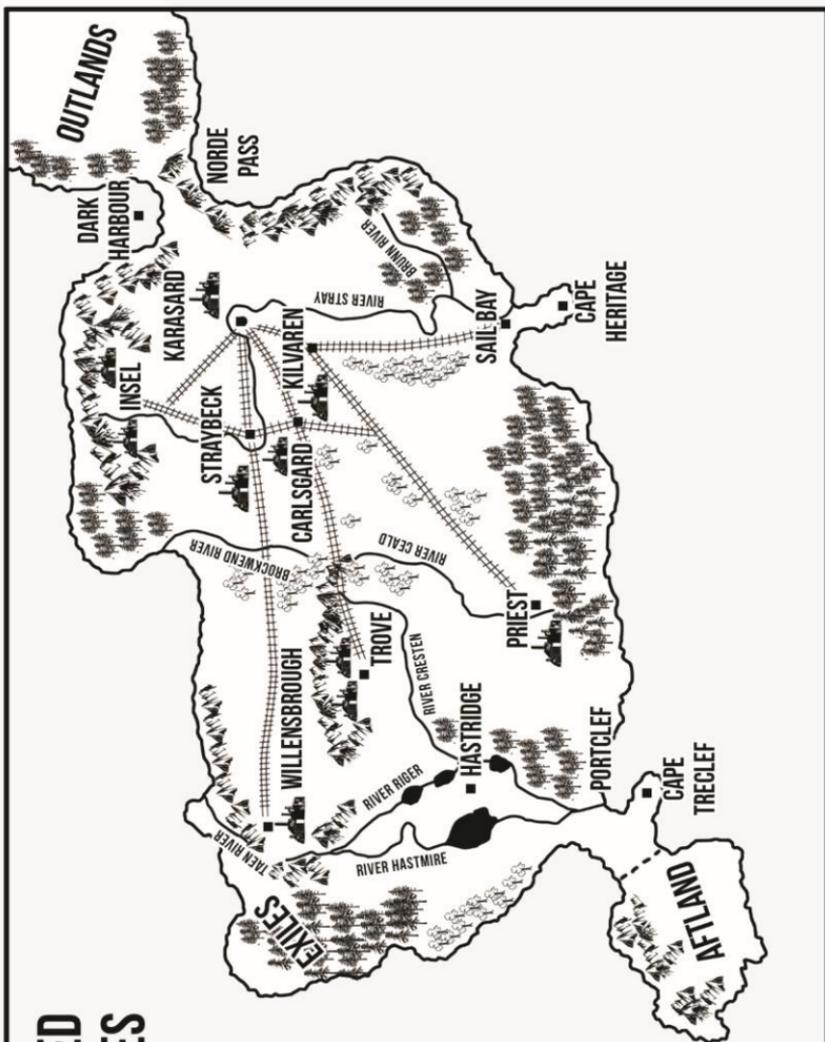


STRAYBECK RISING

By Michael James Lynch

THE UNIFIED CITY STATES



CHAPTER 1

He had once been an angry young man. Then they strung him up in the arches of The Cathedral and broke his body. Thirty-three years later, at two in the morning, Robb was lying awake, praying for his son. The curfew bell had struck hours ago and he knew the gunnermen were always looking for an easy arrest. Robb pulled back the blankets and limped towards the window, his breath frosting in the cold.

The house was in darkness so he peeled back the curtains and searched the street. It was a tomb. Ignoring the flashes of pain in his legs, he knelt before the window and waited. Eventually Robb saw what he had been hoping for. A silhouette drifting down the road. Coming home.

For a moment he allowed his anxiety to fade, until the figure outside suddenly stopped and sank back into the

shadows. Robb held his breath, turning an ear to the window. The sound of an engine was quiet, but undeniable.

He watched the patrol car cruise into view at the top of the road where it waited for a few moments before cutting its engine and lights. Using the slope of the hill, it ghosted forwards, barely a whisper escaping the tyres.

Out on the street, Robb's son sprang forwards and crossed the road like a startled hare. Then he was off through the gardens while the patrol car roared into life. A gunnerman jumped out of the passenger seat to pursue on foot while the car sped to the end of the road and then out of sight.

Robb was at the bedroom door in an instant, grabbing his clothes.

“Wait.”

He pulled on his trousers and fumbled beneath the bed for his shoes.

“Robb. Please.” It was Eliza. For the first time in memory he heard emotion in her voice. “The curfew. They'd lock you up.”

“I can't just leave him,” he said. When he turned, Robb saw the fear on his own face mirrored in his wife's.

“They wouldn't let you out. Not again.”

“I can't leave him,” he hissed.

“You have another son.”

Robb's shoulders sank because he knew she was right. With a hopeless sigh he suppressed the feelings of anger and fear that constantly simmered beneath his skin.

Hours later, the front door clicked open and footsteps crept softly upstairs. Eliza was dozing quietly, but Robb

hadn't slept. Not for a moment. He looked at the clock and saw it was nearly five. Two hours since he'd heard the patrol car make its last circuit.

He waited for the house to settle before crossing the hallway to Ryan's room. His son was fully clothed lying on top of the covers. Unhurt. Unaware. Robb closed his eyes and felt the worry fade, to be replaced by a deep resentment. He returned to his room and perched at the foot of the bed. There was no chance of finding sleep now so he slipped out of his bed clothes and dressed for work.

"Is he back?" Eliza whispered.

"Yes." Despite the darkness, he instinctively turned away and covered the scars on his chest. "Go back to sleep," he breathed.

She rolled over without a word and Robb dressed in the dark. Downstairs, he lit one ring on the hob and flexed his fingers over the flickering blue flames. Then he ran a cloudy glass of water from the sink and listened to the world sleeping around him.

It was earlier than usual when Robb stepped outside and the sunlight was still struggling against the gloom. He walked for the train beneath a pale blue sky, while the wind bit around his face and neck. His legs were stiff and ached with every step, but Robb knew that the only answer was to move through the pain. By the time he reached the station, his strides had evened out and he was almost able to ignore the grinding at his knees.

He passed through the gunnerman checkpoint, finding as usual that the guard was dozing. Robb didn't wake him. If he

was stopped later, he knew he had clearance to ride the trains to the city.

An enormous banner of Talis hung above the station entrance and the Premier's disapproving glare followed Robb down the platform. Head down, he passed over the series of mosaics that were sunk into the stone floor. Each one showed a profile of the Premier whose angular features cut a sharp silhouette against the grey concrete. Robb scuffed his feet over them all, scratching stones into Talis's face.

He took a seat on one of the metal benches and waited. Flecks of rain were illuminated in the dirty yellow lights hanging from the gantries. Somewhere in the distance Robb heard the hush and shunt of an approaching train and as he rose, both knees gave an angry crack of pain. The old train clattered to a stop and threw open its doors allowing Robb to step into the empty carriage and take his usual seat. The doors slid together with a hiss and the train jolted forwards, carrying him back to the factories. Back to Karasard.

Ryan woke after just three hours sleep. He took off his mudstained clothes from the night before and dressed quickly. His whole body was covered in bumps and bruises after his escape from the gunmen.

He'd been talking with Brynne until way past curfew. Just before he left, the old man passed over one of the political pamphlets he handed out around the city.

You know what will happen if you're caught with this?

Ryan had nodded and promised to keep it safe.

Back in his bedroom he examined the puncture marks on the heel of each hand. He had scaled the wall into someone's

back garden, only to find it topped with razor wire. The narrow cuts were quite deep, but they had scabbed over in the night.

Reaching under his pillow, he found the pamphlet that Brynne had given him and flicked to the first polemic.

We must give everything to the cause. We must forsake family and friends as they will be used against us. The revolutionary is a doomed man.

Ryan felt the hairs on his neck stand up. *Revolutionary*. He turned to the mirror straight-backed and raised his chin. Seventeen-years-old and already fighting the Government. Already making a difference.

Ryan placed the pamphlet back beneath his pillow. He'd find a better hiding place later, but right now he needed to go downstairs before his mum left for work. She was staring vacantly at the hall mirror, running a comb through her hair. Ryan watched her right hand moving the brush, just three fingers and a thumb gripped around the handle. The skin around the knuckle of her fourth finger was twisted into an ugly stump.

"You were back late," she said quietly, taking him by surprise.

Ryan felt guilty when he lied to his mum, so as usual he told her a half-truth. "I was at a friend's. I lost track of time."

Her eyes flicked up to meet his, but she didn't push any further. Maybe she didn't want to hear him lie. Ryan noticed that her handbag was on the hall table and he waited nearby for a chance to take some money.

His mum finished brushing her hair and turned towards the kitchen. Then, as an afterthought, she unfastened the zip

on her handbag and left it unattended, almost like she was giving him permission. The idea made him feel even more ashamed than he already did.

We must forsake family and friends as they will be used against us.

He dipped into her purse and took a handful of bronze and coppers from within. It wasn't like he was spending it on himself. Not really. Brynne had arranged for him to get a counterfeit ID. He'd been begging and stealing the money for weeks and today he was finally meeting the forger. If it could get him past the checkpoints, it would be worth all the dishonesty.

Behind him, his younger brother John was half-way down the stairs, still in his pyjamas. John didn't say anything, just stood with a hand on either bannister, swinging his feet back and forth.

Ryan looked at his watch and then swore quietly.

"What's up?"

As usual John looked at Ryan with eyes of total devotion. It was an exhausting standard to maintain and the main reason why Ryan had begun to distance himself from his younger brother. It was easier than trying to explain the life that he led now. The way that Straybeck really was.

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "Except I'm late." Ryan grabbed his coat from the hook in the hallway and then returned to the kitchen to grab the last chunk of bread. In the fridge he found a wedge of cheese and took that too.

"Bye Mum," he said quietly, but there was no answer.

"Where are you going?" John said.

"Out. I'm meeting someone."

"But it's still early. Who's going to walk me to school?"

“You’re twelve, I think you’ll be alright.” Ryan opened the door and a blast of cold air blew through the house. “Just stick to the main roads.” As an afterthought he broke the lump of cheese in half and tore a chunk from the bread. “Here. Breakfast.”

John grabbed them and hungrily popped the cheese into his mouth. “Dad will be angry if you don’t take me.”

“Well he knows where I am,” Ryan said, slamming the front door as he left.

For the past two days he’d gone through the same checkpoint, so today he took a different route. Brynne said that the gunnermen tracked ID scans, so he tried to keep them guessing.

He felt bad for not walking John to school, but it couldn’t be helped. He was already late for the meeting with the forger. He ran as far as the stone pillars at the park entrance and then walked along the muddy path trying to catch his breath.

The perimeter of trees thinned out and the path opened onto a huge playing field. Ryan crossed the open grass and traipsed up the hill at the far side. As he reached the playground, he saw the bench where he was supposed to meet the forger. It was empty. Ryan checked his watch again. He wasn’t more than a couple of minutes late, so he sat down on the cracked wooden slats and waited while grey clouds coasted through the sky.

From his vantage point at the top of the hill, Ryan had an unobstructed view of the park in three directions. In front and behind there was open parkland. To the left there was a steep slope followed by a thick ribbon of water. It was the River

Stray, or at least an offshoot of the main thing that began all the way up in the mountains of Insel.

Beyond the river, a high wall marked the boundary to the sprawling Worker District. Above the wall, dirty chimneys stabbed skyward forming a bleak horizon over Straybeck. It was only to his right that Ryan's view was obstructed by a wide strip of woodland, old as Straybeck itself. As Ryan glanced at the tangled trees, his attention was drawn to a movement beneath the bows of an oak tree. He squinted at the swaying branches where there was the unmistakable shape of a man. A stab of nerves twisted his stomach and he waited, wide-eyed and unsure what to do. The figure in the trees took a step forwards and gave an urgent twitch of his hand, beckoning Ryan closer.

They were supposed to meet on the bench, so either he'd decided to wait out of sight or it was a gunnerman trap. Seconds passed while Ryan considered running. The figure stepped fully into the daylight revealing a skinny guy with a pale face. He gave another urgent wave to Ryan before jumping back into the shadows.

Ryan pushed himself from the bench and jogged towards the trees. As he came closer, the man moved deeper into the tangle of trees.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Depends," Ryan answered. "Who are you?"

"Premier Talis." The skinny guy gave a withering look. "I don't have time for this. Just tell me your name."

"Ryan Calloway."

His eyes went wide. “Just like that,” he almost shouted. “Ryan Calloway. As easy as that.” He turned and stalked away through the trees.

“Wait,” Ryan called. “Where are you going?”

“I’m out,” the guy said. “Tell your man I don’t deal with amateurs.”

“But I’ve got your money,” Ryan called desperately. “Ask Brynne.”

The guy span round so fast, Ryan thought he was going to attack him.

“Will you shut your mouth,” he hissed. He glanced over his shoulder as though the forest might be listening.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said. “I’ve not done this before.”

“No kidding. Word of advice, if you live long enough to do it again...which I very much doubt...try to be just a little more cautious.”

“Okay, okay. But what do I do now? Aren’t you the guy that Bry...that he sent me to meet?” The forger didn’t answer, but he didn’t walk away either, so Ryan pressed on. “Have you got the ID?”

“Of course I haven’t,” he hissed, clearly trying hard to hold his temper. “How do you think it would look if I was searched and they found someone else’s ID card? But I can show you where it is.” Suddenly, he froze.

“What?” Ryan whispered.

The man silenced him with a finger in the air, cocking his head to listen more intently. That was when Ryan heard it too. Footsteps nearby and the choked panting of a dog.

“Get away from me,” the man growled, running deeper into the trees. “You’ve been followed.”

Ryan said nothing. He was out of his depth and he knew it. He tried to make off in the other direction, but after three steps a voice called out, sharp as a punch.

“After ‘em lad.”

He heard the crash of broken branches and then a huge black dog burst into view, muzzle drawn back in a snarl. It moved through the undergrowth with long, high bounds, sighting for its prey. Ryan dropped to the floor, pressing his face into dead leaves.

If he’d had time, he would have warned the forger. Called out to him and told him to stay quiet. But there hadn’t been time and now Ryan heard a growl of excitement from the dog as it locked onto the retreating figure. It was followed by heavy boots running past Ryan’s hiding place, crunching over fallen branches.

“Stand still. Hands in the air.” It was the same deep, angry voice.

Ryan didn’t wait to see if the forger had stopped. He jumped to his feet and sprinted through the trees in the opposite direction. A shout went up, and he saw another gunnerman closing in. Ryan dipped his head and charged down the steep slope and towards the river. He lost his footing and slipped down the sodden grass on his backside. Scrambling up, he risked a glance over one shoulder only to see two gunnermen in pursuit with a dog. The River Stray was wide and fast flowing, swollen by rain. It frothed and churned beneath the lip of the embankment, leaving a barrier nearly thirty feet across.

“Stop,” one of the gunnermen shouted.

Ryan backed up a few paces.

“Stand still,” the command came, louder this time.

Ryan charged forwards and leapt high in the air, tensed for the crack of gunfire. As he plunged into the icy water, the current pulled him under and thrust him downstream. He kicked upwards, breaching every few moments to snatch a lungful of air before he was dragged back beneath the surface. Rocks pummelled his body each time the water tumbled him over.

A turn in the river created a natural eddy where the pace of water momentarily slowed. Ryan was able to find his footing amongst the loose stones and waded closer to shore. His boots sank into the muddy embankment at the far side and he pulled up handfuls of grass as he clambered up the slope.

Glancing back, he saw a gunman levelling his rifle to take aim. Ryan sprinted for the park wall, scaling halfway before a gunshot split the air. It blasted out a chunk of brick, showering his face in grit. As the volley resonated across the park, Ryan scrambled onwards, wet clothes clinging to his body.

He dragged himself over the lip of the wall and landed heavily on the paving stones. He was trembling with fear and adrenalin but forced himself to jump up and sprint for the factory walls ahead. Hopefully he could lose the gunmen in the narrow streets of the Worker District. If not, he'd be in The Cathedral by nightfall.

CHAPTER 2

Night time in Straybeck. John had been in bed an hour when the first gunshots sounded. He crept down the ladder and sat by the window to watch flashing red lights split the Worker District. The faint wail of a gunnerman siren reached him through the glass.

“John?” His dad was silhouetted at the door. “Go back to bed. It’s not safe.”

John let the curtains fall into place and padded across the room. “What are they shooting at?”

“Nothing. It’s just fireworks.”

He pulled the duvet to his chin while his dad stretched the cracks from the curtains.

“Night,” John whispered. He waited for a hand on his head or a comforting word. There was neither and his dad shut the room into darkness.

He was woken some time later by a muffled thud at the other side of the room. John shot upright and saw someone

shadowed at the end of his bed. The figure was standing on a chair and reaching into the loft hatch. John gave a quiet whimper and the figure spun around dropping a small booklet onto the floor.

“Go to sleep.”

John recognised his brother’s voice and watched as he balanced back on the chair and hid the booklet in the roof space.

“What time is it?” he whispered.

“Late.” Ryan threw himself onto the lower bunk and kicked off his shoes. Within seconds, his breathing levelled out and John knew his brother was asleep.

The next day, he dressed quietly and came downstairs to sit with his dad. The radio was playing in the kitchen and the newsreader was describing a training exercise in the Worker District. He said that shots had been fired, but it was just the gunnermen testing their night-time defences.

John took a bite from his crust of bread and chewed it thoughtfully. “You told me it was fireworks.”

“I was wrong.” His dad left the table and limped into the hallway where he tugged on his coat.

“Where are you going?”

“To buy a paper.”

“Can I come?”

Without waiting for an answer John jumped up from the table and grabbed his own coat. His dad sighed, but held the door for him. It was cold outside and John pulled his sleeves over both hands. When the first checkpoint came into view, he stepped close to his dad.

“I’ve got my card,” he whispered. “For the paper.”

“Good lad.”

“Will they search you?”

“They always do.”

Robb’s legs were particularly bad this morning, but he kept his pace brisk, refusing to let John see how much they bothered him. There were two checkpoints between their house and the Trade District, one at each railway station. Years ago, Robb would never have taken the train for a journey like this, but even short trips were becoming harder. There was no way he could walk the forty minutes across town and back.

He let John pass through the first checkpoint ahead of him, hoping that his son wouldn’t see the list of previous convictions that were going to flash up on screen. Robb knew he couldn’t hide his past forever. John was twelve and more curious that was good for him, but he hoped for one more year before his youngest boy looked at him the way Ryan did.

As it went, the gunnerman on duty recognised him and waved Robb through without scanning. It was a minor offence - for both of them - but Robb reasoned that he was safe enough. An old offender like him wasn’t their priority anymore.

The train took almost half an hour to reach the centre of Straybeck and the gunnermen at Municipal Station were not so lenient. When they scanned his ID and the warning markers flashed up on screen, two gunnermen gripped Robb by the arms and shoved him against the station wall.

“Take it easy,” Robb said calmly. “That’s my son watching.”

The response was a gloved palm that pinned his face against the bricks. Once they had searched him though, they relaxed a little and sent Robb through to the Trade District.

John walked solemnly ahead, saying nothing about the checkpoint and eventually waited for him on the high kerb of Market Street. They stood a while watching the wagons make their deliveries until an army truck rolled past, lurching from side to side on the uneven cobbles. The driver gave them a hard stare and Robb lowered his eyes as he took John by the hand.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

The nearest buyall store was a couple of blocks away. They moved through the busy streets, cutting between bakery lines and pushing through the thin crowds. There were gunnermen on every street and as he walked, Robb *taptapped* at his front pocket feeling for the reassuring shape of his ID card.

“Do you want me to buy the paper?” John whispered. “So you don’t have to scan?”

Robb gave him a sideways glance and then nodded. “But if they ask who it’s for?”

“It’s for me. And I won’t pass it on to anyone else.”

“Good lad.”

While John queued up, Robb waited outside the buyall. Not wanting to raise suspicions by standing idle though, he walked a short distance up the street and browsed the butcher’s window. It was important to appear busy in Straybeck. Anyone standing idle risked being singled out by the gunnermen. All they needed was an excuse.

As Robb glanced over the collection of meats in the shop window, he wondered exactly when they had accepted fear as part of their lives. Straybeck hadn't always been like this. *He* hadn't always been like this.

Thirty-three years ago, Robb had been a swaggering young man of eighteen. Back then he was living in the capital city of Karasard and he remembered walking through the Royal Gardens with Eliza. Of course, it wasn't actually called the Royal Gardens by then. Almost six years had passed since The Liberation War when Talis overthrew the King. Any trace of the royal family had been stripped away; their statues torn down and melted for munitions.

Robb and Eliza hadn't been seeing each other for long. Even so, he knew that he loved her and recalled with wonder the thrill he had felt with each touch. That day when he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, she tilted her head and they shared a long slow kiss. Robb had grinned like a buffoon, carrying his happiness too freely, never suspecting it would run out.

Eliza had laced her fingers through his, a simple act, but one that in a few months' time, she would never allow again. They settled on a bench and stared down at what had once been the king's palace. It was now the party headquarters.

"I liked it better before," Robb said.

Eliza glanced nervously around her. "Robb," she whispered.

"What? It's not illegal to talk about the past." Which it wasn't, but it wasn't a good idea either.

During The Liberation War, the palace had been bombed into submission. As a boy, Robb watched it burn through the worst night of shelling the city had ever seen. Premier Talis built his party headquarters above the foundations. It glared over Karasard; all concrete and hard lines. An unspoken threat. Robb remembered how gunnermen had patrolled the gardens back then and one walked purposefully towards them. The sky was bright and from the bench Robb squinted up at him.

“What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” Robb said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just enjoying the day. Is there a problem?”

The gunnerman scanned the park, still not making eye-contact. “Maybe,” he said. “Why did you point at the Party Headquarters?”

“We didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

The eighteen-year-old Robb knew nothing of pain or suffering. Maybe that was why his first reaction was anger instead of fear. “Listen, we’re just sitting on a bench, enjoying the weather. If we pointed, it was probably to say how ugly the thing is.” He stood up and took hold of Eliza’s hand.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“I’ve not finished yet.”

“Well we have,” Robb said as he shouldered past the gunnerman’s outstretched arm, pulling Eliza with him.

“Oi,” the gunnerman called, striding forwards.

Robb remembered that he had been ready to fight, if it had come to that. He and Eliza walked quickly to the gates

and out into Karasard. For some reason, the gunmen didn't pursue them and now it was just a memory. The truth was though, that day in the gardens had been the last time he ever back-talked a gunman. The thought of doing it now made his insides run cold.

He shook his head and moved away from the butcher's window, making his way down Market Street and towards the buyall. John appeared soon after, proudly showing him the newspaper.

"Keep a tight hold of it," Robb said automatically.

He knew that spies patrolled the markets watching for anyone that passed on restricted items. Halfway up the road, they saw a patrol car and Robb instinctively kept his eyes to the ground while his fingers *tap-tapped* on the ID card in his front pocket. All they needed was an excuse. When the car had passed by, he gave a sad shake of his head, mourning the loss of the man he had once been.

When they returned from town, John gave the paper to his dad and went into the kitchen. All morning his mind had run back to the image of his brother searching through the loft hatch last night. John guessed that he had something hidden there but couldn't risk looking while Ryan was still in the house.

His mum was sitting at the table with her head resting on one hand. She looked tired and sad, but that wasn't unusual.

"Where's Ryan?"

"He went out," she didn't look at him and her voice was flat.

“Where did he go?”

She gave a small shrug and he guessed that it was the only answer he was going to receive. Filled with excitement, John bounded upstairs and cautiously pushed open his bedroom door. A cool breeze hit him from an open window and a faint trace of smoke hung in the air. Ryan’s blankets were heaped up at the end of his bunk, the only evidence that he even lived in that room.

As John pulled the window shut, he noticed an old woman looking at him from the house opposite. He smiled at her, but she glared back, hard-faced. Against his better judgement, John drew the curtains and hoped that she wasn’t an informer. His dad said that people were always informing on their neighbours. He said that all they needed was an excuse.

The room dipped into darkness and John pulled the chair out from beneath the desk. He reached up on tiptoes and pushed at the wooden loft hatch. It slid to one side and John pushed his hand through the gap, feeling around in the roof space. He didn’t exactly know what he was looking for, but when his fingers felt paper, he pulled a magazine into view. It sent a shower of grit into the room that left him blinking dust. He stepped down from the chair and perched on the edge of the lower bunk.

John thumbed through the magazine and with each page his stomach clenched tighter. Thick black text jumped out at him, broken by pictures of a war-torn city. Some showed the gunnermen beating workers and others showed piles of bodies rotting in the street. One of the captions read:

Troops murder protesters in Karasard

John shut the magazine, afraid to read on.

“John?” His dad pushed open the door and then stared in horror at the closed curtains.

“What are you doing?” he limped across the room and yanked them open. “You’ve got to think, John.” That was when he caught sight of the magazine and held out one hand. John looked at the outstretched fingers, glimpsing the burned and discoloured skin at the edge of his shirt sleeve.

“It’s not mine,” John said. “It’s Ryan’s”

His dad’s face drained of colour as he scanned the front cover. He leant forwards and spoke with icy threat. “You never saw this.”

John nodded.

“Get downstairs.”

As he ran from the room, he heard the creak of Ryan’s chair, followed by a shallow grunt of effort. He knew his dad was searching inside the loft space and just prayed that Ryan would forgive him.

CHAPTER 3

At the end of the road Ryan dropped the stub of his cigarette to the pavement and ground it flat with one foot. As usual, he grew angry when his house came into sight. He had accepted that his dad was a spineless traitor, but he hated that people would think he was like that too. As far as Ryan was concerned, they shared a roof and a second name. That was all.

He approached the front door and predicted a fight with his dad about breaking curfew. Ryan had practised his response.

I'm seventeen years old. I can come home when I fucking want.

But his dad wasn't in the kitchen or in the lounge. In fact, he could only find John who was waiting on the sofa with a guilty expression on his face.

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

An odd pang of sadness twisted his stomach.

We must forsake family and friends for they will be used against us.

Ryan knew that his brother was the only one anchoring him here. The only person he really cared for anymore. But he also knew that he no longer had the luxury of those feelings. Brynne had made it clear that he needed to shut his family out if he was to keep them safe.

In spite of himself though, he gave his little brother a smile and shoved him gently on the arm. John rocked back and forth like a pendulum, finally coming to rest on Ryan who grabbed him in a playful headlock.

“Ryan.” Their mum came to the doorway while they were both grinning. For a moment - just for a moment - it felt like the old days.

“Dad wants to speak to you, love.”

He locked his smile back inside. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” It was a lie. Her eyes flicked to the carpet because she could never look him in the face when she lied.

“He’s waiting in your room. He’s been there all morning.”

She retreated to the kitchen and Ryan took a deep breath before heading for the stairs. At the bottom step, a small voice called him back.

“Ryan?” It was John. “I found a magazine. In the roof.”

Ryan sprinted upstairs, two at a time. The bedroom door was open and his father was sitting on the lower bunk. At the sound of footsteps he twisted round, his jaw clenched tight. Ryan felt a flutter in his stomach but pushed it aside.

“What are you doing in my room?”

“Don’t start,” he said, rising slowly from the chair.

“You’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“Why? What have I done?”

“What about bringing a...” he paused, biting back his temper, “a pamphlet. An anti-government pamphlet into my house.” He took a long deep breath, his fists slowly clenching and unclenching.

“You shouldn’t have gone through my things.”

“I wish I’d done it sooner. I wish I’d been the one to find it. But it was your brother. Your twelve-year old brother.” His dad’s temper flared again. “What do you think would have happened if he’d shown it to his friends? What if he’d taken it to school?”

“Well he didn’t, did he?” Ryan pushed past and sat at the desk. “And, I’m giving it back later anyway. So you don’t have to worry.”

“You’re kidding, right?” His dad scoffed. “You think you’re getting it back?”

“I need it,” Ryan said, the pitch of his own voice rising. “I’ve promised.”

“Well you can just un-promise. Or better yet, tell me who gave it to you and let me deal with them.”

“I bet you’d love that,” Ryan sneered. There was no way he’d let his dad inform on Brynne. Never. “Where’s the pamphlet?” he demanded.

“I burned it,” his dad said with a shrug.

“You what?”

“I burned it.”

Ryan was furious. He had promised Brynne he’d look after it. He’d never trust him now.

“Why do you have to be such a...” he struggled for the words, “such a fucking sell-out?”

His dad’s eyes narrowed and he spoke with a voice that was low and full of threat. “I’m trying very hard to stay calm now, Ryan. More than you’ll ever know. But keep pushing me and you’ll not like what you find.”

Ryan gave a short laugh. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “I can get another. You can’t watch me all the time.”

“Can’t you see what you’re doing to this family?” his dad said, rubbing one hand over his scalp. “To your mother? To John? Do you ever think of anyone but yourself?”

“A revolutionary must forsake his family and friends or they will be used against him,” Ryan quoted proudly.

“A *revolutionary*? Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound?”

“*I’m* ridiculous?” Ryan fired back, refusing to be cowed. “Take a look at yourself, you cripple.” That hit the mark. His dad thrust one hand into Ryan’s chest, knocking him backwards.

“What is wrong with you? Who’s filling your head with all this?”

“Don’t touch me.” Ryan shoved back, putting his whole body behind it. Both of them shouting now.

“Who is it? Who’s twisted you up like this?”

“No one.”

“Who gave you the pamphlet?”

“No one.”

“Who gave it to you?”

When he refused to answer, his dad stepped closer, less than a hands width between their faces. Ryan’s next words were out before he’d even thought them.

“Fuck you.”

Ryan felt two large hands grab him round the neck and slam him against the wall. As he struggled against the grip, he felt his dad’s leg buckle beneath their combined weight. Quickly Ryan kicked out at the weakened knee, sending them sprawling to the floor. His dad struggled up, breathing hard and Ryan braced himself for the punch he felt sure was coming. Instead his dad tore at the buttons of his own shirt, his voice raw with emotion.

“Is this what you want?”

The open shirt revealed a mass of disfigured flesh. His stomach was lumped and stitched like old clothes, crisscrossed with angry red scars. Large burns had healed into shiny patches of soft tissue and the flesh across the left side of his chest was sagged and melted like candle wax.

Ryan’s stomach heaved and he dragged his eyes away. He ran from the room, taking the stairs in twos and threes. He saw John in the hallway, white-faced and frozen to the spot. He shouldered past and slammed the door behind him.