

GRIT

PART ONE

QUINTIN LOW

PROLOGUE

AS WITH EVERYTHING in my life, it all started with the game.

And no, not as in game theory or the type of animal that you shoot with a high calibre firearm while guffawing like a simpleton. I'm talking about the great game. Since I was young, or rather since I was significantly younger, I've always been obsessed with the odds in life. When it boils down to it, our lives are just numbers. One out of however many for something to happen.

But I'm not one of those cunts who tries to order the world into figures or regiment my existence based on maths and statistics. Those people are missing the point. Life is random, chaotic, and unpredictable. And there's a perverse beauty in that. After all, the odds of winning the lottery are one in a billion, yet every day someone manages to strike it rich and make that mythical big score. That's what life is about to me. Taking a risk and betting it all to chase the golden dragon.

Which brings me to what I'm here to talk about. Some events in life are certain. Death and taxes come to mind. Others are fifty-fifty, like a coin flip. Next you have those events that are unlikely, like finding a bag on the ground and a hundred-dollar bill to snort it all with. Last but not least, you have events that are nigh on impossible. Usually, you're glad that the chances are low with those ones. After all, being that one cunt who met his maker at the hands of a hungry eagle and a plummeting tortoise doesn't exactly sound fun.

On the other hand, some people spend their entire lives without any of the amazing, wonderful, nigh impossible events happening to them. They usually end up spending a lot of time pondering to themselves: *what if?* But as I said, every day someone makes it. And on one of those days, that person was me.

I suppose I should set the scene. I know I said that it started with the game, but first you need somewhere to play it. For me, that place was Empire City. Empire is a big place. Something like six districts, four of them dominated by skyscrapers, spires, and faux pyramids. All vying for domination of the skyline. The remaining two districts are suburban enough, rather boring really. One of them is far out enough to be its own satellite town. The other district hugs the big four like a child to the leg of its parent. That was where I grew up and it was there that I first learned about the game.

But I'll get into that later.

Twenty million people. All spread out over an urban sprawl that snakes, clambers, and devours land across the state. People from all over the world, all walks of life, all aiming to make it big in one of the world's major powerhouses. In this city, the average person is less than an ant. Less than an insignificant speck in the grand scheme of things. And that's exactly what made all of this even more worthwhile: the fact that a nobody like me became a somebody.

If just for one day.

But Empire is just the board. The next thing you need is a sitch and players. Unfortunately for you and me, that starts with me and my family. My name's McMurphy. And no, before you ask, I'm not Irish. My Father picked it because it sounded good to him at the time. That time was when most of his family jumped the pond and moved over here in search of the "good life". He says it has a nice ring to it and I'd have to agree with him. Regrettably, that's basically where any agreements between us start and end.

My Father likes to think of himself as relaxed and easy-going, but I'm not quite sure that he's being amazingly truthful with himself there. I don't think I've ever met a bigger hardass hiding beneath a blanket of false amiability in my life. Everything that should be petty bullshit is a big deal to him, which is something that's never failed to be intensely grating. His ability to be terribly condescending towards me has never failed him either, so I spent the early years of my life barely concealing my distaste for him. Not much has changed since then. As bad as he is though, I have to say that he's still better than my Mother. All her good traits can be counted on one hand. Although, she's passed all of those traits onto me and they've saved my ass on more than one occasion.

Credit where credit's due, I suppose.

I've thought long and hard about why my parents married and to this day I haven't come up with a satisfactory answer. Misery loves company maybe. Although where they're from, divorce is still a dirty word, so I feel that's a big part of why they're still together. Despite the questionable basis and nature of their union, they've managed to produce a brood of three healthy enough children. As you might be able to gather, that means I have two siblings.

A younger Sister and Brother.

My little Sister is two years younger than me. She's changed now but back when we were both growing up, she was the golden child. The nice and outgoing one who never complained about anything. She was always doing all that extracurricular shit (team sport and art) that I've never seen much point in, and was filled with a boundless energy that I could never possess. She'd never complain when my Mother made us study on the weekend or when we were sent to tutoring either. To me, the mere thought of spreading myself so thin like that was akin to being dragged over broken glass. But the signs that she was eventually going to break the mould were there from the start.

My little Brother is four years younger than me and he's a cheeky-looking little cunt with these big monkey-like ears. My parents always give him shit for being the laziest and least academic out of the three of us and he fucking well is. But that's only in comparison to my Sister and I, of course. When you remove us from the equation, he's by all rights a quiet, nice, well-mannered, and most importantly, *normal* kid. He's probably the most pleasant member of my family, come to think of it and as a result I've never been very close with him.

Suppose that just says a lot about me...

But hey, I'm getting ahead of myself. The only thing I can explain and give full justice to in this world is *my* life. And if there's one thing in my life that's defined it so far, for better or for worse, it's that I can't stand routine. It's always disagreed with me and I've always disagreed with it, so we have a mutual loathing for one another.

Doing the same thing day in day out beats you down and wears on your humanity until there's nothing left. It's very easy, at least for me, to become utterly indifferent to life when nothing about it changes. That's because I'm all about freedom of choice. Freedom to choose

even if the choice made is detrimental. Because without the potential to hurt others or ourselves, how can we strive to treat others better and better ourselves?

Most people are much the opposite. Most people don't *like* uncertainty. It scares them. Most people want things to be safe, familiar, and most importantly of all, placating. To me, that just doesn't make any sense. Fact of the matter is that nothing worthwhile in this world was ever achieved without risk. Anyone who's ever achieved anything of true worth did it because they were just crazy enough to do it. The merits of new experiences and the perils that come with them are what we're doing this all for. Without that, there's little to do aside from paying your taxes and contemplating your eventual death. And unless you're a fucking weirdo, neither of those things sound very fun.

But I digress.

To move *with* the uncertainty rather than against it gives you a powerful edge over the opposition that can't be matched. You see, a very long time ago now, I was faced with a choice. To go down into the darkness below me or to desperately clamber back up towards the light. Back then, the wider world and all its trials and tribulations seemed so harsh and unforgiving to me as a mere child. Yet all that awaited me in the light of what was familiar and safe was even more ruinous than the great unknown that now lay at my feet.

And so, I leaped.

Straight down into the fray. Straight down into the muck and grime of the world. Soon enough, I found that I belonged far more in the chaos and mess of it all than in the confines of the nest that'd been built for me by my forebears. Rather than ensuring my safety, I suddenly saw the boundaries that'd been set for me for what they truly were and quickly learned to despise them.

So, *why* did I take that great leap in the first place?

After all, it does sound a bit desperate and dramatic, don't you reckon? Well, that is *far* from a simple story to tell, but I'll give it my best shot.

Here we go.

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS A coolish April night and Easter was quickly approaching. I was standing in the kitchen with my parents when my Mother's palm slammed across my face. My Father launched into yet another long rant about how I'd disappointed them, shamed the family, destroyed my future, and had probably committed multiple felonies all at the same time.

Damn, he must've had a lot of faith in my ability to multitask. My face stung from the pain but by now I was quite used to it. If I had to pick an incident that perfectly sums up how I got along with or rather didn't get along with my family, it'd be this one. Here we were again, in the kitchen, late at night, for another tirade about my marks. How many times had we done this before? How many more times would this happen again? Too many fucking times on both counts.

'You're almost in high school now. This. Is. Serious,' said my Father. He jabbed his finger at my chest to punctuate the last part of that sentence. I had to bite back a grin as he did that because his stern, authoritative tone and expression always failed to affect me.

He thought it made him look tough.

I thought it made him look and sound like a harassed bullfrog.

'You have three more months until you sit that test. Do you know how much money we've spent trying to get you into a good school?!' said my Mother, her shrill voice grating on my ears.

Now that was less funny. Yes, yes, yes, they'd told me time and time again since I'd started year six. If I didn't get good marks, then I wouldn't pass the entrance exam to get into the selective high school they wanted me to go to and if I didn't get into that, I'd fail all my

final exams at whatever school I'd end up attending and be reduced to bumming off Cenno for the rest of my life.

Oh, how horrible...

By now, I was getting quite the sense of déjà vu about the whole thing.

'You'd better listen to us now, Cooper. You're not like everyone else, you're different. You're going to achieve more than all of your classmates. We're your parents. We know you. They're lazy and soft. We didn't raise you to be like that. So why are you acting like it?' my Father said.

I was having a hard time dealing with that last bit. I still wasn't over the last time he'd almost made me crack up, and it wasn't getting any better.

At this point, I feel I should explain why this was all so funny to me. It was funny because I was currently twelve years old, had barely started year seven, and what had set them off tonight was getting a B instead of an A for maths on my term one report card. Hell, old mate Tom had almost failed maths and he was chilling up at the coast right now with his parents for Easter. I'm pretty sure every one of my mates was off doing something for the Easter holidays.

So why was I here instead?

Well, you see the report card actually said: Cooper has achieved high results in both knowledge and understanding, and modelling and problem-solving this term. He has displayed the ability to comprehend and apply skills in the topics of probability, long division and multiplication to an exemplary standard. He should be congratulated on his dedication to his studies and will continue to achieve success if he maintains his current level of effort.

Not a single damned person in my class had achieved an A on that last test either and I'd only been a mark or two off, according to Ms Ryan. There was a perfectly logical explanation here. Yet I was still being yelled at. You wanna know why? Well, I *should* say that my parents claim they can't read English very well because it's not their first language. Although, that's hardly a believable defence because they've been in this country for close to twenty years.

But yeah, because of that supposed inability to easily comprehend written passages of the English language, they hadn't even bothered to read the comments on the report card. The second they'd seen the B in

the place of their desired A, they'd blown up full of hot air and venom like a disgruntled pufferfish. It wasn't the first time it'd happened, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

This is why you should never ever be a normal fish in a tiny pond. You see, I was bright but not a brain. A hard worker, but not amazingly dedicated. Quick on the draw, but not the fastest gun in the west. Yeah sure, I had an attention span of longer than five seconds unlike most of the other kids, but I was really nothing special. I was like a parrot: able to repeat what I learned word for word, hell even sound convincing while doing it, but my actual understanding of the material was shallower than a kiddie pool left outside at high noon.

I definitely wasn't going to be curing cancer or writing a classic novel any time soon. Hell, like most of my classmates, I was still picking my nose at that age. But when you're in primary school, that'll get you far (the parroting part, not the nose picking part). It'll get you so far in fact that certain unobservant adults might start having unrealistic expectations about your future, such as expecting you to actually amount to something.

The minute that starts happening, you've landed up shit creek in a leaky canoe with no paddle. Eventually, to avoid drowning, you have to start putting in effort to stay afloat as the canoe starts taking in shit. I don't think I need to tell you how many have been subsumed beneath the manure mark.

Speaking of unrealistic expectations, I forgot to mention that I'd managed to get As in everything else except art, music, and HPE that term anyway. So of course, all of this uproar was far from necessary. But I knew pointing that out wouldn't help me. I'd tried that last time this'd happened, and it hadn't done me any good. My parents loomed over me like great shadowy titans, their faces black with anger, as I took all of this in. I was dumfounded by their reaction to the whole thing.

Christ almighty, it wasn't like I'd flunked a test, shoplifted, been caught ripping billies, or anything like that (although there'd be plenty of that in the future, but let's not get ahead of ourselves, ay?) It got harder for me to look at my parents as the awkward silence dragged on. I just couldn't accept that they were two real-ass human beings standing in front of me and saying these ... *things*. Eventually, they must've mistaken my dumbfoundedness for acceptance of fault.

'Why do you have to keep disappointing us like this, Cooper? Why

can't you be more like your sister?' asked my Mother. Her face was lined with apparent sorrow as she said that. It looked almost like I'd hurt her or something. I resisted the urge to give a derisive snort. She could spare me her crocodile tears. Were they really going for this angle? It'd been tried on me before and it'd been as efficacious as a Band-Aid on a bullet wound.

'You know what you are, Cooper?' posed my Father.

This was going to be interesting...

'You're an underachiever,' he said. Huh. That was a new one. 'You're only like this because you don't want to put the effort in. Your sister would never be like that,' he added.

Ugh. What he just said would become really funny to me one day because my Sister would become exactly like that a few years down the track. There's nothing more delicious than some slow cooked irony. It's food for the soul, really. But yeah, whenever they wanted to say I wasn't up to scratch, all they had to do was whip out the Sister card and, at least in their minds, they'd achieve a flawless victory. She'd made a clean sweep this term and my parents had just about cried tears of joy. This was all while going to dance, art, and gymnastics classes on afternoons as well as doing team sport and playing an instrument (however poorly) mind you.

I'll give you a wild fucking guess as to how many of those things I could do.

She'd pretty consistently won awards for all that shit, too. I'd been forced to sit through many presentation night award ceremonies over the years and was made to watch as she was handed the best this or that award. According to my parents, seeing it happen was meant to motivate me into getting those awards myself.

Apparently, I should've been ashamed to be sitting there in the audience rather than joining her up there on stage. Personally, I reckoned that a waste of three hours of my life was a waste of three hours of my life regardless of whether I got a piece of fucking paper during the ordeal. The only thing seeing my Sister get those awards did was make me shiver at the thought of how she'd probably be a better actor than me when she started doing drama next year.

When it came to acting like she had no money so my parents would give her more, she was definitely one of the greats.

It seemed to be my lot in life to be second-best back then.

I debated pointing out the inanity of the entire situation, but I reminded myself that they'd been on the warpath since this morning. A nice, rational discussion wasn't possible at this point. Logic and reason were out to lunch. Worse actually. Logic and reason had hooked up, robbed a bank, and skipped town with luck as the getaway driver while I'd been asleep last night. Because of that, I was left absolutely destitute of any original retorts I could use in this situation.

Back to my usual reply it was then...

'Well, I'm *very sorry* that I can't be my sister.' I sighed wearily before giving a bit of an eyeroll.

Their faces brightened up a touch and their formerly furrowed brows returned to neutrality the moment they heard it.

I grumbled inwardly to myself. Wrong move ha-ha.

'Maybe one day, I'll find a way to clone her so then you'll have two of her to balance out having one of me if you're *that* aggrieved by my existence,' I added.

Now it was their turn to wonder how to reply, although I think it was because they didn't know what "aggrieved" meant rather than due to dumbfoundedness.

I sighed. 'Listen, I get the point. I'll make sure to get an A by the end of the semester,' I explained, wanting to end this conversation ASAP.

'Don't make promises you can't keep,' said my parents in unison.

'Yeah well, you said that last year when we had this exact same conversation and look what ended happening,' I refuted.

I ended up topping the class for term two test in year six.

Now that was a good day.

My parents folded their arms and gave me a glare that would've stripped the paint off me if I were a wall or car. An even longer and tenser silence than the one before ensued. I wondered what they'd try saying or doing next. They might choose to hit me again but I'd already copped that no problem. Threaten to kick me out maybe? I used to believe they'd actually do it back when I was like five years old.

By now though, I had the good sense to realise legally that wasn't an option for them. Neither was putting me up for adoption, and they were too stingy to send me off to a boarding school. Unfortunately, as I got older, being kicked out became a very real threat, especially when I started doing shit that was actually wrong. But once again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

‘Get out of here,’ said my Mother, finally breaking the silence.
She pointed towards the hallway beyond the kitchen.

Wait what?

Oh.

She wanted me to go back to my room.

They’d been reduced to telling me to go back to my room.

I **never** thought I’d see the day. I guffawed in disbelief that my parents, of all people, had just told me to go back to my room. I’d been expecting them to beat my fucking ass. That always seemed to be their preferred alternative to, God forbid, admitting that they had no ammo. But hell, I wasn’t going to complain.

I spun around and walked away, planning to hightail it back to my room ASAP. After only a few steps however, I couldn’t stop laughing. The dam had burst, and the sheer absurdity of the situation was flooding into my brain.

‘Don’t you dare laugh at us like that!’ yelled my Father.

This only confirmed to me that, as they say in the industry, they had nothing up their sleeve. He may as well have shown his hand and given me the winnings.

‘You might wanna read the rest of the report card!’ I exclaimed as I hightailed it away.

As the unlucky sort of kid, I shared a single room with my siblings. My little Sister had gone off to have a sleepover with her friends that evening, leaving only my little Brother and I to occupy it. I shared a bunk bed with him and I got the top bunk of, befitting my status as king of the room. The little boy himself was sleeping soundly on the bottom bunk, entirely unaware of the commotion outside. He looked so peaceful and innocent when he slept. Secretly, I pitied him.

There was a moment of perfect calm and silence in the house followed by prolonged and indistinct cursing as my parents decided to take my advice. If they hadn’t blown the fuck up at me immediately, then they might’ve been able to see much earlier on that overall, my report card wasn’t too bad. A lot of people have told me that it’s a good thing my parents have always been so supportive of academics. Yeah, well, I’d just like to say that what just happened is *exactly* the sort of “support” that I’ve gotten from them over the years.

Real conducive to a passion for learning, right?

I smiled to myself as I sat on the part of my mattress that met the

ladder of the bunk bed. I stared at the wall and wondered how I'd gotten into this mess in the first place. Given how the day had started out though, it was hardly surprising that events had unfolded like this.

'You're going to get a real hiding when you come back with your report card today,' my Father told me that morning before he left for work.

Shit.

The moment he'd said that I felt my heart plunge. This was shame because I'd been having an alright morning so far. School was gonna be out for the term by three o'clock, the weather was good, and we weren't really gonna be doing anything that day. Watching a vaguely educational movie, having free "reading" time, and a sausage sizzle for lunch didn't really count as class. Holiday wise, I'd have a few days of well-deserved R and R over the Easter weekend, even with tutoring and the looming terror of my high school entrance exam to deal with.

However, I'd momentarily forgotten that reports were out today. My Father's reminder of that brought me back to reality real fucking quick. But hey, my report had to be good enough, right? Well, the problem was that good enough was not *good enough* to cut it. As much as I wanted to tell myself my parents were talking shit, the threat of falling *just* short of their demands loomed over me like some shadowy predator. I spent the next two hours dreading the moment when I'd have to find out if my Father was right. It was about ten o'clock and I was sitting at my desk in the third row of my classroom when Ms Ryan told the class to come up and get our test scores and report cards for the term.

'I'm sure you're all eager to start on your holidays, so if you can all line up from A to Z, we'll get your marks sorted,' she announced.

She smiled and pointed at the two stacks of papers she had in front of her.

A part of me wanted to stay glued to my seat and not look at either of the damned things but that wouldn't do me any good. In front of me, I saw Bree Nakayama practically burst with excitement at what to her was the great news. Bree was a bit like my Sister in that she was a girl of many talents, all of which eclipsed what few I had of my own. We'd met under fairly normal circumstances back in preschool. She quickly found out that I was the only other person at this age who gave a damn about their marks (however unwillingly) and we'd become friends after more than a bit of prodding on her part.

Difference between us was that she *wanted* to get into a good high school while I'd never had a choice. She needed to do well academically for that to happen, so she was always eager for crunch time so she could see how she was tracking along.

Secretly, I wished I could be as excited and certain as she was. I wasn't sure if I'd still be alive by the end of the day. I was on a short leash that'd become a choke collar if I wasn't careful. And so, it was with great reluctance that I forced myself out of my seat to go and see what the damage was. I was the only *M* in the class, so the person behind me in line had been Bree all year because she was the only *N*.

'Hey Cooper, are you excited?' she asked.

She drew out the middle of my name as she always did. *Coooooper*.

'You know, if anyone else asked me that, I'd assume that they were referring to the holidays...' I said.

'Yeah, you know me way too well,' she giggled. 'Seriously though, are you?'

'Well, *excited* isn't the exact word I'd use but yeah, I'm ... *measuredly* eager to find out.'

'Aw, you sound worried. I'm sure it'll be fine,' she beamed, putting her arm on my shoulder.

Somehow, I didn't share her enthusiasm or optimism...

Amy Adams was first up, so I had ages until I got my results and that only worsened my already dire mood. Most people didn't even bother to look at their results. They just dumped them on their desk and went on with their day. I wished that I could afford to do that. Slowly but surely, the moment of truth for me edged closer and closer. Kent Bradley, Jaiden Cannon, Christine Gold. Their names and all those in-between entered my head as they received their marks. Eventually, Michael Kingston got his and he seemed happy enough to let me have my turn.

'Congratulations, Cooper!' said Ms Ryan as she handed me both pieces of paper.

I frowned and squeezed my brow with no small amount of force when I saw the mark on the front of my test. Welp, there was the entirety of my Friday night down the gurgler. B+ for Knowledge, B+ for Problem-Solving, A- for Communication. I had a look inside and found that I'd made a few basic errors that'd cost me the A.

Two plus two was not fucking five, dammit. I was fucking livid. I

already knew what was on the inside of my report card, but I decided to check anyway and saw the B staring me right in the face. The comments weren't too bad, but I knew that wasn't going to help me because they weren't going to be read.

'What's wrong? You scored the highest in the class,' asked Ms Ryan.

She frowned and peered at me in concern from behind the stack of report cards she was still yet to give out.

I sighed.

'You must've been aiming for an A then? You're such a hard worker. It was a very hard test for your age and year level, so don't feel too bad about it. There's always next time!' she said after a few moments.

'Frankly, I'd be happy with the barest of C's, Miss. It's my parents that wanted me to get an A,' I said.

'I'll be sure to explain to them that you still ranked the highest in the class at parent-teacher interviews. Don't you worry!'

'Thank you...'

That was another three weeks away, so her saying that was cold fucking comfort to me. The damage was already done. I gave the rest of the report a look, but it failed to make me feel any better. I gave Ms Ryan the test paper back in disgust and kept my report and stepped aside to let Bree accept her marks. She'd probably gotten a triple A plus or something, knowing her. I gazed out the window and wondered how I was going to play this. Knowing my Mother, she'd make me wait until my Father was home and he often worked late so it'd probably be at least nine until the moment of truth happened. Fuck, why did everything in my life have to be such a prolonged, hostile ordeal? It was getting hard to remember the last time I didn't have something to worry about.

I was jolted out of my ruminations when I heard the sound of loud complaining from behind me. Bree was distressed, using phrases like "Oh no!" and "That's impossible!"

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Ryan, 'I tried to fight for your mark to be bumped up, but I couldn't get it past the Head of Department. I hope you're not too disappointed.'

Bree's bottom lip was curled over in intense disappointment. She really didn't really have a face for sadness. The worst she got was a sulky frown where others would've looked distraught. Still, it was quite a marked contrast from her usual peppy self.

'It's alright, Ms Ryan. I only got a mark less than Cooper and he's

a real egghead,' she said, after taking a long moment to regain her composure.

She forced a smile and joined me over near the whiteboard where I was standing.

'I can't believe no one in this class got an A. Me and you were *so* close though,' grumbled Bree.

'Yeah well, it really doesn't matter for anyone *except* for you and me and even then, we'll bounce back,' I said.

'You don't sound too sure about that,' she said, frowning again.

I frowned back. 'No, I'm not. I'm going to have a repeat of what happened last year. Takes me a bit to get in the game and I'm always made to pay for it in one way or another.'

'Jeez, that sucks... Just say you can do the same thing that you did last year then. Top the class on the next test and stuff. Aren't your parents happy about that?'

'No. Apparently it was expected of me.'

'Oh...'

'Yup.'

That conversation entirely failed to lift either of our spirits, and we were left quite depressed for the rest of the morning. Not that Bree had too much to worry about. Any consequences in her case were strictly self-imposed. She was the sort of girl who was already entertaining thoughts of going to uni and shit. Her parents would give her nothing but encouragement and support to do better next time. In my case, consequences were going to be imposed on me unnecessarily by my parents. I'd get plenty of "encouragement" from them too, but not the sort I wanted or needed.

Support, in the emotional sense, was a foreign word to me.

I did nothing but get tenser and tenser as the day went on. My heart was this twisted ball of stress and nerves that absolutely refused to return to its normal pace. I was twitchy and fidgety, like I was readying myself to escape from some encroaching threat lurking on the horizon. Yet wherever I looked, I couldn't find any tangible trace of its presence. I was too much of a fool to realise it at the time, but that was just my physical stress response firing off in anticipation of pain. As much as I'd have liked to just stalwartly cop it on the chin and deny them the satisfaction of seeing me squirm, the very real risk of an ass whooping

from my parents had me ready to take off so fast you could see sparks come off my heels.

Talking to Tom during lunch didn't improve my mood either. We met in our usual place near the senior port racks and next to the stairs for lunch. It was out of the way and afforded some shade, even on the hottest of days. We'd chosen this spot because Tom had lost his hat ages ago. Even though his parents could've bought all the hats at the uniform shop easy he still hadn't gotten around to asking them to get a new one. With no hat, there was a no play rule at the school. You had to stay undercover and away from the oval, hence why we were here for the whole lunch break every day. *I* still had a hat and could go wherever I wanted, but I hadn't done that in a long time.

The best part about this spot though was that we couldn't be overheard by teachers or more importantly, tattletales. Most of those sorts spent their time on the oval following the teachers around on duty. It amuses me in hindsight how easy it was to tell who'd become a prefect in high school. A proclivity for telling on others for swearing was a sure sign that a person would one day become a serial brownnoser. This only made the privacy afforded by this spot all the more important because I'd long ago told the taboo on swearing to go fuck itself.

'Oi, how'd you go?' I asked.

We sat down on the old bench that'd been moved there to make space for the new bubblers in the courtyard.

'How'd I go on what?' he wondered, like he didn't know what I was talking about.

I stared at him in confusion before realising he was as puzzled as I was. 'On your fucking report card, cunt. What the fuck else would I be talking about?' I laughed in exasperation.

'Oh yeah. I didn't really have a look at it. Probably got the usual. Ms Andrews said I almost failed maths but,' he said, finally arriving on the same page as me.

He pulled out his report and read it with more nonchalance than I would've if I'd had the same one. 'C, C, C, C. Whoops I failed drama, art and music. Another C for Comp Ed. Whoops, also failed HPE,' he said.

He laughed as he put it back in his bag and started on his lunch. I'd have been lucky not be decapitated if I'd brought home a report card like that. The Arts were definitely not Tom's strong points nor

was getting up off his lazy ass to get some exercise during HPE. I'd managed to pass Music, Art, and HPE at least and had even scored an A in Drama.

'Fuck it, doesn't matter. Holidays are here already,' Tom declared.

Crumbs and peanut butter caked his face and threatened to spill out of his maw. I saw a few bits of his lunch fall directly onto the floor too, but Tom didn't care or notice.

'Keen to head down to the coast soon and spend some time at my better house at the beach. It's been ages since we've been there,' said Tom.

He finished his first sandwich and started to attack his other one.

A bit of an aside, but it amazed me that Tom's parents, despite being loaded to all hell, sent their precious little boy to a public school. Although, not sending him to a private school might've been exactly why they were still loaded. A private school education around these parts cost a ransom and a half, or so I'd heard from my parents. Also, at a private school, he couldn't have fucked around nearly as much as he did here. In fact, his report card would've been grounds for expulsion anywhere aside from here. Once again, I was reminded of what would happen that night and my appetite became less than large.

I finished my sandwiches but left my fruit and snack bar uneaten. I ended up giving them to Tom because if I'd brought them back home, I'd have copped a hiding for wasting food too. Fucking hell, I was the only one in my grade who was going to face any real consequences tonight and it fucking rankled. All of today there'd been holiday talk to the point of utter obnoxiousness. Hell, before lunch time during third period, Ms Ryan made us tell the person next to us what our holiday plans were in an effort to pad out the class.

'I'm garn to *Disneyland* and seeing my grandparents and stuff. It'll be sick as!' said Michael Kingston. 'What are you doing, Cooper?'

'I'm probably not going to leave the house unless I absolutely have to for the next two weeks. A lot of study to do, but not by choice,' I said.

'Oh yeah that's right, you're leaving at the end of the year. It's gonna be weird without you around, dude.'

'Yeah, it's gonna suck not seeing all you guys around, but we all have to follow our own paths in life...' I lied.

I tried to steer the conversation back onto what Michael would be doing over his holidays after that. I didn't want to think about what was to come next year. We were then told that we had to talk to the

person in front of us about the same damned thing too. Thankfully for me, that person was Bree, and I didn't need to explain my current situation to her.

'Going back to the motherland for a week or two?' I asked.

'Sure am, it'll be great! My aunt just got engaged so we're going over for this engagement thing. I get to wear this *amazing* dress and get all made up for the night. I'm so excited!' she beamed.

'Sounds like a fun time.' I'd rather have been shot than do any of that, but I kept that to myself.

'I just saw my mum's family last summer but I'm real close with them, so it always feels like ages between trips.'

I hadn't seen my extended family in ages. The longer I went without seeing them the better I felt.

Shit, it was my turn now to tell her what I'd be doing these holidays.

Christ, did I really have to?

'I hope you don't have to work too hard this Easter, Cooper. Take some time out and relax!' she said, already knowing exactly what I was going to say.

We'd known each other for ages, so her doing that wasn't exactly surprising. I was sounding more and more like an old fucking man these days. As a result, later that day at lunch time when I was talking with Tom, I chose to keep the conversation focused on the topic of his holidays.

'Sounds like it'll be pretty chill. Hope you have fun, bro,' I said.

'It'll be *so* good dude. Shame you can't come with,' said Tom, just a little forlornly.

'Well, you know Tom; I've got to be *responsible* and think about my future and all. Sacrifice my happiness now to succeed later in life...' At this rate, I'd have happiness neither then, nor now.

'Well, once you get into that high school that they keep banging on about they'll probably ease off, right?'

'Fuck, I sure hope so.'

The idea of my parents doing anything other than stepping up the heat until my blood boiled was ludicrous to me. I spent the rest of the lunch time with the thought of what was coming in the back of my head and it only got worse as I neared zero hour. Fourth period ticked away and by the time the bell rang, I was well and truly over it.

I picked up my Brother and Sister from their classrooms that day and

felt nothing but disdain for them. When I got to my Sister's classroom, I saw that like always, she was engrossed in a conversation with one of her friends that she absolutely refused to cut short. I'd tried to drag her away last time, but she always walked back into the classroom to continue yammering on. So unfortunately, I had to wait as ten fruitless minutes ticked away on the school clock in the far corner.

'Oh. Hey,' my Sister said once she decided to acknowledge my presence.

'Oi, come on, we're already late to pick up Percy, thanks to you,' I said. I shot her friend a furious scowl and her friend's eyebrows almost took off her forehead as our eyes met for a tense moment.

'Alright, alright!' whined my Sister.

'Oh sorry, I have to go now. Bye Meagan!' her friend said hastily. She scooped up her bag and ran out the door before I could glare at her any further.

'Now look what you've done, you scared her off. I still needed to tell her stuff,' my Sister snivelled.

'Don't try to deflect the blame. Get your bag and go!' I snapped.

She muttered something under her breath about how I was a prick, but I was beyond caring.

Thankfully, my little Brother was much easier to pick up. He always looked vaguely scared as he waited for me there near his classroom like he thought I might not pick him up and leave him stranded one day. He was a fairly portly in those days and his ears were too big for him, so he looked like a chubby little monkey as he clumsily ran over to greet us. I forced a bit of a smile but I didn't find him so adorable at the moment. His stumpy little legs meant it'd be ages until we got home. I wanted to be fresh-ish for when I finally had to face the music, so his slow pace was inordinately irritating. Still, he was a quiet enough kid, and I didn't have to trade any conversation with him on the walk home.

Whereas my anger at the situation was hidden behind my usual irritation with the school day, my Sister was entirely content with the day's events. I knew from her blissfully smiling face that she'd gotten straight-A's or close enough. It seemed to be a lose-lose situation with her. There was no guarantee that beating her at her own game would stop the comparisons. My parents would just find another person, probably one of their workmate's kids, to compare me to in all likelihood.

On the other hand, if I could go even a day without being compared to her, I'd be a happy bloke.

Choices, choices, choices...

My Mother got home from work around four and by five, finally had a chance to sit down for a bit. She wasn't going to be in a better mood than then, so I decided it was time to show her the report card.

'I got my report card today. Don't know whether the other two have given you theirs, but here's mine,' I said.

'I've got things to do. I'll have to look later. Put it down on your dad's desk for now,' she said.

She smiled this utterly false smile and stared me dead in the eyes like she was trying to pierce my soul. We both knew what was up here and as usual, she was trying to make things harder for me than they needed to be.

I'd expected this to happen. She always waited until my Father got back home so she could have the extra back up when it came to slapping me up in the head. It was with that realisation that I came to accept this was all an inevitability now. It'd happened plenty of times before, so the same rules applied here like they did every other time. I'd proven them wrong on every occasion so far, so all I could do was cop the heat and do it all over again.

'Cooper, come here!' said my Father once he'd had a chance to look at my report.

There was nothing else I could do so I was just going to have to go in there and stone wall them until they got as sick of it as I was.

And so, I had.