**ITHAKA**

By Alan S. Falkingham

**PROLOGUE**

**As You Set Out For Ithaka**

***Twenty Years Ago***

I look out of the classroom window as Alberto, our school’s groundskeeper, rides his mower back and forth, painting broad brushstrokes across the sports field in the sunshine. Cut grass spews in a fountain behind him, like a speedboat churning up wake and, in the distance, I can see the tiniest glint of the sun on the river. The school campus always looks its best in these last few days before school ends; the glass fronted buildings seem to shimmer in the heat and the air is filled with the scent of the lilac trees and the constant chorus of bird calls jousting with each other on the breeze. And the promise of summer, stretching out in front of us all, long and lazy, loaded with nothing but whatever our imaginations might create.

Mrs. Rivers makes her way slowly between the students and pauses when she reaches me, tapping the very tip of her pen on the edge of my desk, like a hypnotist rousing her subject from a trance.

“Please feel free to read this marvelous piece out loud, Maddison,” she tells me, trying to trap me, expose my lack of attention.

But I am too smart for her. She will need to be more cunning than that to catch me out. Because the young will always be too nimble for the old, especially on the brink of summer.

Mrs. Rivers raises her eyebrows expectantly. She knows that I am only here on account of the full ride scholarship my mother managed to get for me and my brother Nico. Ma is a fierce woman, brought up fighting for everything she ever got, helped by no-one, and expecting nothing for free. Her own father left before he even knew her name, and she lost her mother the day before her sixteenth birthday. Drink and drugs stole them both she tells me, usually accompanied by a wagging finger. But the experience shaped her, as these things tend to do, both breaking and making her in equal measure. She is the locomotive pulling our family train in which me and Nico are the carriages, and our Da is the caboose. And we all feel both the benefits and pressure of all that tenacious energy. Mrs. Rivers said that Ma parked her car across the principal’s driveway every morning for a month, until he agreed to accept me and Nico into this school. Ma had told us it would change our lives. Give us opportunities she could never have even dreamt of. A way out of the spiral that, she is convinced, one day will consume us too.

I do not even need to look down because I have the whole thing memorized. I smile at Mrs. Rivers and she cannot help herself but let the corners of her own mouth sneak upwards in response. Because I know I am her favorite, and of me, she will tell anyone prepared to listen, she expects great things.

“*As you set out for Ithaka*”, I begin, my voice taking on an odd quality I almost do not recognize. “*Hope the voyage is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery……..*”

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Shadowlands**

***Present Day***

Father Nico gets the call from Fitz while he is sitting at the bar of the Stalking Horse. He has a half-finished Guinness and a Jameson’s in front of him and is pretending to work on tomorrow’s sermon while watching TV. The Phillies are all tied up at the top of the eighth, and for a moment he considers not picking up. But, while Jimmy Fitz may be many things, he has never been a time-waster.

When he gets there, Nico parks his beat-up old Challenger on the sloping concrete bank of the levee. Police tape is already strung out carelessly between the piers of the bridge while, far above, traffic rushes by oblivious, like the constant roll of faraway thunder. That night’s fire still flickers away in the base of an old oil drum, surrounded by the tents, tarps and familiar make-shift structures of Camp Shadowland. But, otherwise, the place is deserted, its residents disappeared, frightened off by the arrival of the cops. Still, one familiar face remains, standing just outside the tape, illuminated like a ghost in the strobing lights of a nearby patrol car. He wears a long gray overcoat that has seen better days and at his feet lies a stick thin dog, mangy bald patches mottle its back.

Nico wanders over, assessing the scene. It does not look good, and he suddenly feels a tightness in his chest. “So, what happened?” he asks Solomon, handing him a cigarette.

Solomon waits for a light, then takes a long drag before answering, strokes at his dirty beard. Either he is in no hurry, intent on enjoying a brief hit of nicotine, or he is upset. Nico cannot tell which. Solomon’s face is so creased it has forgotten how to be expressive.

“It’s Jackdaw,” Solomon says eventually. “Some frat boys came looking for him. Drunk as hell, kicking shit over. One of them had a gun. Waving it around threatening to shoot every motherfucker. Some argument over a wallet they said Jackdaw had stolen earlier that afternoon, or something. I’m not sure, I didn’t see it all.” He takes another drag. “But next thing I know, there was a pop, pop, pop and Jackdaw was lying there, all twisted around.” He pauses. “Wasn’t no saving him, Father. Bled out, right there, staring up at the overpass. Couldn’t even see the sky.” Solomon shrugs, as if he doesn’t know what to make of it all. But like this last point somehow mattered a great deal. The dog at his feet stirs, sensing Solomon’s unhappiness.

“No!” Nico feels a weight drop through him, hard and clean. “Shit, Solomon.” Instinctively, he puts an arm around Solomon’s shoulders and pulls him in, holding him tight. He smells sour and sweet, stale bread soaked in hard liquor and sweat. Solomon does not hug him back, but he does not exactly pull away either, just stands there awkwardly letting Nico’s cigarette drip ash onto the ground. He does not cry, because Solomon has seen enough of life to not give his tears away too cheaply.

“He was my friend, you know?” says Solomon eventually, his eyes are dull. “Only one I had.”

And there is truth in that thinks Nico. He has spent enough time in Shadowland to understand the nature of this place. Desperate people who have lost everything there is to lose. Whose worlds have become so small that they care only about themselves and their own survival each day. A world where friendships are hard to come by. Because if everyone you have ever relied upon has let you down, then it’s hard to believe in anyone anymore. But Solomon and Jackdaw *were* friends, sure enough. Nico had seen that. They looked out for each other.

In the early days after Nico had first become priest at Saint Jude’s, he had struggled with how to do at least some good with the opportunity that had fallen so unexpectedly into his lap. How exactly he had gotten the job was still something of a mystery, even to Nico. He remembered how his mother had woken him one morning and told him that he had an interview with Bishop O’Reilly and the elders of the diocese. How he should dress nice, quote the bible at every opportunity, talk about Jesus as his savior and that, if he didn’t screw things up, then the job was his. And just like every other time he could ever remember, whatever his mother had said had proven to be true. He had showed up at the clergy house, along with two other fresh-faced kids who had recently graduated from seminary. They spoke Greek and Hebrew, were able to talk in detail about books of the Old Testament that Nico had barely even heard of. Still, somehow, he had walked out of there as Father Nicolas of St. Jude’s.

But, after a few months spent drowning in the day-to-day boredom of running a parish in one of the city’s most affluent suburbs, he had decided that his true calling lay in helping the people who made their home in the shadowy concrete world beneath the city’s bridges and overpasses. A world which was both tolerated by the city but also equally ignored and despised. And he had immediately found a strange affinity with the people who inhabited that world. He quickly learned that if he showed up with a trunk full of canned soups to cook on the campfire, a bottle of Jack in his pocket to hand around and a pack of cigarettes to smoke, he could make more of a difference than he ever would at a lifetime of Friday fish fries amongst the lawyers, businessmen and stay-at-home moms of St Jude’s. Where the freshness of the flowers in church was always a huge talking point, and each Sunday was a parade of the rich and beautiful people. But Nico also knew it was all a sham. And that when those leather-bound bibles were slid back onto the bookshelf for another week, his smiling congregation would immediately return to fucking their neighbors, taking kickbacks on their next business deal, and cheating on their taxes. That was life at St. Jude’s and he both understood and hated his role in it. How his position meant that he had to slide into that tight little booth and listen to a movie-reel of confessionals through the mesh window, hear the relief in their voices, as each one of them unburdened themselves, told him of their worst behaviors, and then expected *him* to make it all OK. To provide absolution from their guilt. That was all that any of them really wanted.

Around the fire he felt like he could be himself. A place where he could say what he really thought. Where he felt like he didn’t need to keep telling people to rely on some benevolent God he did not really believe in. Where he could instead tell people what they really needed to do to help themselves catch a break in a world where breaks were hard to come by. And in return, the people who inhabited Camp Shadowlands had grown to know and trust him. He worked with the sanitation department to keep the place inhabitable. He arranged for clothes and blankets to be delivered in winter, before the snow came, and Shadowlands froze over. He arranged for volunteer doctors and dentists to visit from time to time, even got the fire department to stop by in the height of summer to turn on the hydrants for an hour so they could all cool off.

They cooked soup together round the campfire, told each other stories, some true, some made-up, but mostly somewhere in between. And Nico was a good listener. He offered advice when it made sense and sympathy when it didn’t. He wore his cross, but never talked about it, kept his judgments to himself. But most of all he paid attention. Made them feel like they weren’t invisible. That, just maybe, somebody cared. And that is how Nico had come to know Jackdaw.

John Dawson. Jackdaw. Son of a public prosecutor and ex-bonds trader in New York City. Recreational drinker and coke user who flew too close to the sun. Lost a fortune which he didn’t care about. And a wife and kid that he did. Whose life unraveled fast, like the chain of an anchor from a boat deck, until it embedded itself, stuck fast in the muddy riverbed of Shadowlands. Where he was reduced to living in a tent he salvaged from a donation dumpster, panhandling the intersection on Eighteenth and Parkway and, when that wasn’t enough, stealing. That was how he got his name. And although it was perhaps surprising for someone who had come to find himself living under a bridge, like a lot of the things Jackdaw had ever done in his life when he was clean, he did it surprisingly well. Many was the time he would empty his pockets around the campfire to show Nico and Solomon the results of his day’s work. He was drawn to shiny things. Watches, necklaces, rings. Handfuls of the stuff. A true jackdaw.

“I’m gonna miss him. You know?” says Solomon pulling away.

“I know,” says Nico. “I know you are, man.” He has nothing else to say. Even though his dog collar meant he had seen grief up close a hundred different times, he had somehow never quite found a good way to stare it down. He had become careful never to tell people how sorry he was for their loss or that he would pray for them. Because what good was that? Sorrow and prayers were no match for the raw pain of loss. He knew that.

Beyond the police tape, over in the middle of the cardboard city, Nico can see Jimmy Fritz walking the site, picking his way past upturned shopping carts and tossed garbage. One of the big portable arc lights that the police had erected casts Jimmy’s shadow up against one of the bridge piers. The shadow is huge, making him seem even larger than life, which is tough, because Jimmy is a man who could certainly use to lose a few pounds. But, for such a big man, he moves carefully and with precision, slowly and methodically sweeping the area. He is wearing a pair of latex gloves and occasionally he bends down and picks up something, drops it into an evidence bag and then puts it back where he found it, along with a piece of marker tape. Eventually he squats, takes his flashlight, and shines it down onto the ground in front of one of the tents. Although it is difficult to see in the gathering gloom, Nico can just make out the dark shape of what looks like a body, folded under itself, limbs twisted at awkward angles.

“Can I go over there?” Nico asks the cop who is standing a little way away, keeping the perimeter of the scene secure. He looks bored, chewing idly on his gum. At first, he does not reply, just checks his watch.

“Sorry, Father,” he says. “This is a crime scene.”

But Nico tries again. “Detective Fitzgerald called me. I do a lot of work down here with the homeless. Thought maybe I could help with identifying the body. The people who live here often don’t carry ID, you know?”

The cop looks at him funny. “No shit,” he says. “Always the same with these deadbeats.”

“Asshole,” says Solomon, a little too loudly.

“What the fuck you say?”

“All God’s children, officer,” Nico cuts in, before Solomon can say anything else. “All God’s children.” He makes a solemn face, briefly makes the sign of the cross. “Please? May I pass?”

The cop considers his options. Eventually he nods.

“Where was your God when one of his children needed him, huh?” asks Solomon. He drops the cigarette butt and grinds it into the ground with the sole of his shoe, which is held on by a loop of string.

Nico turns as he ducks under the tape. “He ain’t really my God, Solomon. You know that.”

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Ma Kendricks**

It is gone midnight when Nico finally gets home, but his mother is still up, sitting in her favorite chair in the darkness. On the arm of the chair is a glass of bourbon and her eyes are glassy as she stares straight ahead. An 80’s movie is flickering unwatched on the TV and, in the hearth, a well burned fire still glows orange, smoke gently rising from the charred remains that she stopped feeding hours ago.

“You’re up late, Ma,” Nico sheds his jacket and hovers. He is tired, the smell of Shadowlands is still on him.

“I could say the same thing,” his mother rouses herself. “You been drinking hooch with the hobos again?”

This is a familiar battle ground and, with liquor inside her, Mrs. Kendricks is ready.

Nico sighs. “How are you feeling, Ma? How’d the appointment go today?”

She waves him away, recognizes the diversion. “I didn’t go.”

“Jesus, Ma. We talked about this, right? You gotta go to radiation. You heard the doctors.” He is frustrated by her attitude, but also out of ideas on how to change it.

Esophageal cancer, stage four. Diagnosed the week after Labor Day. His mother had finally been persuaded to visit her doctor. Trouble swallowing. Saliva pooling in her throat. At first, they had laughed about it. Joked about everything in life now getting stuck in her craw. But, once they found out how serious it was, how developed it had become, then the laughing stopped. Nico remembers how he had asked Dr. Bledsoe about the chance of spread. How the doctor’s answer had been so carefully crafted he could tell it was designed more for what it did not reveal than what it did. Stomach, liver, lymphatic system. All in play. All possible secondary sites, but at this stage no definitive evidence of any malignancies outside the primary site in the esophagus. Fancy words. Medical-speak that said everything and nothing.

“Yes. I heard them,” she replies. “What I heard was that it’s not going to make any difference in the end. That’s what I heard.” She extends an arm and grabs the bourbon glass, like a corn snake snatching a mouse. The bourbon shines honey brown and, for a moment, Nico thinks about pouring himself one.

While she is not right, she isn’t exactly wrong either and Nico suddenly feels even more exhausted. But now is not the time to get back into this. He knows his mother well enough. With her mind made up, she is prepared to stand in front of a freight train on the tracks.

“Where you been ‘til so late anyway?” she asks him again. Mrs. Kendricks prefers to play offense.

“One of the homeless men was killed tonight,” he says. “His name was John Dawson. But we called him Jackdaw.” Nico humanizes him as best he can. The exact opposite of what his mother always does whenever she talks about homeless.

She looks across at him. “How’d that happen? Fighting amongst themselves again?”

Nico shakes his head. “No. Some group of frat boys by all accounts. One of ‘em had Daddy’s gun. An argument about a wallet they say Jackdaw had stolen. Shot him dead.”

Mrs. Kendricks purses her lips and nods. If she has some wise-ass response she chooses to keep it to herself. While his mother had always been hard, she had never been completely heart-less. Unless you count Maddie.

“Jimmy Fitz called me to let me know,” Nico continues. “He’s working the case.” He pauses, searches his mother’s face for a reaction, but does not get much of one, although she seems to hold his gaze for a second, momentarily clear-eyed.

 “Jimmy know who did it?”

“Not yet. He got some partial license plate from someone who saw the kids escaping. That’s all I know. He was busy processing the scene when I got down there so I didn’t wanna disturb him.”

“Jimmy’ll find them.” She says it with sudden certainty. Gives a firm nod. “Probably posted a video of them bragging about it online by now. You know what kids are like these days” It is not obvious whether she is joking. or not.

“I hope so,” Nico is almost inaudible. The heaviness of the day is suddenly now almost unbearable, and he hesitates. “It’s just all so unfair. You know?” He says it loudly, a little too loudly, not quite in control of his emotions. “Life is so…..” He can’t find quite the right word and so quits searching.

His mother levers herself out of the chair. She sighs with the effort.

“This about some hobo who I’m sure had plenty enough chances to choose a better path through life or is this about me dying of cancer?” She was a champion at this. Cutting to the chase. Always had been.

Nico doesn’t answer. Guilty by his silence.

Mrs. Kendricks takes a step towards him, perhaps measuring the arc of her fist swing. Or maybe his. “You think I’m a quitter don’t you? You’ve heard about all those brave cancer warriors who do walks and runs and raise a million bucks. Expected me to be more of a fighter?” She doesn’t say it nasty. In fact, she is all matter- of- fact, to sharpen the blade so it can go deeper.

Same silence, same problem.

“I get to choose how to do this.” She says it like Nico might have some doubt about that. “I wanna do it quietly.”

“I know that, Ma.” He re-finds his voice.

“Good. Glad that’s settled then.”

“I just think. You know. You’re fifty nine years old. Not even sixty. Otherwise healthy.” He knows it *is* settled, but he can’t help himself.

“She smokes and drinks too much, you know, Father Nicolas.”. That’s how you get throat cancer, don’t you know?” Mrs. Kendricks mumbles it behind the back of her hand as if mimicking gossiping in church, even gives a little snicker for dramatic effect.

“There are sensible steps you can take. Even just to buy……” He tests the sentence end in his head. Decides against it because it isn’t needed anyway. “That’s what the doctors told us, if you would bother to listen.” He ends it petulantly. His proof positive.

“But that’s not the point is it?” She stands in front of him. A head shorter. Half his weight. But there had never been any doubt. Whether it was about cancer treatment or anything else. Even back when Nico’s father was alive and Maddie was still at home, what his mother wanted, she got. It would be the same here, at least for as long as this fight would last. And although, on one hand, it puzzled him. Because sometimes the longshot wins. Someone’s got to be in the one percent that makes the math whole. On the other hand, it made him feel immensely proud of her. Still the human tornado, capable of sweeping away everything in its path.

She softens a little, almost imperceptibly. “Look, I don’t wanna end up weighing less than two bags of sugar with radiation sores and throwing up chemicals. What for? For a few extra weeks? Who wants that? This thing will get whatever fight I’ve got left. You can keep your radiation and your chemo.” She gives a little wink. “That would give me an unfair advantage now, wouldn’t it? You know Give Cancer a Chance!” She pretends to punch the air with an imaginary protest sign.

Nico nods, because what else can he do.

“You can say a little prayer for me, at church though maybe.” She says it quietly. Softly.

The TV movie still flickers, casting odd jumpy shadows and Nico looks at his mother in the half-light, tries to decide if she means it or not. While Mrs. Kendricks had always taken her place in her favorite pew at St. Jude’s, Nico had never known her talk about any faith she might carry. Not once. He had there always assumed she was as skeptical as he was. That her presence in church was nothing more than habit.

“I wouldn’t rely on that,” Nico cannot help but roll his eyes.

“Now what would your employer say about that?” his mother chuckles. “Shouldn’t you, of all people, should embrace the power of prayer?”

“I’d prefer you just go to radiation, Ma.” He says it quietly without much conviction, accepting the futility.

His mother finds the remote control and kills the TV, so that there is just the dying fire embers and a slant of milky moonlight coming in through one of the windows.

“I know you do Nicky,” she says, and she touches his arm lightly. “But I’m doing this my way. This thing is going to kill me.” More chase-cutting. Nico makes a face.

“Yes, it is,” she insists when she sees his expression. But she says it gently this time, almost as a form of re-assurance, like the certainty brings with it a peacefulness. “We all need to face that. I’m facing it, and you need to face it too. But this can still be done with dignity. That’s what is important to me. I have never been scared of anything in my life, and I’m damn sure not going to start now.”

She is right about that Nico thinks.

“Now, I’m headed up to bed.” She slides passed him. “Suggest you do the same,” she says without looking back as she begins to climb the stairs. “You look like total shit, and you need to give a sermon tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Ma. Love you.” She is right. One he can probably fix with a few hours’ sleep and a good shower in the morning. The other he would just need to wing. The unplanned trip to Shadowlands had eaten into his preparation time, if you counted searching for divine inspiration watching baseball and drinking Guinness at the Stalking Horse. When he first got the job at St Jude’s he would agonize for hours, rigid with nervousness, afraid that somehow exposed up there in the pulpit his flock would be able to see exactly who he was. And what he wasn’t. But, over the years, he had perfected his technique, like a Blues musician learning his trade in the smoky cellar clubs deep beneath the city. Gideon putting out the fleece was his go-to. Job was also popular, especially if the goings-on in the world got really bad. Sometimes David, tormented by King Saul. Or the Apostle Peter. Great stories. The festivals of course were easy: Christmas, Easter, Lent. Those sermons took care of themselves. But, in the end, it was always the same: recount some tale from long ago that his congregation recognized, the repetition somehow re-assuring. Trot out some familiar truths. Nothing to disagree with. Nothing too controversial. That was the secret. Tomorrow would be no different.

“Goodnight, Ma. Love you.”

 Mrs. Kendricks pauses at the top of the stairs. “Nico?” Her voice is a little raspy.

He looks up. He cannot help but feel she looks frailer, standing there in the moonlight. But if she had let him glimpse any inner vulnerability earlier, she is not about to repeat it. Her face is reset to the way he has seen is whole life.

“I’m sorry about your hobo friend. OK? Nobody deserves that.”

He winces a little at the word she chooses. But her sympathy seems real enough. However, she is also not done. “And you tell Jimmy Fitz that once he’s solved that case, he needs to get his fat ass over here. I’m dying of cancer for fuck’s sake. He owes me a visit. Tell him it’s been a while.”

And with that instruction issued, she disappears out of view, padding across the carpet towards her bedroom.

Fitz. The puzzle piece that Nico had never quite been able to figure out. Jimmy Fucking Fitz. He had entered their lives quietly and then lingered there ever since, like the last leaf on a Fall tree. For good and for bad. So, what did his mother have left to say to him? Unfinished business? Time for one or other of them to pay off debts owed? A final chance to say what needed to be said?

“OK, I’ll tell him,” says Nico although, by the time he gets it out she is no longer there to hear him.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Jimmy Fitz**

Jimmy Fitzgerald finishes up the egg and sausage muffin he had picked up from the drive through and tosses the wrapper on to the passenger seat next to him. He takes a swig of coffee, good and hot, the color of newly laid blacktop, then wipes his mouth with the palm of his hand.

The gravel crunches under his tires as he drives up towards the house. It is set back, well out of sight from the road, and Jimmy had needed to use an intercom to buzz himself in through the wrought iron gates that blocked the driveway. A big fountain is set in the middle of an ornamental lake out front, and it sprays water up into the air in grand arcs. On the other side of the lake, a line of Autumn Higan cherry trees is still flowering, a brushstroke of color against the sky

Jimmy gets out and looks around, stares up at the sweep of windows, the double front doors, heavy maple stained dark. Two stone lions guard the steps leading up to the entranceway, poised in a watchful crouch.

“They even got fucking swans,” he says to himself as he watches as two gigantic white birds take to the water with a couple of thrashing wing beats, sending ripples across the surface of the lake.

He wipes self-consciously at a spot of grease that is on this shirt front and then mentally checks himself. This is all part of it, he thinks. To make you feel uncomfortable. Out of place. Somehow inferior. This is different to doing things in that small windowless interrogation room. Judge Whittaker knows that much. And Jimmy Fitz knows it too. So, Jimmy leaves the grease spot exactly where it is, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. He lights it, takes his time, dragging on it deeply, enjoying feeling the coolness in the Fall morning air. Football weather.

When he looks back out across the lake, the two swans are floating in the center, serene now on the glassy water surface. Done smoking, he deliberately drops the butt end on the doorstep and, with it still smoldering, he ignores the fancy video doorbell panel and, instead, takes the heavy metal door knocker and raps it down hard, so that the noise reverberates like cannon fire across the bay.

…

***END OF 5,000 WORD EXCERPT***