

The Party - Chapter One

A trap is sprung and doors vanish

Now this was awkward. Very awkward and unexpected and uncomfortable. That they should arrive back at the same spot surprised every one of them

The early evening mist hung about them in lazy shreds and brought with it a silence that held them all bemused. True, they knew that Kenny had a massive garden, but when they had set out – headstrong and defiant to be alone – they couldn't have imagined that each path they had separately taken would lead them to this self-same place. And that it would be such an enthralling place.

They had been banished from the party, told by some unknown parent to cool off, and “to come back when you've civil tongues in your heads”. Thrown out into the dusky back garden, they silently ignored their fellow outcasts, looking instead to find a way of saving face. And the garden had presented the perfect opportunity to pretend that whatever conflict had just blown up was absolutely nothing to do with them.

But their separate paths had all led here. A shallow bowl of a clearing, in which sat a fragile and oddly old-fashioned cottage. It appeared completely unremarkable; if a cottage with a thatched roof and roses around the door in your friend's back garden could be called unremarkable. Of all the mysteries that Kenny's garden had promised, this had to be the most unexpected. But to have to share this wonder with their new enemies, people that they had been quite fond of until that little scene of unpleasantness indoors – that was a cruel twist.

It was hard to remember what they had fallen out about. Tom had dropped them all it by an exaggerated report to an over-zealous adult at the party about a spill on the carpet that was not doubt now a definite stain. His version of events had almost nothing to do with Emily's spiteful stirring, Gerald's aggressive pushing, or Rosie's maddening indifference. They had appealed to Rosie's judgement and honesty as the eldest, but she had decided at that point to ignore them. Things had become heated, out of control. So much for brothers and sisters, so much for blood!

And now there was the problem of Kenny's garden, a place none of them had explored before, but which lay before them in the beckoning twilight gloom. In secret shades of blue and grey it revealed itself to be quite vast, dark and mysterious. But now – with brothers and sisters still itching for a fight and looking to pile the blame on the slowest thinker (probably Gerald) or the weakest (Tom) – now wasn't the time for weakness or truce. The light above the backdoor travelled as far as the shadowed paths that seemed to lead in every direction – but no further – and the coloured lights and loud music still throbbed through the kitchen blinds. The party sounded good, it was good, but they were out here, tarnished with the same crime, fighting growing resentment with every silent and blame-laden second.

Gerald was the first to stomp away from the patio, swinging his legs like a moody horse and kicking out aimlessly at whatever undergrowth was foolish enough to get in his way. "How like him", thought Rosie, "to pick a fight with a formidable weed". She smiled to herself, content in her judgements as his heavy clatter brought some relief from the tension, but showed the remaining three to lack his mettle and determination. Rosie was the next to move, in that way she had, swanning off with the genuine appearance of being utterly content and alone and happy in her continuing private thoughts. Emily, fearing that the best discoveries and sanctuaries would soon belong to her older brother and sister then bounded noisily away into the undergrowth like a startled animal, leaving little Tom, the cause of their banishment, silent and alone, breathing hard in his isolation.

Tom had only spoken his version of the truth, but being the youngest he was most readily heaped with the blame. True, he did enjoy imparting bad news, and seeing how people could end up in trouble thanks to his well chosen words, but now he was alone in a strange back garden, without an audience and completely harmless. None of them would welcome his company as each would have a special and different resentment growing towards him (indeed adding to those resentments nourished and carried around against the young brother who could do no wrong and got away with everything) – because these things always ended up being his fault. Tom stared hard at the ground, wondering how the faint and unfamiliar light made the plants and patches of scrubby grass seem odd and strange. He also wondered who to follow. But no one appeared a safer haven than the others, and perhaps a gamble and a risk would be better. Tom liked putting his life in the hands of forces he couldn't really understand – but only when his mind itself was reluctant to make a decision or the outcomes were equally pleasing or bad. He tried his best to overlook the paths taken by his brother and sisters, and ignoring the faint muffled sounds of their own private journeys (that travelled back to him like primitive sonar) he resolved to pick a random route. His eyes travelled to the trees.

Now alone and gazing at the cottage in front of him, Tom felt decidedly odd, because he hadn't walked anywhere at all. Trying to see beyond the trees he had just sat down on the damp and loamy earth once his brother and sisters had fled and his mind had wandered. And now they had all, somehow, returned to him. They had come from odd directions, still fuming or indifferent or whatever mood had possessed them, but arrived at exactly the same startled and surprised moment. They grudgingly acknowledged each other briefly before noticing the cottage in the clearing. Tom alone knew he hadn't moved – or thought he hadn't moved – while the others looked at the cottage as if it was a discovery, not something odd that hadn't been there a moment ago (one of those concrete facts Tom had but was afraid to share). The other children stared in

rapt amazement at the cottage before them, giving Tom time to check some of his facts, to take stock of his sanity. He knew he hadn't moved, but the cottage in front of him argued otherwise. But, he could prove he hadn't moved, because the house and party and kitchen (now silent he noticed with a sinking heart) were right behind him. He whipped around to check his growing panic. But there was nothing to see. He had stayed still while the world had been shuffled around him. His sanity had taken a hit.

Tom's distress was palpable but completely ignored by Gerald, Rosie and Emily because the cottage was utterly fascinating. Reunited, their concern about having to be near one another was soon overcome as they huddled together in shared curiosity of this little, outlandish building. Tom looked from one to another hoping for some window of aid or sympathy but they were utterly held by this odd building. And try as he might, Tom couldn't resist its pull either. Soon the oddness of his situation became eclipsed as the shared fascination spread like a fog among the gathered children.

You could call it a bungalow, but its roof (steeply pitched) and leaded windows (mildewed and murky) made it seem otherworldly. There was a chimney pot lazily breathing a sweet, piny smoke that mingled with the mist that had sleep on its mind. The low front door had small glass panes at the top, which showed lights glowing inside, and was flanked on either side by windows that murmured mystery. A neglected path led up to the door, through a garden that had seen better days but was charming none the less, with flowers of outlandish size and heady scent. The fact that the only plants Gerald could name were dandelions was less to do with the state of the garden, and more to do with his limited horticultural knowledge. Each child (Tom included) was held, hushed and dumb, in the grip of a mysterious and beguiling illusion; this improbability that drew them close in the wonder of a shared and magical instant.

Their curiosity and excitement was being fed by all their senses at once, because each child heard honeyed, whispered words, almost-silent phrases drifting into their heads, which spoke to

each child as they longed to be spoken to, breathing promises they had longed to hear.

Fascination was overcoming caution, what was in reality the common sense their dad had spent so long drumming into their growing minds. Each was aware of a unique and beautiful melody of seduction, and each felt a guilty, secret thrill as they fell deeper into the mesmeric trap.

Of course the whole scene before them was ridiculous, but reason (like Tom's sanity) had been suspended. The late summer sun had all but gone, and they could feel the chill night air biting at party outfits designed for the heat of the hearth not the damp of gathering dusk. Despite this, the evidence of sense and reason, of goose-bump and frosty breath, the cottage was lit up by the richest honey-glowed sunset-light that any of them had ever seen. And what was more, it didn't appear to be bouncing off the flint and stone walls, but actually seeping through the mortar, swelling the building with light, perfume, sweetness and warmth. It was as if the sun had been soaked into the building – and a sun of such generosity – and now washed over them like a warm tide.

The Maddox children were not flighty or easily deceived. Even Tom as the youngest regarded the world with a cool intelligence that considered everything it encountered against a bank of previous, and not always pleasurable, experiences. As a result, much of what he came across was discarded as either true but grown up (the adult world was one of mystery and confusion so that category contained much that would need to be dealt with later); or a total lie. This solid realism came from his parents, and each child contained the core of this sceptical philosophy to some degree or other.

But just for now, with that delicious smoke and welcoming light, those half-heard promises and its boundless mystery, the little house was utterly accepted as real and genuine and good. Even Tom's hold on the facts was becoming shaky in the light of the illusion he faced. And if the cottage promised them such hidden pleasures, it meant that they now had to consider what to do. One amongst them could easily say they couldn't go back (Tom was perhaps having the hardest

time accepting the deception, his mind jolting against the knowledge that he hadn't moved and that the party had completely vanished). There was a problem with anything he said, in that it would be treated with complete scepticism. Being youngest held sway over parents and teachers, who could glimpse an eternal cuteness in his eyes, but with older brothers and sisters, he was most certainly at the bottom of the pile. Indeed he was hoarse from crying wolf. And against the promise of a magical cottage, a fairy tale come true? – he doubted he would even listen to what remained of his reason. Rosie and Gerald would decide what to do; they would know and they would lead. And if it all went wrong, he could lay the blame on older, broader shoulders. Big brothers and sisters did have their uses after all.

The back door opened and Kenny's dad called into the hazy grey of the garden. The cake was about to be cut, and the children's crime didn't warrant exile for the whole evening (in fact the stain had been diligently removed with detergent and elbow grease). There was no response, so he called again. "Maddox?" he shouted. As a retired Army Sergeant he had always called his son's friends by their surname, believing that in certain situations, such as this one, he could use one name for more than one child.

The Army voice was swallowed in the grey gloom, but not a single voice replied. Insects and birds settled in the trees.

He turned back into the kitchen to grab a coat, torch and the dog, and called to his wife, "The Maddox kids have chosen to play hide and seek. Great timing huh? Get them playing pass the parcel or something. I won't be long."

But Kenny's dad couldn't find them, and much later in the evening he too would be classed as officially missing. Parents and Police all searched and called, but the four children and Mr Phillips could not be found. It was a rather frightening end to a rather dull party, and Kenny, full of sugar and Lemonade swore that when they all returned, the Maddox children would never ever

be invited to another party of his. *And* that he would never again let his dog or his dad out of his sight.

“We’ll knock, just say hello and how much we like the house, and then go back to the party. Okay?” Most of Gerald’s questions seemed like commands, but this was different. Somehow they all felt as if they were being included in a decision, made party to something momentous. They smiled and nodded to each other, knowing secretly that their hearts would have fought against anyone that had counselled an alternative. The longer they spent thinking about this impossible cottage, the harder it became to be to turn away.

“Of course we shall. It’s rude to do anything else”, said Rosie. “But I shall knock and do the talking, if that’s all right? We don’t want to scare them with you lot, do we?” This altered mood was even working its magic on Rosie, who would usually have used much colder tones when dealing with her younger brothers and sister. It was as if their harder edges of were being worn away, a skin being lost to reveal a forgotten tenderness beneath.

The collective agreement passed like a secret between them, and they moved down the path towards the front door. They were walking two abreast, which again would have caused concern to a right thinking Maddox, especially one that had just been thrown out of a party because of its siblings. But they appeared to have little or no choice now about their actions. Even Tom, who contained the greatest capacity for fear, and had the firmest grounds for doubt and suspicion, was utterly won over by this apparition before them.

In the distance Emily thought she heard a name rustling in the shadows under the trees – behind the shuffling of birds and under the hiss of insects – but it was nothing next to the sweet lullabies in her head. So, ignoring it, she squeezed Tom’s hand all the tighter, not from fear but from joy.

Up close the building was even richer than they'd thought. The stones seemed to have lives of their own, each with its own radiant light and scent, and each stone murmured, urged and spoke to each child in turn. They simply had to look at different parts of the building to hear different voices and word and promises, to hear assurance and comfort and solace.

The roses around the door seemed perfect beyond measure, having delicate veins of icy white and purest gold that seemed both natural and wonderful to the children in this dreaming world. Furthermore, the glass in the windows refracted and made kaleidoscopic the opulence inside. As with the voices each child saw what they most desired – isolation, picture-books, toys, forgiving friends, games, abundant food, music, a mother's smile – whatever yearning surfaced in their heart was abundantly delivered in the glassy eyes of the cottage.

You would need to be free of enchantment and cold in heart and reason to see then what they did not as they neared the oak front door. For despite the fairy tale illusion, beneath the dream of a fantasy cottage, there was an air of decay and putrefaction barely masked by the mirage of hopes and happiness. The roses were really painted chips of wood fashioned into petals, and the plants in the border were fashioned from coloured card, wood and steel. What Gerald took for a dandelion was nothing more than the suggestion of such a thing, but enough to deceive and confound. The illusion was good, but imperfect, making a deal with the imagination and desire of the viewer – if you didn't look too closely, it was indeed something to fall in love with. The Maddox children would have had to have been jaded indeed to see such details through the fog of deceit.

Fully immersed in this world, absorbed by a creation that was theirs alone, they approached the door to find it slightly ajar, and Rosie, taking the lead eased it open on silent hinges. The entrance hall was panelled with dark stained wood that had high sconces' casting a nervous and jittery candlelight. The panels seemed old beyond knowing, and had distant images

swimming in their ancient grained surfaces. It was a cramped, square entrance lobby, containing only three doors (and the door they had all just entered through).

Now however, it seemed smaller still, containing four eager children with eyes wide and hearts racing. Each door led off in a compass direction (although none of them now had any sense of where North might be, or indeed what time of day it was) and without words or thought, Gerald silently opened the door directly ahead and stepped through.

The door swung closed behind him with a sigh. The sound was slight but also hollow and heavy. No one had spoken of such a thing, but it was now obvious to everyone that there was no chance of sharing a door with anybody else. The unity of purpose they had so recently won vanished the instant the doors had offered freedom from one another, the independence they always craved. Emily, desperate to have a choice, bolted to her immediate right, and burst through into what seemed like complete blackness. For a girl who still secretly feared the dark, this was out of character. But it was clear at last that no one was thinking anymore.

The hall now contained only the eldest and the youngest. Rosie, the old Rosie come back in her icy and aloof glory, looked at Tom as if he were a piece of furniture, glanced one last time at the doors that now hid her brother and sister, and then walked calmly through the door on the left. This door closed with a hoarse whisper, but Tom, alone and with fuddled senses, failed to catch the words he thought he heard. Had she spoken some parting insult? But then it hadn't sounded like her voice. It hadn't sounded like a human voice at all.

Tom quickly tried to think through his new isolation. He considered that on reflection he would feel safest with Gerald, and decided to risk his brothers' wrath and join him through the facing door. Resolved and yet timid, he gently pushed - nothing. The door that had been so welcoming now appeared barred and locked to Tom. However, knowing his brother, he suspected that Gerald had his weight completely against the other side, as evidence of his desire for solitude.

So he tried Emily's door next, preferring her moods to being ignored by Rosie. Again, there was no sound or movement. The door was shut fast.

Panic for the first time brushed Tom by the throat and he threw himself full force at Rosie's door, the most recent to open and his last hope. But still nothing happened. Tom flashed panicked eyes at all the doors and the blood flushed his burning cheeks. He started to thrash and crash around, wildly charging the doors at random; hoping that something would give and he wouldn't be left behind. His shoes squeaked and screamed on the wooden floor, but his effort and energy had no effect at all. His bursts of violent movement made small sounds that were soon swallowed and forgotten, unlike the echoing cacophony you would expect of a small boy in the middle of his worst tantrum ever. After less than a minute he collapsed to the floor, feeling bruises swell on his knees, elbows and shoulders, lungs bursting with hollow cries and gaping for breath.

His head swung between his knees as he tried to gather his wits. If they were all leaning against their doors, perhaps he only had to sit and wait quietly for them to begin exploring their enticing new surroundings. Then he could easily follow them through, once they had abandoned their defence of their doors. In his current state of mind he could think of nothing else. So he sat, slumped, and began counting the wooden parquet blocks that made up the floor while calming his breath and his mind. With his back against the closed front door, he tried to recall how he had ended up inside this strange building, and where exactly he was. To Tom it felt as if the mist in the garden had entered and flooded his head, where his thoughts and recollections struggled for air in the rising fog.

After some minutes had passed, and he had counted two hundred and forty five floor blocks, he thought he was calm enough and quiet enough to try the doors again. But when he looked up his heart leapt as his last hopes faded. The doors, that had promised everything (he couldn't remember exactly what) and through which he knew his brother and sisters had passed, were no longer visible. The wooden panelling covered the entire hall with no joints, chinks or

hinges. It was as if the wood, claiming back what was theirs by right, had united in opposition to the carpenter's crime, and the smooth grained chamber hall was testament to its rebellion.

Tom staggered to his feet feeling sick. His eyes still seemed clouded and he didn't trust them, so he ran his hands over the coffin-like interior of the entrance hall to confirm what his mind was reluctant to accept. Not a single hairline crack was apparent in the solid wooden space in which he was the sole occupant. Indeed, there was only one door left, and that was the one they had all entered through. The happy moment of adventure and discovery was an age away, as if he had read it in a book now long forgotten.

So he had no choice. He wasn't going to stay in this coffin, and he wasn't prepared to wait for the front door to disappear as well. He looked for one last time at where the doors had been. And the moment he did, he sincerely, and with his whole being, wished that he had not.

Where Rosie had disappeared, through that now solid wooden wall, there was now something moving, emerging in the fluid marbled grain of ancient and wise wood, teased into being in the flickering candle light. There were two letters, MR, crowning a sinuous and swirling image that had resolved itself into a portrait of Rosie at her worst, all snotty superiority and looking down her nose at something that you could almost swear smelt dreadful. This portrait was as much part of the panel as the rest of the grain, and appeared as if it had been there forever. Like a contour map the lines and features of his eldest sister's sneering face were finely picked out in shades of wood that so resembled Rosie, he felt a chill pass up his spine. How had he not seen this before? Indeed, Tom now couldn't recall if the door had borne such an image before she'd gone through it. Being the smallest and at the back of everything that had happened, he may simply have failed to notice, what with everything happening so quickly.

With a sense of dread he then registered two further portraits. Gerald had a grimace of anger on his face and was half turned away as if his hidden arm was raised and ready to throw a punch. His portrait had the letter XG embedded above. Finally, Emily's portrait was perhaps the

hardest to decipher. A kind of sick longing, an emptiness and spitefulness was in every curve and crease of her sneering face. Again, letters had appeared; this time LE.

Each panel (or hidden door) now contained on its smooth surface the fine lines and etchings of his lost brother and sisters. They didn't look scared or happy, alone or content. They glared down on Tom with all their faults apparent and immortal. As he turned in desperation from one to the next, he began to sense collusion and movement between the faces as if they were alive and delighted in seeing him abandoned, lost and madly terrified.

Hot tears pricked his eyes as the last shred of the deception slipped from his mind. He was abandoned, lost and frightened, and the most pressing thing he had to do now was escape this nightmare and somehow explain and find help. But that wasn't going to be easy, especially as with every passing second his hold on what were facts became more and more shaky, as fluid as the fearful family gallery around him. And his mind seemed determined to forget, to let the simplest facts slip and fall away.

Feeling a sense of purpose and ignoring any other possibility, Tom turned and burst out of the front door. He wasn't sure what to do next, but escape filled his mind and his limbs obeyed blindly. He didn't even register any pleasure that the front door was still just that (a real, functioning door). He simply bolted. And was outside again.

Help was nearer than he thought as he cannoned at full tilt into something or someone that suddenly collapsed, winded to the ground. Just then sound burst into life as his ears and eyes cleared of all confusion. There was a man laying stunned and unconscious on the earth before him, and a furious Labrador was snarling and barking and kicking up such a stink that help was certain to be here soon. By the light of the rising moon Tom surveyed his surroundings feeling once again in control. He stood up and looked at the man before him. Kenny's dad. Mr Phillips. And the families dog, Tess. This world he knew. Things might just be all right after all.

He was no longer alone, and hope flooded his mind. He felt as if some heroic destiny was opening up before him. With a fierce determination to do the right thing, he calmed the dog, and tried to rouse Mr Phillips. Never before had he managed to knock anybody, let alone an adult, unconscious. Then his confused recollections shifted and began to fall back into place, and he remembered his lost brother and sisters. He felt small and weak and foolish.

He turned slowly around to survey the cause and agent of all this madness and upset. With a sense of utter helplessness and incredulity he saw absolutely nothing. No door or house or planted garden – just a small clearing in Kenny's back garden that looked quite ordinary, even in the eerie light of the moon.

This was going to be harder than he could possibly imagine. And he wanted his mum.

He continued to shake Mr Phillips, and Tess ran in excited circles around them both. Help would be here soon; with that, Tom tried to comfort himself.

But help was not on its way.