

WEE MALKIE

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Chapter 1

Gerald called me a bastard again, and I nearly killed him. Serve him right.

I'd known all my life that I was. A bastard, I mean. I was born while mum was on a rebel/ hippy/ free love/ do your own thing kick. I'll swear dad was on some kind of drugs, though mum always denied it. Whenever he was high on cloud nine he was good fun, giggly and cheerful, what outsiders saw as normal. But even at three I knew to keep out of sight when he was down, which was most of the time; he was vicious and depressed, like a weasel with toothache. Mum couldn't protect me, he was too strong. She just cringed and told me to run for it if I could, or hide, usually in the cupboard under the kitchen sink. For some reason dad never thought to look in there. If he caught me, though, I was black and blue for days. Like mum. I was in hospital for broken ribs once, and Mum with a broken arm. Mum said she'd been papering, and I'd climbed up the ladder and she'd tried to catch me and we'd both fallen. Next time, when I lost three

teeth, mum says they looked suspicious, but she smiled charmingly, as she could, and it went no further. I was lucky, I suppose, that was the worst.

Then when I was about five dad quit on us. Maybe there was nothing left around to steal. He never got in touch. I didn't miss him, except with relief, and neither did mum after the first shock. About three years later we heard he was dead.

Anyway, mum was left with me and no visible means of support; her own parents died when she was just fourteen, and her only relative was a crazy old sister away in the wilds of Scotland somewhere. She was pretty and stylish, even on no money, with a kind of dreamy, delicate, vulnerable look, huge shadowy violet eyes surprising against her pale skin and dark hair, and kind of scatty – a real dizzy blonde, except that she was dark. Elfin, they call her.

I'm small and dark too, but nobody ever calls me elfin; more likely goblin. Okay, so I'm nobody's sweet angel. I was used to it. I just kept so quiet nobody noticed me. That suited me. Being noticed meant getting hurt.

Anyway, gatecrashing the party of a friend of a friend – you know how it is – mum met Walter Melford-Jarvikksen, who was an accountant, fair, definitely well-padded, posh and divorced, with an eleven-year-old

boy left on his hands and a small mouth plump under a soft, waffly moustache. So she married him, and discovered pretty soon why he was divorced. His name was about right; he really was a wally, a pompous oily prat, and sarky with it whenever he'd had a drink, even a sherry, which with business lunches and so on was a fair bit of the time. He treated her like a child, with no respect. And even less for me.

He disapproved of me, you see. Not just didn't like me, although he didn't. It was mutual. But he loathed the irregular way I'd come into mum's life, and so into his. Not that he ever said so – mustn't be intolerant, so uncool, not politically correct! But his tolerance was a mile obvious, and I hated it, and sulked and acted stupid because I felt so angry and guilty I couldn't think straight, and that gave him a real excuse to get at me.

Never vulgar or violent, Walter, give him that. Just mentally; patronising when he was nice and cutting when he wasn't. He sort of paralysed my mind till I always fell short of his precious 'normal behaviour', and then he'd poker up and sneer silently with his pousy little mouth, and get onto mum later for not bringing me up properly, and how her background had ruined me. She'd end up crying, and I felt like murder. Or suicide. Over and over, I did.

I once got up courage to ask mum to run away, but she said that he was a good man as he saw it, doing his best for me, paying a lot to put me through a good school, and it'd do me good in the end, blah, blah. I thought for a while that she was just glomming onto a good thing, but then I thought maybe she was scared to leave while I was still young, so it was my fault we stayed. It all made me so angry sometimes, my manners suffered, and I got into more trouble – talk about a vicious circle!

At least Walter didn't beat me up.

Gerry did that. My step-brother.

Gerald, that is. He hated being called Gerry, because he knew I was thinking 'Hitler'.

He wasn't a wally, not by a long shot, though he looked it in some lights. One of those yukky handsome glowing California-style golden boys. Well in with the teachers – and the girls. Such a nice young man, Gerald, old-fashioned, if you know what I mean? Top of the class in just about everything. Not even bad at sport – if you can call poncing about wagging a fencing foil a real sport. He didn't do team games – had to be out on his own. A whiz with computers, good at art, played the oboe, champion debater, open and friendly, upright and confident, lovely wavy gold hair, a cert

for Oxbridge, a proper gentleman, a credit to his father, what a pity Malcolm can't be like him!

Yeah. And he liked to tie me up on my bed and torture me, because he knew I wouldn't shout or tell, whatever he did. He was too big for me, well, at seventeen against thirteen what do you expect? But he never beat me, not that way.

And when he noticed me wince when he called me a bastard, he started saying the word as often as he could get away with – though about real baddies, not about me, of course, not in public. I tried not to cringe, tried to hide how much it hurt, but it was like rubbing your arm with a grater; it got worse every time, till I was always waiting for the stab, every second.

So the morning this story really started, I suppose, everything was perfectly ordinary, except that when I came out of the boys' bathroom Gerry was draped elegantly against my doorpost like a male model. I froze inside as usual, head down not to catch his eye. Stuff it, I'd forgotten to lock up! Something would be missing or damaged for sure. Last time Gerry had got in, next time I switched on my computer it had a virus that had moved absolutely everything one letter or number up, so that Malcolm became Nbm dpmn and $2 + 2 = 4$ became $3 + 3 = 5$.

Screamingly hilarious. It took a fortnight to fix, and I lost most of my games.

Humming something classical – he was one of those maddening people who wake up quick – he sneered round as I slid past him, eyes down. “What a pigsty! But that’s where you find bastard runts, isn’t it, Wee Malkie?” he murmured contemptuously, in that cut-glass accent the teachers loved. He’d recently found a poem called ‘The Wee Malkies’ about a Glasgow gang who destroyed everything, and because dad and mum were Scotch he’d started calling me after them.

“Yes, Gerry.”

Bad mistake. Stupid, stupid!

He glanced round fast to check we were alone, shut the door and grabbed me, twisting my arm up behind me till I couldn’t help grunting. “You’re not trying to be cheeky, are you, Wee Malkie? Mind your manners with me, you snotty little Scots bastard!” I ached to spoil that wide, charming grin he flashed so effectively – best orthodontists money can buy – but his arms were too long. Hate hate hurt hate hurt hate...

“Malcolm, Gerald! Breakfast’s on the table!” Mum called on the stair.

Breathing deep with satisfaction, he gave my arm a final twist and stepped back,

smoothing his hair and his voice. “Better get a move on, Wee Malkie. Don’t want to be late down. You know how it irritates my father.”

Not dad, or our father, you notice. Same as he never called mum anything but Beth.

He went out, humming happily. I eased my arm. No, I’d not cry, no way! It was the only way I could beat him, was keep quiet. At first I’d told mum and Wally, but they just didn’t believe that a polite, smiling, innocent-eyed twelve-year-old would beat a seven-year-old with his cricket bat, or rip up his books, or deliberately push him down stairs. It just caused more trouble for mum, so I stopped. I’d never tell, and Gerry knew it. Hate hate... In helpless frustration and fury I muttered all the words I’d learned at my new posh school.

But what could I do what could I do...

When I finally straggled down, Mum was busy feeding our little sister Amanda. “Hi, mum.”

“Hi, you!” She gave me a rather flustered peck on the cheek. “Eat up fast, you’re late down, sleep in?” She wasn’t really paying attention, it was just a pre-emptive scold, getting in before Walter did. “Amanda, sweetie, eat up your nice eggy for mummy!” Some landed on the floor. “Oh, dear!” Amanda giggled triumphantly.

“Hi, Mandy-Pandy!” I said. At least she loved me. “Good morning, Walter.”

Walter lowered the Guardian politely to say, “Mornin’, Malcolm!” in his plummy voice before he vanished again. Wasn’t reading the paper at breakfast bad manners? At least it kept him quiet and let me doze over my omelette and orange juice. Well, when my arm wasn’t sore I could. This morning I wasn’t hungry, but I had to pretend or they’d nag again. Everything just seemed to stoke up on me.

Amanda finished redecorating the kitchen with egg and wriggled to get down. In seconds she was squirming about under the table tickling our legs and jabbering away in scribble, twenty to the dozen. For not quite three, she knew some fancy words. “Here’s a hijjus tyrannus rex dinner-saur coming to chomp you to gobbles!” She bit my knee. I yelped, but before Walter could do his long-suffering act mum snaked her out like an octopus, wedged her in her high chair again and gave her a banana.

“Really, Beth, you spoil that child ridiculously!” But Walter peered over the top of the paper and smirked foolishly.

“Everybody loves Amanda,” Gerry commented, giving me a smile that said, ‘But not you, bastard!’

Hurt hate hate...

Mum looked startled and defensive. Gerry didn't often say nice things – as she saw it.

Amanda giggled and poked her banana at my face. “Wanna bit, Makkum?” I acted taking a huge bite and choking on it. She screamed with glee.

Gerry chuckled, pretending to tease in a relaxed, friendly way. “Proves that man really does descend from monkeys, doesn't it, Malcolm?” He smiled sweetly at my tight face. “Now, are you sure you've got everything ready for school? All today's books? Got your homework and everything? Your punishment exercise?”

I glowered. “You been in at my things again?”

“Me? Oh, Malcolm!” He was all injured innocence.

“Yeah, you! I've told you to keep out!” He was shaking his head sadly.

The Guardian rustled irritably. “Malcolm, you are paranoid!”

Mum sighed. “Honestly, Malcolm, Gerald wouldn't interfere with your things, or even go into your room –”

“With that enormous padlock and bolt he's put on, what chance would I have?”

“Ruined the woodwork!” Walter muttered automatically behind the paper. True enough, I'd used three-inch screws for security.

“As if I would anyway.”

I couldn't help it, he always made me so mad. “Oh, wouldn't you, you rotten pig!” Not loud, just a mutter, but Walter heard it.

“Malcolm!” The Guardian went down with a snap. “Gerald was only trying to help! Will you please stop insulting people! Really, Malcolm, I have never known anyone so paranoid! You slink about furtively, looking harmless, but whenever anybody speaks to you, you snarl and snap, lash out as if you were being attacked! You must stop this – this – I dislike slang as you well know, but the only word is aggro! Learn some self-control.”

He didn't know how hard I was self-controlling. I was desperate. This time, for sure, something would be wrong with my lines, and I'd need them first period for ferocious old Tinribs Ironsides. At least that seemed to have slipped past Walter. He went rabbiting on about sullen silence, untidiness, lack of appreciation for everything everybody did for me.

All I wanted was to be left alone, why wouldn't they all leave me alone?

“Please, father, it's all right.” Gerry finally stopped him, all smarmy. “Poor Malcolm can't help it. It's just his way.”

Mum was fluffing up, trying to get up her courage to defend me, but I had to keep her out of it. I gritted my teeth and said humbly

as usual, “Sorry, sorry, I’ll try to do better, honestly, sir.” She gave me a grateful look as Gerry beamed in triumph.

Whenever I was in trouble with Walter I’d get in a ‘sir’ and the pressure normally eased. This time, though, it didn’t work. “And what was that about a punishment exercise?” Stuff it, he had noticed. “Misbehaving at school as well as at home – really, Malcolm, your appalling attitude...”

At last he ran down. Mum started to clear the table. “Come on, boys. Malcolm, rinse off, please. Gerald, you stack the dishwasher.”

“Sure, Beth!” Gerry jumped up – couldn’t let me score merit points over him. “But can’t we leave them for the cleaner? I specially want to get in early today, I have to speak to Miss Chou about the school mag.” Naturally he was on the editorial committee.

Through the fog of resentment I saw my chance to shine, for once. Though my heart was racing with rage still, I chuckled. “We’ve time, Gerry, and Mrs Blackstone has enough to do.” Consideration for others, see? Like Walter wanted. He smiled, and so did mum, but Gerry’s eyes promised pain later. My insides twisted. What had got into me today? Hate hate...

While I rinsed the pans and plates, he started showing off, to keep me in my inferior

place, dramatising all over, giving us yards of Mark Antony, the part he was auditioning for – face it, the part he’d get – in ‘Julius Caesar’, the school play. Just as he got to ‘Oh, what a fall was there, my countrymen!’ I dropped a pan edge-on on his toes.

It was accidental, I didn’t mean to drop it, honest!

Well, sort of honest. My arm twinged, I lost my grip, the pan began to slip, and I didn’t try too hard to stop it. Face it, I didn’t try at all to stop it.

And I sort of organised the way it was going. Oh, what a fall...

“Yeow!” He hopped all over, most satisfactorily, while I picked up the pan. “You did that on purpose! And we’re fencing Harrow tomorrow, if it’s broken I’ll have to drop out – you – you –”

Then I saw his face change, and I knew what he was going to say before he said it. It was quite deliberate. He thought he had a good enough excuse to get away with it about me for once. He looked right at me, and he said coldly, “You little bastard!”

I hit him. With the heavy, copper-bottomed, non-stick omelette pan. And whether it was the sore toes, or the presence of mum and Wally restraining him, or the suddenness of the attack, or just all my pain and frustration and hateful, hating

misery finally exploding, for once I won. I battered him senseless.

He was lucky. I could have been holding a carving knife.

I'm only sorry I don't really remember any of it.

Next thing I actually know, Gerry was lying on the floor, groaning. The tiles were supposed to be blood-red, but they weren't, not exactly. His face was a joy, like a pound of stewing steak. Walter was dotting about, kneeling beside him, mopping at his face with a dishtowel, shaking me till my teeth rattled – I'd never believed that, but it's true – and shouting, "You've killed him, Beth phone an ambulance, Malcolm you're insane, call a doctor, call the police Beth, I'll have you imprisoned, in a mental institution!" I'd never seen him so upset, but he still didn't say jailed or in a loony-bin.

And then I heard Amanda screaming. Mum was white as a sheet, her eyes huge and dark and horrified. She was holding my little sister; and blood was pouring down Amanda's face. "You hit her!" mum whispered. "You hit your little sister! You could have killed her!"

"I didn't know she was out of her chair! I didn't know I'd hit her! Mum!" My guts were roiling inside me, with a flood of sheer terror. "Mum, I'm sorry – I didn't see her – I'd never –"

But when I stepped towards them, mum shrank back and fled upstairs with Amanda.

They can say what they like about the NHS and London traffic, the ambulance was at the door in less than five minutes, and they had Gerry on a stretcher and loaded up in another five. Walter said he'd fallen down the stair. Stupid, I thought, the nearest stair was two rooms away. The men gave me a queer look. I'd cleaned up at the sink, but my face and my pale blue sweater were still marked with blood. One of the paramedics said, "His cheekbone's broken, but his skull's probably okay, you'll be glad to hear, son," being sarky. I didn't know whether to be glad or disappointed.

Mum hurried downstairs with Amanda and climbed into the ambulance with them.

Walter looked straight at me for the first time. His face was all patchy white and red. His little mouth twitched and pursed. He said to me, "Malcolm, go to your room." It was what I wanted to do, anyway. He followed me up, and I heard the hasp rattle over and my big padlock being clicked shut. I was locked in. He was locked out, too; I had the key in with me.

The front door shut, his car drove away. I was alone.

He'd call the police, psychiatrists, the DSS. He could call the SAS, for all I cared. I

didn't care. I didn't care. I'd hurt Amanda, she'd hate me now, and Mum too, not just not care about me. She thought I was like dad, brutal and violent... Gerry had won. Stuff him. And Wally. And mum too, she thought it was my fault, everybody always thought it was my fault, but it wasn't not this time – not ever. Hate hate hate.

Stuff the whole world. I didn't care. Didn't care. Didn't care wouldn't care didn't...

Round and round, flooding my mind...

I got out my Swiss Army knife that mum had given me for Christmas.

About two hours later I heard the car, and the front door. Steps came upstairs. I waited to see what he'd say when he realised he didn't have the key. The padlock rattled, and to my annoyance the door opened. He must have got the key I'd given Mrs Blackstone so she could get in to clean, and I hadn't shot the bolt on my side.

He stood and stared.

I'd destroyed everything. Everything. Every one of my cassettes and videos, the ones Gerry hadn't damaged for me, I'd smashed them, or pulled out the tapes and cut them up and scattered the coils over the floor. I'd ripped up my posters, and slashed the mattress and the curtains. I'd sliced open all my shoes, even my new Nike trainers. I'd cut the strings of my squash racket, and jammed

the slide and tube of my trombone into a drawer and sat on them till they bent. My school books were confetti. The feathers from my down pillows and duvet – nothing but the best for Walter’s family, and serve him right – were puffing gently like, well, like feathers, all over the shreds of the fitted carpet. I’d pulled the doors off the fancy repro pine furniture and smashed the drawers, and gouged my skis, because no matter how hard I jumped on them they wouldn’t break. A use at last for that thing that takes the stones out of horses’ hoofs. I used it on my records and CD’s too. I won’t tell you what I’d scrawled all over the walls with marking pens. I’d thought about breaking the windows, but it was still cold out, in March. The floor felt crunchy as cornflakes underfoot where I’d gutted my clock, my ghetto blaster, my lamps, my TV and video, my mobile and my computer. Take more than a fortnight to put that lot right. All my clothes were in ribbons, including the ones I’d been wearing. I’d unscrewed my radiator, and bent it down from the wall. It was leaking all over the floor.

It’s surprising what you can do when you really try.

I stood there, stark naked except for my slippers – I didn’t want cut feet – and my watch that mum had given me, and stared at

him. He turned green. It didn't go with his toning pink shirt and plum cords, that's for sure. I thought he was going to faint. My chest was full of triumphant black glory.

"You think I'm bad," I said. "I'll give you bad."

After a minute, he just shut the door again, and the padlock rattled.

Well, that suited me.

I yelled after him, "How's Amanda?" I didn't care about Gerry. But he didn't answer.

He didn't come back either, not all that day. He was in and out, and the phone was like a police station, but he didn't come near me. When I got desperate for a pee, I opened the window. I got hungry and thirsty, but I wouldn't knock and ask to be let out, not for a million dollars I wouldn't. If I hadn't smashed my mobile, I'd have ordered a pizza delivered – bad planning. I thought mum might have brought me something, but she never appeared. Maybe Amanda was badly hurt, and mum was still at the hospital with her? If I hadn't destroyed all my clothes, I'd have run away, second floor room or not, I'd have got down somehow. Stuff the world.

Late on, Walter opened the door, handed me a packet of sandwiches and a soft drink, marched me to the bathroom without a word, and then locked me in for the night.

When the central heating turned off it got cold, without clothes or heating or a proper bed, though I wrapped up on the remains of the mattress in the duvet cover and the rug that somehow I'd missed, probably because it was covered with assorted electronics.

Next morning early Walter brought in a gigantic youngish bloke like Conan the Barbarian, wider across the shoulders than Walter was round the waist, with a seventh-hand face and a neck like a pillarbox. Walter looked past my ear, his face tight as a tent. "You know what to do," he said. "Get him out of my life." Then he went out again.

The man looked at me, and round at the wreckage. My heart was pounding. What was he here for?

He had a carrier bag in his hand. He dropped it on the floor, lifted the bent tubes of my trombone and gently, easily, straightened them. He shook his head. "Shame to treat a good instrument like that." He looked down at me from about ten miles above my head, and asked quietly, in a voice about four octaves below middle C, "Am I goin' to have trouble with you, son?"

"Depends," I said, trying to keep my cool. He scared me, the way Gerry never did. He'd have scared Rambo. But I didn't care. Wouldn't care. "You the fuzz? Or a minder in a loony-bin?"

His mouth widened – it was a smile. Just. It should have creaked. “No, I’m not a copper, or a trick-cyclist. Be sensible, an’ you got nothin’ to worry about, kid, honest.” I didn’t believe him, but he just pointed a thumb at the bag and said, “You’re leavin’. Get dressed.”

“Leaving? Where to?”

He smiled again. “Does it matter? You want to stay? Tell you, son, I wouldn’t, not with him, not after half-killin’ his boy. Broken nose, broken cheek-bone, concussion. Make a dentist’s fortune with bridgework. Want to be done for attempted murder? Or get clear out of it?”

What did I feel? Relief? Resentment? Regret? I considered, and he waited, giving me time to think.

“How’s Amanda?”

“Your little sister? Cut on her face needed a couple o’ stitches. Upset but okay. Lucky.” That was a weight off my heart.

“What about mum? What does she say?”

He blinked. “Your mum? Ain’t seen her. Just your dad.”

“Stepfather!” I snarled. Oh, mum... Stuff her. She thought... I’d never trust her again! I hated her. Never trust anybody, everybody lets you down. Hurt hate hurt...

“Come on, son, get dressed. Or do I have to dress you? Warn you, if I do, neither of

us'll like it. But you'll like it less than me." I shivered. He half-smiled again. "See?" he said. "You're half frozen. Keep us all happy. An' I don't know about you, but I could murder a Macburger or five, an' a gallon o' coffee before we catch our plane."

Plane? Not a loony-bin, then, probably. He was too big to tangle with, and I was starving anyway. "Best offer I've had all day," I said, and reached for the bag.

We got on fine. He never laid a finger on me, didn't have to, I'd sooner have argued with Godzilla. I got dressed in a whole new set of clothes, new Reeboks and everything, nothing but the best, specially when Walter loathed me – coals of fire, see? – and we left. Walter stood and watched from the window of his study as we got into the taxi. He didn't wave. Neither did I.