**SPARROWLEGS (Paul Delaney) – Chapter One**

A few years ago, I lived in an old, terraced house. School was just down the road and the Bongs, as we called them, just a few streets away.

The ‘Bongs’ by the way, was a huge open field, with hilly bumps, scattered trees and a little pond. Dogs pulled their owners across the long, wet grass. Children flew their colourful kites in the strong winds. Footballers battled it out on the muddy pitch, chasing the ball across the puddles.

Every evening you’d find me down there. At weekends, it was the place to be. I’d play out in all weathers, with my best friends, Matty and Gadge.

They were twins but you couldn’t tell. Crowning Matty’s tall, slim body was a thick head of wavy brown hair. But Gadge was different. A short, cropped haircut sat on his head, like a thousand sharp straws.

We all went to the same school, sitting in Mr McDermott’s cold, draughty classroom. We lived next door to each other too. I suppose you could say we were like brothers. We didn’t look like it through.

I was probably the smallest boy on the playground in those days. The only one with red, curly hair and a hundred freckles covering my face like a volcanic rash. ‘We’re all different!’ McDermott used to say. *‘*

*True Sir,* I thought.

Matty and Gadge’s skills with the football were incredible. But I wasn’t so lucky. It was even written in black and white. ‘Malcolm Thomas: tries really hard at football but only scores one goal every year – normally when the goalkeeper’s tied up!’

That’s what my teacher, Mr Ryan scribbled on my report one year. Mum’s still got that crumpled up piece of paper somewhere. It still makes me chuckle when I read it. He was only joking about the goalkeeper of course but it did hurt a little.

*I’ll prove you wrong one day, Sir,* I remember thinking as he breezed past me in the cold corridor. *And that’s a promise.*

Matty, Gadge and I played for Stanley Village football club, the ‘under elevens’ team. Looking back, I think I was a little jealous of the twins. Everything was going right for them. Living with their parents, they seemed to have things I could only dream about.

How that sleek Mercedes saloon of theirs floated down the street! It was like a silent, black beast, its engine purring obediently. And the bodywork! No marks, no scratches and definitely no dints. It was pure, shining steel, like soft, polished moonlight, rolling down the road.

For holidays, Matty and Gadge would fly to the other side of the world on jumbo jets. Sometimes to places with strange names that I couldn’t even say properly.

I’d be happy in Uncle Ron’s car, travelling to Wales with Mum for a whole week in his caravan. Sometimes, we’d jump on a coach for a day out to Blackpool. ‘First one to see the tower wins a pound!’ Mum would say.

I fell in love with the twins’ panther black ‘Goal hunger’ football boots. They were black leather, with a thin, golden stripe running down the sides. Six silver studs screwed into the tough, plastic soles. Long, silver laces hung from those boots like strands of angels’ hair.

How often had I stared at those magical boots, lying in the dusty display window of Boydells, our local sports shop? My eyes widened in wonder, locked onto this heavenly image. I stared at them for an age, my fingertips digging into the shop’s cold glass.

‘I’m not made of money, love,’ Mum said softly, dragging a mouthful of cigarette smoke into her lungs. ‘Well unless I win at the bingo this weekend and if that happens, I’ll buy you two pairs!’

So I pulled the ‘Boots with no name’ onto my feet. It was the moulded, plastic studs I hated the most. Not ‘screw-ins’ but already stuck to the bottom of the black, rubbery soles.

I didn’t like those boots one little bit. They were too tight anyway, squashing my toes together. They turned my feet into two tight, clenched fists, almost bursting out of their leathery prison.

Football training was hard work. We were always out after school, even when snow clouds drifted across the sky. Nothing would stop us getting out onto the field, not even a sudden earthquake.

We trained with the school team on the big field and we trained with Stanley F.C. on the Bongs. And do you know what? We loved every minute of it, lapping it all up like a pack of hungry hounds gnawing on a bag of butcher’s bones.

Everybody had somebody watching them. Except me. Mum tried to get to training as much as she could. She showed her face at a rare weekend match. But most of the time she was stuck behind the counter in Graham’s busy bakery.

‘You do understand, don’t you?’ she whispered in that soft voice of hers, her eyes deep and searching. ‘It’s just a little overtime and I’ll put the extra money in the holiday pot!’

But the holiday pot, an old jam jar, was almost always empty. Mum would hand those spare coins and notes over the counter in Reeves’ dusty corner shop. And Mr Reeves would exchange them for cigarettes, whiskey and a small bottle of lemonade.

A little hurt often came my way during training, like a short, sharp unexpected pinch. ‘Substitute – Malcolm Thomas’ the team sheet would read, scribbled out in ballpoint pen. *You’ll get into the team one day,* I’d say to myself, watching the game unfold. *If aliens land and kidnap most of the team.*

Looking back, I wasn’t a bad footballer. I had a few skills up my sleeve. Passing the ball in a smooth, straight line, I’d find the feet of another player almost every time. I could shoot with both feet too, sometime driving the ball into the back of the net. I think it was my self-confidence, that’s all. I just didn’t believe in myself at all. Not one little bit.

Hanging around with Matty and Gadge was great. ‘Come on Malcolm!’ they shouted out before training. ‘Show your skills off!’ They never laughed at me, even if I made a mistake. They just encouraged me, jumping high onto my shoulders when anybody scored. Now that made me feel good, that’s for sure!

We played for hours in each other’s bedrooms. We watched exciting games down at the local football ground too, cheering on Stanley’s first team. We sneaked into the cinema to catch a glimpse of the latest films, all freshly delivered from Hollywood. We even went on days out together, in that luxury, floating machine of theirs.

I thought it would never end. Those days would last forever. But then, one cold, foggy morning, on 6th November 1999, it finally happened.

A large, blue transit van screeched to a sudden halt outside Number 25 Badger Street. Two scruffy workers jumped out into Matty and Gadge’s front garden. One of them held a tall, thin wooden pole with a rectangular sign at the top. The other one hammered it into the soft ground. ‘House for sale’ the sign said, in thick, black letters.

**Two**

It all seemed to happen so quickly. One minute the sign was up. The next minute the house was empty. ‘Dad’s got a new job in London,’ Matty beamed, bouncing his leather football. ‘I can’t wait to see Wembley!’

We said we’d keep in touch but we never did. After several weeks of writing to each other, our letters dried up. To this day I don’t really know why. ‘When you’ve gone, you’ve gone,’ Mum used to say.

I suppose things naturally move on don’t they? For weeks, I sobbed into my damp pillow. I wanted my special friends to come back. I wanted to see their faces and hear their voices. I dreamed and waited. I waited and dreamed. But alas, it was no good.

I played on my own in the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of the floating black beast. My mind filled up with whispering voices. *We’re coming home Malcolm! Mum didn’t like London at all, said it was too noisy!*

But finally, it hit me, like a sledgehammer splitting a stone. My best friends were gone - forever.

My bones ached with excitement when Mum dashed into my bedroom one cold, January evening. ‘Joan told me in the shop,’ she exclaimed. ‘A new family’s moving in soon. And guess what? They’ve got three young boys, all about your age…and they’re all football crazy!’

Staring out of my bedroom window, I waited for weeks. My head spun thousands of times. The slightest noise and I’d be off my bed, my nose pressed up against the cold, frosty glass.

A car pulling up outside perhaps. The loud piercing horn of a taxicab. The sharp screech of the Number 47’s brakes, dropping off old Mrs Prosser as usual. Or the faint whirr of Geoff’s milk float, creeping up the street along with dozens of empty, rattling bottles. But nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Until that cold, February morning. A thin cloak of fog was lifting when I saw him for the first time. Standing in my front garden, my hands trembled with sharp, painful cold.

He was in a silver wheelchair, with a thick, red blanket draped over his knees. Somebody was pushing him up the path of ‘Shell Green’ cottage. I held my breath. Tears invaded the whites of my eyes. I tore up my welcome card I’d made for the Harvey boys.

Slumped in that rickety old chair, an old aged pensioner sat. On the top of his bald head, a few tangled hairs blew in the wind like grey, dancing spiders. He was covered in long, thin wrinkles, etched into his face like deep scars. He was half asleep. Half dead I suppose.

Peering at him, I shook my head. My mouth closed as my eyes narrowed. A long, unhappy sigh escaped through my lips. I released a sad, cloudy breath into the cold air.

The lady pushing him pulled a key from her pocket. Then she put it into the lock, pushing the wide, black door open.

Struggling to lift the wheelchair over a huge, whitewashed stone step, she paused. For several seconds, they both chatted away. Two icy breaths locked together, rising up into the freezing heavens.

Then she grappled with his frail, lame body. She pulled him up from his wheelchair prison. Slowly, the old man rose to his unsteady feet.

Her loving arms around his shoulders, they strode over the tall step into the warmth of the house. The hairs on my back rose up. I found myself out of breath. Perhaps I was scared of his wheelchair, I thought.

‘This is the worst day of my life!’ I screamed to Mum. A thick cloud of sadness suffocated my heart, almost strangling its heavy beats. ‘I’ve no new friends to play with now, just an old man who probably can’t even play cards.’

‘Don’t be so heartless, Malcolm,’ Mum said. Her eyes smoked with anger, almost drilling through my forehead.

‘But he’s in a wheelchair, Mum!’ I snapped. ‘I’ve seen it with my own eyes. He can’t even walk. He can’t do anything, except breathe probably.’

Mum gazed at me. She ran her bony fingers through her thick, brown hair, tinged with little flecks of grey. ‘You might be in a wheelchair yourself one day, Malcolm!’ she bawled. ‘I can’t believe you’re being so horrible!’

‘It’s just that the Harvey boys…’

‘Their parents didn’t like the house,’ Mum interrupted. ‘Thought the kitchen was too small or something. Wanted a garden instead of a back yard. That’s what I heard anyway.’

‘Well it stinks!’ I barked. ‘I’ve got nobody to play football with again, have I? Why can’t we move down to London? Or haven’t we got any money *as usual*?’

I think I said the wrong thing. A horrible, ghoulish scream erupted from Mum’s mouth at dangerous speed. She dashed towards me. I avoided her angry clutches by running into the hall and leaping upstairs two steps at a time.

‘Don’t you dare show your face down here!’ she yelled. ‘You ungrateful little brat!’

Lying on my bedroom carpet, I stared at the ceiling. I clamped both eyes shut. Thoughts raced through my battered head like hot, electric sparks dancing off a welder’s torch.

I saw the wheelchair. I was the old man, his head bowed in defeat. I saw his helper, struggling to pull this thin bag of bones over the step. Then I saw Mum, slaving away behind Graham’s busy counter. Just for a few extra pounds in her purse.

The sound of Mum’s quiet sobbing crept under my bedroom door. Pulling it ajar, I snuck out onto the landing. Soon, I was sitting on a step halfway down the stairs.

Watching her through the kitchen doorway, she sat tall on a wooden stool. A smoky cigarette was balanced between two shaking fingers. A tall glass of whiskey hung from her other hand too. Her whole body seemed to be trembling.

‘Sorry Mum,’ I whispered as I sidled up to her. I lowered my head, eyes glued to the clay floor tiles. ‘It’s just that…’

‘One day Malcolm, you’ll realise just how tough it’s been,’ she said.

She sucked on the end of her cigarette, its stale smoke rising into the air. Staring at me, she drilled deep holes right through the centres of my eyes. ‘I hate working all day and leaving you. But what else can I do?’

‘I know Mum,’ I sheepishly replied, watching the curling, twisting smoke trails.

‘It’s hard enough being on my own all the time,’ Mum added. ‘I get lonely too, you know. But at least you could be grateful Malcolm. Money doesn’t grow on trees.’

‘I’m sorry, Mum,’ I whispered, burying my head into her warm lap. ‘And I’ll always love you, you know that don’t you?’

‘I love you too, Malcolm,’ she said. ‘So that’s why I want you to respect the man in the wheelchair. He’s a human being, just like you and me. And he was a young man once, so just remember that!’

Wiping away her tears with a small, soft tissue, she looked straight through me. ‘Anyway, his name’s Mr Schiaffino,’ she said, as a tiny smile cracked open on her lips. ‘He lives on his own but somebody looks after him. So guess where we’re going tonight?’

Open-mouthed, I twisted my head around, almost pulling a muscle. I stared into her for a few tense seconds, pulling away a little.

‘But I don’t want to go, Mum,’ I said. ‘It’s just that, well; I don’t like old people at all. You know that anyway.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t, that’s why!’

‘Well we’re going and that’s the end of it,’ Mum snapped, pouring the last drops of alcohol into her mouth. ‘Anyway, don’t be so selfish Malcolm. You’ll be old yourself one day and believe me, it comes around sooner than you think.’

‘But I don’t want to go, Mum,’ I said, puffing out a long, whining breath. Once more, I lowered my head, hiding my tear filled eyes. ‘You can’t force me!’

‘Just do this for me Malcolm, please,’ Mum said. ‘Just for me, eh?’

**Three**

Mum knocked on the door. It opened with a gentle creak. A tall, thin lady was standing in the doorway, her bright yellow dress almost blinding us. A long mane of thick, black hair tumbled down her back.

‘Uncle Joe’s expecting you,’ she said, her voice crackling with excitement. ‘Oh, I’m Charlotte by the way, Joe’s niece. Very pleased to meet you!’

Living a few streets away, she dropped in on her uncle every single day. ‘Auntie Maria died a couple of years ago now,’ Charlotte said, leading us down a dark, narrow hallway. ‘And Uncle Joe’s never been the same really. He thinks he can look after himself but he can’t. Well not any more.’

‘How old’s your uncle?’ Mum asked.

‘Seventy five,’ she whispered. ‘And he’s got the football on as usual. I can hear it.’

My eyes lit up like two locomotive lamps in a dark, smoky tunnel. Pushing open a door, Charlotte led us into a warm, cosy lounge. ‘Uncle Joe, it’s your new neighbours,’ she said. ‘Mrs Thomas and her son, err…’

‘Malcolm,’ I said as the cheers of excited football crowds weaved into my ears. Charlotte went off to make a pot of tea. Mum sat down on a small, leather sofa. I sat next to her, staring at Mr Schiaffino’s bent over body.

Sitting in a tall, wooden armchair, a living skeleton glanced up at us. An enormous knitted cardigan hung from his shoulders like a grey, baggy ship’s sail. His long, bony hands trembled a little.

Carved into his face, deep wrinkles stretched wide. A large pair of black spectacles rested upon his short, fat nose. And his dark, sunken eyes peered through thick lenses, like magnifying glasses.

‘Corner ball!’ he yelled in a strange accent. ‘’Bout time we had a bit of luck.’

He couldn’t peel his eyes away from the football game. Mum asked him a few questions, but he just wasn’t listening.

‘Once the football starts, that’s it,’ Charlotte said as she trotted in with four mugs of tea. ‘You might as well talk to the wall.’

‘Do you like football?’ Mr Schiaffino said, scratching his flaking, blotchy scalp.

‘I love it,’ I replied.

Sipping his warm tea, he glanced over to me. ‘Can stay if you want,’ he said. ‘Watch the match with me.’

I looked towards Mum. She shook her head. ‘It’s almost time for Malcolm’s tea Mr Schiaffino,’ she said. ‘And he’s got his homework to do, haven’t you love?’

Shaking his head, Mr Schiaffno stared at us. ‘Football’s better than homework, isn’t it Malcolm?’ he chuckled. A wrinkly smile stretched across his rough face. ‘And call me Joe from now on. It’s Juan really but all my friends call me Joe. Well, those who are left of course.’

Pausing, his dry, cracked lips stretched into a wide smile. He ran his fingers over those few remaining grey hairs of his, flattening them a little. ‘At one time, they used to call me Sparrowlegs,’ he said. ‘But that’s another story Malcolm.’

The shot was fast, unexpected and clean. Into the top corner the ball flew. ‘Like a rocket!’ screamed the commentator’s bubbling, high-pitched voice. ‘What a superb goal!’

Springing up, Joe’s head almost burst through the ceiling. His half-filled mug of tea crashed to the floor as he bounced back down onto a big, springy cushion.

‘We deserved that!’ he yelled, flashing three yellow, stained teeth. ‘Come on lads!’

Widening my eyes, I locked a puzzled gaze onto Joe’s worn face. Joe had suddenly come to life. He was as happy as a child clutching a bag of sweets. That sudden goal had breathed life into his frail body.

‘Any good at football are you?’ he asked, puffing out a long breath.

‘Err not really.’

‘Play for any teams?’

‘Yes but only substitute normally.’

‘Everybody starts somewhere.’

‘I suppose so,’ I said, nodding.

‘Anyway, where do you play?’

‘On the Bongs, Saturday mornings usually.’

‘Well I’ll be there on Saturday then,’ Joe said, his lips stretching into a cheeky grin.

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