by other people were scaring him. Some prisoners from the court cells said twenty years, Sue suggested twelve years, ten if he was lucky. Ten years in prison didn’t feel very lucky to him, it seemed a lifetime.

The clang of the metal stairs being unfolded from the van and hitting the tarmac floor was followed by the appearance of a smiling Prison Officer.

“Come on son, let’s get you through and onto the induction wing. I’ve seen you and your brother play for the Under 23 team, you are both bloody brilliant. Fingers crossed for an appeal, we need you in the team.”

Luke didn’t respond, other than a forced smile. His mind was elsewhere as the reception process buzzed away around him. He paid little attention to anything that was said until a young prisoner sat down next to him.

“Hi Luke, my name’s Stu, I’m a helper down here. I don’t think that you’ve heard a word that was said to you have you?”

Luke looked up at him. “No, not really.”

Stu laughed. “I didn’t on my first night here either, but it’ll be ok. After a few days you’ll know everything. Have you ever had any thoughts about hurting yourself?”

The question sounded crazy to Luke, no one had ever asked him this before.

“Course not man, never.”

Stu didn’t flinch. “Well if you do, at any time, just ask to speak to a listener. They are just prisoners trained in helping out people who are desperate...we all need them at some point.”

Luke stayed indignant to the line of questioning, putting a suit of armour up against the world. “Not me mate. When do I get up to my cell?” He almost snarled his answers back, instantly regretting his tone.

Stu looked at him, knowing what Luke was feeling, but disliking his demeanour. “In a second, one of the officers will take you up to the wing. Just lose a bit of the attitude though, there are a lot of people up there who will test you out so take care.”

He stood and left as a young officer came and collected Luke.

“Ok Woods, we’re going up to ‘A’ Wing where you’ll be in cell 3.25, sharing with another lad who came in this morning. You’ll like him, nice lad.” Luke considered the information for a second as it rattled around in the fuzz of his mind. “Why would he like the guy? He didn’t know him did he?”

Walking through the endless secure corridors, passing a myriad of locked barred gates, Luke tried to take everything in before finally reaching the large open space of ‘A’ Wing. His first impression was bad; litter strewn the floor and half eaten food was left in trays on a small dirty table. Music seemed to emit from every one of the hundred or so cells and occasional shouts went up from an unseen window as some other poor boy was bullied, sometimes literally to death. The officer spoke briefly to the wing staff sitting in the office before coming back out and calling Luke to follow him. The metal stairs felt threatening as he ascended to the third landing, the grime of decades embedded into the industrial looking metal, the pack of bedding he carried suddenly feeling heavy.

“Here we are, this is your new home, Woods.”

The blue metal cell door opened and Luke looked in. The walls were covered with peeling paint, graffiti and blobs of toothpaste previously used to hold up photographs of family and friends from

the last occupant. He took a deep breath as he took in the state of the Victorian cell which looked as though it hadn't been cleaned since the first occupant a century before.

A dirty, lidless, stainless-steel toilet sat in the corner beside an equally filthy sink, the stainless part of the description failing miserably. His small, gray, metal-framed bed stood on the right hand side next to a wooden locker with a broken door balanced unsteadily at its end, stains and burns covering the top. An old ripped blanket covered the broken cell window, trying valiantly to keep out the dust and heat coming from the concrete exercise yard below them.

Lying on the left hand bed was a large, red-headed prisoner who didn't acknowledge Luke's presence, instead reading a newspaper discarded by a member of staff.

"This is your cell, Woods, you're sharing with Mitchell here. He's a regular visitor so can show you the ropes." The guy still didn't acknowledge anyone as Luke turned and pleaded with the officer.

"The place is filthy, have you got a better cell? This one hasn't even got a proper window." The officer's sarcasm cut through any further requests.

"Well maybe you should have thought about that before you stabbed that guy to death. It's a prison, Woods, get used to it. This is where you're going to grow up. Do you realise something? My twelve year old son will be married and with kids by the time you set foot out of prison again. Mad thought isn't it?"

The door was banged shut, Mitchell finally putting down the newspaper and turning to face Luke.

"Don't listen to that little prick, I heard about you on the news. You have just been given life, but that doesn't mean that your life stops, it's just a state of mind." Luke dumped his bedding pack on the broken locker and lay on the uncomfortable bed. "I don't share that view, I'll be a middle aged man when I'm released."

Mitchell sat up. "Bullshit! Okay, the first couple of years are going to be different for you. Yesterday, the boundary of your world was endless but forget that, the boundaries are now within the walls of this prison. They have shrunk, that's all, they haven't disappeared." He lit a thin roll up cigarette before continuing. "You need to treat the next couple of years like a secure university, grab everything that you can for free. Get every exam, degree or qualification they offer you. Let's just say that you get twelve years, the first three are behind a wall, shit-holes like this. The next three will be in an adult jail, Category 'C', still banged up but with a fence around you instead of the wall. Get through that and you're half way through." He took a long pull on the cigarette, watching the smoke hit the stained, flaking ceiling. "Then aim for some work outside the jail, it doesn't matter what you do, just get out and do something. Work on the gardens, anything is better than this." Another smoke ring spiralled its way upwards. "After that you head towards Cat 'D' status which means going to an open jail, the sun on your back all day long, working outside unsupervised for eight or more hours a day. Only sleeping in the prison at night and weekend trips home, everything will be better, then before you know it, you're home, sentence done. Use your qualifications to get a job, get on with life and forget this crap."

Luke shrugged disbelievingly. "As easy as that! How do you know this stuff?"

Mitchell finished the cigarette and put the butt in an old jar by his bed.

"My brother did the same thing as you, killed a man in a fight when I was younger and he was given ten years. At the moment he's in an open jail. Just like I said, you need to play the system." He stood and held out a large freckled hand. "My name's Lawrence. Trouble is, I never listen to my own advice - that's why these pricks keep banging me up." He let out a long laugh.

Luke shook his hand and smiled. "What if I told you that I didn't kill anyone?"

Lawrence laughed and lay back down. "That's easy, the longer you deny your part in the crime, the longer you will serve. These fuckers want you begging for release and forgiveness from the off so if you didn't do it you have two choices. Find the person who did do it, or shut up bitching and do the time - simple really."

