## CHAPTER ONE

I first met Neil not long after my father died. I was living in a big old red-brick Victorian semi in north London with my mother and her vicious cat Sparky, trying and failing to finish a long, learned novel packed tight with the obscure literary allusions and authentic multicultural credentials that the publishers loved in those days. Then out of nowhere Neil rode into town, all bravado and muscles, shaved head and mad, staring eyes. He was still just a boy, really, but a boy with an ASBO at fourteen, a caution at fifteen, a spell in junior detention at sixteen and with a boy of his own by seventeen. He was a boy who was wild, dangerous and soft-hearted, a boy who read Nietzsche one minute and manga the next, a boy who wanted to learn everything, see everything, do everything, a boy who wanted to live more badly than anyone else I knew.

Compared to my own sad, shambling existence in the shadows of life, his was a kaleidoscope. I peeped from behind my mother's curtains at the world outside and wrote about people like Neil. I never believed that he really existed until I met him.

Here's how it happened. It was one of those long,

cold winter evenings in London, when the streets are slick with a rain you don't recall having fallen and the lights are an orange ball above you in the damp, black chill, fighting feebly against the night. Water hangs in the air with nowhere to go and as you brush against these tiny cold needles they stab your face, making you draw your hood closer about you. Long, dark alleyways harbour thieves and villains, furtive drug-dealers, nervous knife-wielders and young drunk couples rutting. Through it all runs the Holloway Road, a long straight road with dismal shuttered shops on either side, the gloom punctuated at infrequent intervals by the bright lights of a pub, kebab shop, curry house, burger joint. One or two of the old fish and chip shops remain, but they are relics of a time fast being forgotten.

A younger crowd roams the streets on these nights, ravenous for real red meat, big slabs of it slathered in ketchup and hot chilli sauce. Fish seems strangely genteel for such a crowd. Even an inch of grease and a side order of thick, stodgy chips cannot hide the slight effeminacy of the tender white fish that melts away at the first bite. The crowd on the Holloway Road these days wants meat that you can bite into, gristle that you can chew on, blood that you can wipe off your lower lip. It wants its beer cold, its curry hot, its lights bright and its music loud. Nothing luke-warm, nothing ambiguous for this crowd.

If you follow the long, straight Holloway Road far beyond the neon horizon, you'll end up in Scotland. It's hard to believe, but this drab parade of tawdriness is the Great North Road by another name. Before too long,

the Holloway Road becomes Archway Road, then Aylmer Road, Lyttelton Road, Falloden Way, then the Barnet Bypass and then you're out of the suburbs and into open countryside. Green fields and hedgerows flash past as you tick off the towns – Stevenage, Letchworth, Peterborough, Newark, Doncaster, Pontefract, Darlington, Durham.

Fight your way through the huge smoky grey sprawl of Newcastle and you then find yourself speeding along quiet open roads, close enough to the sea to smell the salt in the air and hear the seagulls cawing but never quite close enough to see that big grey frigid North Sea until suddenly you're past Berwick-upon-Tweed and hopping over the border into Scotland almost without realising it. And there is the sea in front of you - white-topped waves, freezing and forbidding, bordered by craggy crumbling cliffs. After only a few minutes the road turns away in disappointment and heads inland, cutting across open countryside to grand, regal old Edinburgh, with its magical castle suspended in the clouds above the city.

You skirt over the top of ancient Holyrood Park and, for the last few hundred yards of its existence, the A1 takes on the name of Waterloo Place, as if trying to reassert its Englishness one last time, reminding the burghers of this proud town that the A1 begins on Newgate Street in London, where Rob Roy himself was held in chains.

I was dreaming all these unconnected vague drunken dreams as I sat in a plastic box of light, sound and blood. Donna's Kebabs I think it was called and I was

taking refuge from the oppressive damp mist outside which had, after I'd spent some time walking up and down the Holloway Road, pierced the protective film of alcohol and got to my joints, making my elbows and knees ache arthritically. I sat huddled over a white foam box filled with grey-brown, glistening slices of meat, encased in pitta bread and doused in hot sauce, ketchup, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, red onion, white onion, cucumber, gherkins and olives. By the time Neil walked in I had left magical castles and folk heroes far behind and was pondering on the olives, a nice touch but not right. I admired the originality, but originality is not what you expect from a kebab house at midnight on the Holloway Road in the middle of November. You want something to fill your stomach with the expected greasy-sweet flavours. The sourness of the olives was a surprise and left me feeling somewhat dissatisfied.

Donna did not have any other customers that night - perhaps others felt the same about olives in a kebab - so I was surprised when this big, shaven-headed hulk of a man ignored all the empty tables and eased himself creaking into the little red plastic chair opposite me. His gruff "Dja mind?" was uttered far too late to admit any response but an impotent shrug.

For long minutes he said nothing, just attacked his extra large kebab as if he hadn't eaten for a month. I sat saying nothing, eating nothing. I couldn't. I got a sensation that was strange to me at the time but would soon become familiar: that Neil was doing enough living for the two of us, and there was nothing left for me to do but watch. Soon he had ketchup and chilli

sauce all over his stubbly chin, and bits of lettuce had flown all over the table, the floor, his jeans, his t-shirt. Whereas I had been eating my kebab using a small folded piece of pitta bread as an ersatz fork, Neil just shoved the whole bundle of meat, salad and sauce into his face and began chomping with his huge strong jaws. Slashing the food to pieces and somehow ending up with most of it in his mouth, he chewed only perfunctorily before gulping it loudly down and setting those chomping blades immediately to work again.

The noise was astonishing. The dull beat of the radio, the squealing roar of the traffic on Holloway Road, and the underlying buzz of the slowly rotating lump of grizzly meat in the window were all drowned out by the sound of Neil's bones crashing against each other, his saliva washing around among the sauce, ketchup and meat, his muscles working so hard that his temples pulsed furiously with each pincer-like motion of those powerful jaws. His face, already blood-red, became redder with each mouthful and, just as I was beginning to fear that he would choke, he put the remains of the kebab down, took a big slurp of Coke and belched softly.

"So whatcha doing tonight?" he asked. He looked like a child suddenly, all eager energy and bright eyes, waiting for the next amazing thing to come his way.

"I was looking for my friends," I replied. "I lost them somewhere back there." I gestured vaguely over my shoulder into the misty wet darkness, and Neil's eyes followed my arm faithfully, searching the night for people he'd never seen before.

"Can't you call them?" he asked. "Text them? Page them? Email them? IM them? Photograph yourself holding up a sign saying 'Where the fuck are you?' and send it to them? I mean, who loses people these days?"

I looked down at my kebab and picked up a small mouthful with my piece of pitta bread. "I don't have a mobile," I said awkwardly. Usually it was a sentence I pronounced with pride, as it portrayed one of my few truly distinguishing features. People would draw in their breath and regard me with awe, as one who had asserted his individuality and resisted the siren call of technology. But suddenly, that night, my lack of a mobile phone felt like what it really was, an affectation. To my relief and astonishment, Neil did not pass judgement one way or the other, just accepting it baldly as one more simple fact to add to his growing store of knowledge about the world around him.

"Well, if you can't find them, they've either gone home or gone to a club in the centre. Or they just don't want to be found," he said after a moment of intense concentration. "So here is what I propose. We'll finish our food here, and then go around the corner to the Dog's Head and talk to as many people as we can, until we find someone who's going to a party afterwards. Then we tag along and have the time of our lives. How's that sound? By the way, I'm Neil Blake."

"Jack Maertens," I replied, and Neil took that for assent to his plan of action, for he began attacking the rest of his kebab and motioned for me to do the same. I did, feeling a little sick a few minutes later as I lurched back out into the dark wet Holloway night and followed

Neil to the Dog's Head. It was a dive of the worst kind, so bad that I didn't want to go in until he told me patiently and seriously, as if talking to a slow child, that he had chosen it precisely for the reason of its awfulness, which would make anyone in it naturally keen to get out and on to somewhere better. He was soon proved right, too, as after only a half-hour or so of working that tight-packed smelly young crowd, he hit upon a group of students who were heading to a party up in Highgate. All he had to do was tell them a few jokes and buy a couple of rounds of drinks, which he left me to pay for, and suddenly we were on the night bus chugging up Highgate Hill, where a few hundred years ago Dick Whittington had heard the Bow Bells calling him back to fame and fortune in London, and where today middle-class families drive their huge snorting Landrovers up to huddle together in expensive refuge from the pulsating violent ugliness below.

For Neil and me that night, Highgate Hill was a place of cheap wine in plastic cups, vodka jelly, cheap cigarettes, expensive hashish from a reputable dealer on the Edgware Road, tequila slammers, half-grabbed kisses with a girl on a sofa, loud music, shouting and some attempts to dance.

By the time we left it was already morning and people in suits and raincoats were climbing sourly onto buses. The sun was still not up, though, and neither was my mother when I sneaked in and crept quietly to my room. What had happened to Neil I didn't know, but he must have followed me home because the next day, although I hadn't given him my address or phone

number, and was caught between relief and regret over it, I went downstairs and found him there - sitting in my mother's living room sipping a cup of tea, and chatting amiably with her about the beautiful bright yellow winter jasmine climbing across the walls of her garden.

Soon we were out again onto the Holloway Road, dodging cars and buses, and mingling with crazy throngs of shoppers as we hopped from pub to pub, our talk becoming more bizarre at each place until the orange glow of evening took hold and the shoppers on the street became drunks like us. After numerous pubs, Neil was able to finagle us into another party, this time in Hackney.

Almost every night and every day passed this way in the new period of my life where the morose brooding behind my mother's curtains suddenly gave way to a riotous drunken haze of colour and noise. If I felt any regret it was only because my novel was unwritten on my laptop and by the time I woke up each afternoon it was time to go out again. However, there was a slight, lingering feeling of being a hanger-on. At the parties we went to I knew nobody, and usually Neil didn't either. Yet soon he was virtually playing host, while I was merely being suffered as a necessary side-effect of Neil's irrepressible presence. I tried to introduce him to some of my friends, but he quickly tired of them while they just thought he was mad, and we left early from whatever gathering we had ruined.

As for Neil, he said he had no friends. Since leaving Feltham Young Offenders Institution he had drifted from town to town, making deep and intimate but not

lasting connections. He had more phone numbers than his mobile's memory could handle, but each of them was accompanied by a long and extravagant story about why he couldn't call because he owed the person money or a favour or had slept with his wife or stolen his car. So we sloped around north London from pub to pub and invited ourselves to parties with strangers.

Then, one day, Neil was gone. For several weeks I heard nothing until, just before Christmas, a battered postcard smudged with rain informed me that Cornwall in December was a truly beautiful place, full of crags and rocks, and monuments to people and gods nobody can remember anymore. He was staying in a friend's old cottage working his way quickly through a dusty old Cornish dictionary, he told me, as if he were remembering the ancient words rather than having to learn them anew. He had got as far as 'gwreg' ('wife'), but couldn't find anyone to teach him the correct pronunciations. So he was fumbling through, making up his own sounds and planning to get all the way through to z by New Year. He signed off 'Dha weles' without even putting his name.

Though who else could it be? The friends with whom I now spent my time, the collection of failed writers and 'mature students' who only a few weeks ago had been in my naïve young eyes the height of wit, erudition and wisdom, seemed like shades. None of them could have composed something so spontaneous and true as that smudged, creased old postcard. Its spidery black script streaked across the page, winding its way between the lines of the address and spilling over onto the bright

yellow sands and blue sea on the other side. I was gripped by it and wanted to jump into my old blue-green Nissan Figaro and burn down the M4 to spend Christmas with Neil, learning Cornish and drinking whisky in the rickety old fisherman's cottage with the fire crackling and the treacherous winds lashing the windowpanes. But I lacked the heart for it. Instead I toasted Christmas with sherry in my mother's living room with relatives who always made me feel dead.

New Year's Eve came around and I was feeling as lonely as the grave. I had been invited to a couple of parties but knew exactly what they would be like and had no interest in going. I fully intended to see the New Year in with my mother, using my desire for solitude as a pretext to be a good son for once and help her through what my vapid relatives had sententiously predicted would be a 'difficult time' for her. By ten o'clock, however, the canned laughter from the television was making me suicidal and I knew that my mother could see it because she offered to turn it off. I hastily declined and she looked relieved as I sped out of the door and into the cold dark night that was full of animal yelps and whoops.

I pulled the top down on my Figaro so I could hear all the roistering and perhaps let some of it rub off on my lonely soul. I drove down Hornsey Road into the madness of Holloway. But it did nothing for me. After driving up and down for some time, I parked in a side street and did something truly absurd. I went to Donna's Kebabs, ordered an extra large kebab with hot sauce and chomped down on it, watching the clock tick

down to midnight. All the time I fully expected Neil to come crashing in, full of ideas and enthusiasm, dragging me out of my solitude into some pulsating pit of desperate young drinkers trying to live just a little more before the end of the year.

Of course, nothing happened. Neil was buried in his Cornish dictionary, probably halfway through 'y', feverishly fighting his way to the end, and I was left with myself. It was another slow night for Donna's Kebabs – everyone with anywhere to go was somewhere else. Around midnight, the spotty young man who had been left in charge shuffled out from behind the counter with two cans of beer and set one before me, saying, "Don't tell anyone, yeah?"

Midnight came and went. We clinked cans. For the kebab boy, the fear of getting caught seemed to outweigh the pleasure of rebelling against Donna, and he looked constantly out of the window for the police, hardly talking to me. About ten minutes later, with his can still half-full, he went back behind the counter. I was bad company anyway and, to avoid getting Donna's Kebabs closed down over the worst, smallest, most dismal and depressing New Year's party in history, I took my beer out into the street. People were cheering as they swayed past in flush-cheeked groups, arms around each other, and several tried to gather me up and carry me along in their tide of celebration, but I resisted and broke free. Everything felt wrong, and all I could think about was that one more year had passed with my great literary novel still unwritten. I had wasted too many nights on the Holloway Road and too

many mornings lying in bed too sick and confused to do anything. My laptop brimmed with half-finished thoughts. Abandoned chapters littered the dark corners of its hard drive. It was taking longer and longer to start up in the mornings, evidence, the shop said, of a virus, but to me a symptom of the weight of hackneyed, cliché-ridden prose clogging its arteries. The more I wrote, the slower it ran, as if in protest at the poverty of my writing.

A few days later, in a grand New Year experiment, I tried taking a notebook to a café and writing there, as I had on long dreamy university days, but the process now felt foreign. My hand ached quickly, the dull characters in the café distracted me too easily, and writing even the simplest sentence seemed to require far too much effort. I realised that I could never have churned out so many megabytes of dross had I been forced to write longhand, or even to feed paper through an old-fashioned typewriter. At some point my body would have rebelled against the wasted effort, as it rebelled now in those cafés at every trite sentence that my tired brain formed. I went back to my room and let my fingers glide swiftly over the keys. Better to produce garbage than to produce nothing at all, the writing books always said. So for two months I cluttered my hard drive with more megabytes of ponderous, inelegant prose, all the while feeling like more of a fool.

So when Neil came racing into my mother's house one bright March morning, I embraced him as my saviour. He did look curiously messianic, standing there

in the hallway with the bright orange sun flooding in through the open door at his back. It made him almost glow around the edges as his bright brown eyes shone childlike and his thick face smiled broadly but serenely at me. He looked at once like a man who had discovered some important secret and like a child eager to discover a new one. Probably all this was in my head, a product of the months of despair and their sudden end in a blaze of glorious spring light. We hugged like old brothers, and my mother stood watching us in bemusement. She liked Neil for his polite talk of winter jasmine and for the simplicity and kindness that lay beneath all that loud masculine youth, laughter and energy, but she could sense that he was dangerous too. She knew he would leave again soon but that this time I would go with him, and she warned me before I left not to follow him everywhere he went.

"Keep your own mind, Jack," she said. "Don't let yourself be led anywhere you don't want to go."

I kissed her and said I'd be fine, and indeed at that time I felt stronger and more independent than at any time in my life; the idea of going anywhere I didn't want to was ridiculous and slightly hurtful. By that time Neil and I had spent a week or two exploring every pub, bar, club and kebab shop, curry house, chicken shack and burger joint on the Holloway Road, and were thoroughly sick of London and all its grey grimy misery. We'd even taken to trying the pubs around my mother's house in sedate little Crouch End, disturbing the faithful old dogs at the feet of the old men with their crossword in one hand, pipe in the other and their pint

of bitter half-drunk on the table in front of them.

We decided to cause some havoc to shake them out of their dead filmy-eyed smiling expressions and get them to put down their pipes and papers and express something, if only anger. But the first place we tried it, a tiny little place with net curtains on the window, a crackling fire and a leafy beer garden out back, nobody rose to the bait. We cursed loudly, danced and shouted and even took a swig of one old man's beer. But nobody said a word. The barman stared at us with an ambiguous expression on his face, and the customers just buried themselves in their crosswords, waiting for us to go away and leave them alone. We soon did, feeling so ashamed of the whole thing that we bought a round of beers for everyone before we left.

After that we got a bottle of whisky from an off-licence on Hornsey Road and went down the hill to dark dirty old Elthorne Park to sit among the sad old winos, to drink and smoke. Neither of us said very much, not even Neil, who usually only seemed to stop speaking to eat, sleep or kiss someone. I don't know what he was thinking, but I was thinking of my father, who had worked all his life in a government office up in the city and travelled home on the same train every night, always stopping on his way back from the station for a quick pint and a chat with his friends before coming home to dinner. I imagined how he would have looked at Neil and me if we'd interrupted his quiet pint one tired evening with foolish attempts to goad him, how he would have told the story later over dinner with a sad shake of his head.

"We must leave tomorrow," Neil said into the night. A couple of winos looked over; we'd been silent so long that they must have forgotten we were there.