



Hello! A note from the author



At school, I'd get into trouble for “not listening”, but I was actually lost in my imagination, fed by weekly trips to the library.

My writing has always been inspired by my love of music. My first novel *Outside Inside* was inspired by the Levellers, one of my favourite bands ever since I was a teenager.

In *Distortion*, I wanted to pay tribute to an inspirational music teacher and my own experiences as a teenage musician.

I get quite immersed in writing my novels. I've picked up my trusty electric guitar for the first time in years and now play in an all-women punk band! We have just written our first song, which is very exciting.

I decided that my character Jason in *Distortion* should be obsessed by the Manic Street Preachers. I bought a few of their CDs second-hand and then got stuck in a terrible traffic jam with their first album on repeat, turning it up louder and louder. When I finally got home, I was a firm convert! I've now seen them many times.

I even have a ‘Libraries Gave us Power’ tattoo after a line from one of their most famous songs – because I firmly believe that knowledge and education gives us the strength to achieve anything that we want to.

I hope you enjoy reading this sampler of *Distortion*. Both my novels are available from Amazon and other online retailers.

Twitter: @anne_grange

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Chapter 1
September 2008
Something's Started

Jason

'Oi! Pikey!'

Bradley Smeed and his mates are lounging against the bus shelter on the opposite side of the road. I turn away, pretending they're not there. I feel like I'm acting my life and I have to be word perfect.

The guitar is still in the window of the charity shop. It looks dusty and unloved, but I want it.

'I'll look after the bikes,' Ben says. I lean my crappy bike up against the bench, and Ben gets his *NME* out.

I push the door of the shop open, ignoring Bradley. He can call me a pikey all he wants. He's not stopping me from getting the guitar.

Inside the shop, everything's muffled and peaceful. The air is smothered by the smell of mothballs and musty old books.

Mavis, the charity shop lady, looks up from sorting out a tangle of jewellery. She smiles at me and offers me a mint imperial from the crumpled paper bag on the counter. She used to give them to me when I was little, when Mum wasn't looking.

I shake my head.

'The guitar...' I cough, getting a whiff of her perfume stuck in my throat.

Mavis bustles over to the window and takes the guitar from where it's been leaning against the glass. Bradley Smeed must be watching the shop because I can hear his gang shouting and laughing in the background, mixed in with the noise of cars.

Mavis hands the guitar to me. I don't know what to do with it. I scrape my finger over the strings. The jangle sets my teeth on edge. Obviously it's out of tune but I don't know how to make it sound right. It's worse than it looked in the window. The varnish is scratched and there are dents in the wood.

'I thought you might like it.' Mavis gives me an indulgent wink. She fiddles with her plastic necklace. 'It's ten pounds, but just for you, it's a fiver. You're one of our best customers.'

I'm so glad I'm alone in the shop. What sort of thirteen year old

goes into a charity shop every night after school?

I found a tape of Combat Rock by the Clash last week. Someone in Wirksworth must have had great taste in music once. You have to rummage through loads of rubbish and CDs someone's skated across the floor on, but sometimes it's worth it.

There's no brand name on this guitar. It's probably crap. If it's as bad as it looks, it can just go straight back to the shop. If I ask nicely, Mavis might let me swap it for some tapes.

Mavis feels sorry for me. Mum used to take me here all the time. I didn't mind wearing second hand clothes from head to toe. When I was little, Mum told me Mavis slept here, using lacy tablecloths as blankets. I actually believed her.

I put my hand in the pocket of my uniform trousers and take out a mixture of coins. I count out five pounds, going into silver and coppers, everything I've got, and put the money into Mavis' outstretched palm.

Ben's dad paid us for creosoting his garden fence in the summer. Not much left from my share now. I wonder if the neighbours need any odd jobs doing. I'd even shovel horse muck for money to buy records.

Mavis rings the sale through the till. Where else am I going to get a guitar for five pounds? What if I can't play it?

'Silly me, I forgot. It came with a case.'

Mavis disappears into the back of the shop, returning with a grey fake leather cover, like a cheap slip-on shoe. It's got a long strap, so I can sling it across my back when I'm on my bike. I zip the guitar into the bag.

I take a deep breath and push the door open. It should be a relief to get into the fresh air, but Bradley Smeed and his henchmen are still at the bus stop.

'What's that you've got there, Kenny? Are you going to give us a tune?'

I don't dare to shout anything back. I cling onto the guitar, even though the case looks like dead elephant skin and makes my fingers sweaty.

Bradley Smeed has called me Kenny ever since my first day at primary school. I wore a coat with a big fake-fur lined hood. The hood

felt soft. Mum walked me into the playground and kissed me goodbye. Bradley barged up to me when I was waiting with Ben. He looked really big and scary, like he owned the playground. Bradley shouted “Kenny” in my face. I told him my name was Jason.

He didn’t stop calling me “Kenny”. I didn’t even know what he meant. We still don’t have a TV at home – Mum refuses to. I watched an episode of South Park at Ben’s house and saw the kid in the orange parka getting killed in a gruesome way. I deliberately lost my coat. It wasn’t even orange.

It’s not just about that coat. It’s about my free school dinners and my cheap trainers – about everything I have and everything I do being a reason for him to hate me.

I keep my head down as I walk towards Ben.

‘Great – you got the guitar.’

‘Yeah, but it’s crap,’ I mumble.

‘As long as you can get a tune out of it.’

‘Not even sure about that.’ I kick at the gravel on the pavement.

Ben pulls a thick stapled wodge of A4 paper out of his bag and hands it to me. The title says “Beginners’ Guitar Manual”, with a grainy drawing of an acoustic guitar on the cover. I flick through the pages – loads of numbers on horizontal lines, and diagrams with boxes and dots.

‘It’s what my guitar teacher uses. He wrote it himself – about a million years ago. I got Mum to photocopy it for you at work.’

‘Thanks.’ I shove it into the guitar case. I don’t want to look at it until I get home. What if I don’t understand it?

‘It’ll get you started. I’ve learned most of the chords now.’

We get on our bikes. I arrange the guitar case and my school rucksack so they both balance on my back. Ben got a new mountain bike for his birthday last year. Mine’s his cast-off. I’ve outgrown it already, the saddle screwed up as high as it’ll go. The scratches are covered up with Mum’s black acrylic paint.

‘Pikey!’

‘Kenny!’

‘Scrounger!’

The insults blur into each other – shouted at my back. Sometimes I let myself believe them. I can’t stop my cheeks from burning. It feels

good to be out of town, cold wind rushing into my face, cruising downhill until the road starts to climb again. I can feel the guitar, bumping around on my back.

Before we get to the turn-off to Bolehill village, the bus rumbles past. A crushed Diet Coke can flies out of one of the little open windows, missing my face by millimetres. It bounces into the hedge. I nearly wobble over in the rush of wind behind the bus. Bradley Smeed shouts something and flicks his wrist at me through the back window. His mates flatten their faces against the glass as the bus squeezes under the bridge.

‘Fucking scumbag!’ I yell, not that Bradley Smeed can hear me now.

Ben brakes behind me.

‘They can’t do it for ever. Just wait until you’ve turned into a rock god.’

‘Yeah, right.’ I can always trust Ben to make me laugh.



Kaz

The sound of a guitar string being played, way too low, rattling against the frets, a boinging noise as the tuning peg is turned.

I freeze on the attic stairs, my right foot mid-air, carrying a pile of Jason’s washing. Did I imagine the noise that just came from his room?

I listen. It sounds like he’s trying to tune an acoustic guitar. I clutch the pile of t-shirts and Jason’s ripped jeans to my chest in shock, remembering Daz; the way he guided my fingers onto the frets of that battered old classical guitar. I grab the banister for balance, so I don’t tumble down the steep stairs and land in a pile of broken limbs.

My hand trembles as I knock at the door. I started knocking earlier this year, when he turned thirteen. It’s not a good idea to barge in on him anymore. He needs his privacy.

‘Mum?’ he calls.

I push the door open and dump the washing on top of the chest of drawers. Jason’s sitting cross-legged on the bed, hunched over a knackered-looking steel-string guitar. He stares up at me with a hopeful expression, pushing his fringe out of his eyes. I suddenly feel like someone punched me in the guts. There’s a photocopied guitar tutorial

in front of him. He's still wearing his school uniform. The trousers are too short, with a gap between the hems and his socks.

'I can't get it tuned right,' he moans.

'It looks like an old piece of shit. Did you get it from school?'

Jason gives me a wounded glance and I feel instantly guilty. For a second there, I almost thought Jason was Daz. I used to speak to Daz like that – but Daz was used to far worse.

Jason shrugs almost imperceptibly, fixing his attention back to the guitar. He's de-tuned the bottom string too low, making it wobble against the fingerboard, but he carries on turning the tuning pegs, his tongue sticking out.

He still has Harry Potter posters on his bedroom walls; his own drawings of Star Wars characters; a collection of snail shells, pebbles and bird skulls on his bookshelf. Band posters are tacked onto the sloping ceiling: My Chemical Romance from Jason's big emo phase that started when he was eleven. I suppose I shouldn't have been massively surprised he discovered Manic Street Preachers – and he's found a poster of them in their eyeliner heyday. Going even further back, he's got the classic Clash poster with Paul Simonon captured forever, about to smash his bass.

'Haven't you got anything better to be doing?'

'No.'

He throws the guitar on the bed. He stares at me with an expression full of thunder, dark eyebrows knotted. I recognise Daz's scowl combined with the look of frustration I often saw in the mirror when I was Jason's age. Maybe if I walk out of the room now, the guitar will never be picked up again, like the wooden model castle kit he wanted so badly for his tenth birthday. He stuck one of the turrets on the wrong corner with Superglue and then dumped it in the shed for kindling. I'd never burn a guitar, even a bashed-up one like this.

I sit on the bed. I pick up the guitar and put it on my knee.

'Don't make it worse,' he warns.

There's a charity shop price-tag on the side of the guitar.

'You bought it?'

He nods and stares at his faded duvet cover. I feel even guiltier for slagging off the guitar.

I wish I could buy him better, new things. He wanted an iPod for

Christmas, but instead, I bought him a stereo I found in Oxfam. A bit old fashioned now – Jason calls it retro, but it's got a CD player, a tape deck and a turntable. It still works perfectly – and loudly. He's covered it with hand-graffitied stickers, like something Daz would have done.

The pile of tapes and CDs on the shelf next to his stereo is growing – and he's so proud of his slim stack of vinyl...



I'm back in my own bedroom, fourteen years old, that Joy Division bassline ripping through my head as I lie on the bed listening to the John Peel show. I'm standing outside the school music room, gathering the courage to investigate the guitar playing and drumming I've heard every lunch time for months...

I was half-hoping the musicians would be a band of sexy sixth-formers but they're two lads from my year. Lanky, awkward Darren Pratt – I mean, what a name – and his chunky ginger mate Pete Hollis. They were a permanent fixture in the library at lunch and break-times, reading sci-fi novels or 2000AD comics. So this is where they ended up.

I lurk in the gloom at the back of the classroom, next to a dog-eared poster of Beethoven on the brown hessian noticeboard.

Darren is thrashing out chords on a battered classical guitar. He's stuck a microphone in the sound-hole and there's a distorted noise coming through an amplifier. He's singing but I can't hear him over the noise of Pete enthusiastically bashing the drums. My friends laugh at Darren – his hands look too big – his hair is greasy, he has spots and he wears massive glasses.

Playing the guitar, he looks natural, relaxed. He's even throwing little poses.

Darren sees me and stops playing. He stares at me, frozen with alarm. Pete stands up and folds his arms. He's wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt under his unbuttoned school shirt.

'What are you doing here? Get lost.' Pete still has a drumstick in each fist.

'I want to learn the guitar.' I say.

'What bands do you like, then?' Pete glares at me.

'Joy Division – and I like the Cure and the Cult...'

There's loads of cool stuff I've taped off the radio and I've bought a few albums by the bands I'm getting into but I feel tongue-tied. I walk nearer to the drum kit.

'I want to learn how to play 'Transmission' and 'Love Will Tear Us Apart'. Can you teach me?' I sound pathetic, desperate.

'You really mean it, don't you?' Darren laughs. He looks almost cute. I've never talked to him properly before.

'My friends don't understand. They like Rick Astley.'

'Daz – we don't want her messing things up!' Pete lurches towards him, nearly knocking one of the cymbal stands over.

'Actually the cool bits in Joy Division are mostly done on the bass.' Darren gives me a shy smile. 'But I can teach you what I know. There's another school guitar – it needs new strings but if you're nice to Mr Melton, he'll let you take it home.'

'I'd like that,' I say. Darren's eyes connect with mine briefly, before he stares down at his guitar.



I realise I'm tuning Jason's guitar, tightening up the E-string until it hits the right note, putting my finger on the fifth fret and tuning the A-string to the same tone. I carry on, surprised I can still tell the difference between musical notes. The tuning pegs turn smoothly between my fingers.

The guitar's actually not too bad. The strings are tarnished and buzz against the frets a bit; but it's got a nice sound and it feels good to play. It's obviously been bashed about, and there's nothing to say what make it is, but it seems like a good quality instrument, under the dust and dirt.

I've not held a guitar, or any musical instrument, since before Jason was born. My bass is wedged, in its case, at the back of the cupboard under the stairs. It feels so good to hold the guitar that, when I've finished, my fingers involuntarily run through the bassline of 'Rootless in Babylon'.

Jason stares at me, his slate-blue eyes wide – his father's eyes. I hand the guitar back to him.

'Mum!' he gasps. 'What the —?'



Jason

That riff she played was amazing. I had no idea she knew anything about guitars. I'd forgotten Mum was in a band before I was born. She told me about that when I asked about my dad. He played the guitar. His name was Darren. That's almost all she's ever told me. Their band didn't get anywhere. If they were any good, she'd talk about it, wouldn't she?

I work my way through the start of the guitar manual. There are six lines – one for each string, with numbers to show which frets to play. The manual says it's called tablature. Reading the music reminds me of the time I tried to learn the recorder. I soon got bored. No one ever looked cool playing the recorder. There are a few pages of little tunes, to let beginners get the hang of holding down the frets.

I play the notes for the *Batman* theme tune on one string. I recognise it! I try the riff from 'Smoke on the Water' next on the same thick e-string – I know it because Ben's dad listens to Planet Rock radio. I play both tunes until they get faster and smoother.

There's a red line across the tip of my left index finger. It's starting to feel sore but I keep playing. The manual says I should use the other fingers on my left hand too. I haven't felt this excited since Mum first let me loose with poster paints or when I first rode a bike without stabilisers, keeping myself upright by magic.

Ben's been having guitar lessons since the start of term. Some guy his dad knows. Last Saturday, Ben played me all the chords he's been learning. His guitar teacher taught him this old song called 'The House of the Rising Sun' but Ben was trying to play the chords in a different order and change the words. He wanted me to have a go at playing his guitar. I really wanted to try it but I was scared of being rubbish. A bit of me hated Ben for being able to do it already.

Then yesterday, I saw the guitar in the window of the charity shop.

I'm hungry for music. I can't do without it – food, water, sleep, and music. I want to discover bands no one else at school has heard of. Ben wants us to form a band together.

Music was just something in the background until the end of Year 6.

We had bikes, even though we weren't allowed to go very far on our own. We were obsessed with Star Wars and had only just grown out of making Lego space monsters. I was already a bit bored with playing on Ben's Xbox. Then Ben's sister Rachel went to Guide camp and wasn't allowed to bring her iPod. I borrowed it. She has quite good taste in music, even though Ben doesn't think so. I got into My Chemical Romance and Bullet for My Valentine that way.

Last year, in the summer holidays, I helped Mum with the vegetable patch. We had the portable radio on. They played this song, 'Motorcycle Emptiness' by the Manic Street Preachers. Mum said she didn't like it much, but I loved it. It was the first music I liked that was made before I was born. I wanted to listen to the guitar solo over and over again. I went over to Ben's house and his dad let me use his Amazon account to buy all of their CDs second hand. I like their early stuff best. I found out all about them. One of them – Richey – didn't play much guitar but wrote brilliant lyrics – he went missing years ago, and they never found him. James Dean Bradfield is a great guitarist, and I love the bass player, Nicky Wire.

Now I'm ransacking racks of vinyl and stacks of tapes in charity shops like a total music junkie. Ben's borrowing stuff from me. His dad's got a computer programme that turns tapes and records into MP3s.

I try to play 'Wipe-out'. I have to use more fingers; more strings. I play the notes slowly, trying to stretch, not like Mum – her fingers flew across the strings – but I'm starting to get the hang of it and I can recognise the tune. I can't understand why I was so afraid of learning the guitar – I'm not scared at all now.

'Jason! Jason!'

How long has she been calling my name? I don't want to put the guitar down. It's old and dusty, not new like Ben's – but it feels like part of me already. An hour ago, I was so mad with it I felt like chucking it out of the window. Mum solved it, without making a fuss, like how she taught me to ride a bike when I was little; how she stuck plasters on my knees when I fell off.

I open my door. She looks guilty, as if she's been standing there, listening to me. There's a weird look on her face, like she's worried about something but pleased at the same time.

‘What?’ I really want to say *thanks for tuning the guitar*, but the words don’t want to come out of my mouth.

‘Tea’s ready,’ she says. ‘Stuffed marrow. Fresh from the garden.’

I try not to pull a face. Stupid hippie food. I bet Ben’s not eating stuffed marrow.

I’ll start learning chords after tea.



Kaz

Everything’s quiet upstairs. I think Jason’s asleep now. I’m trying to get on with a painting. Jason played the guitar all evening, working his way through that manual. I imagined him, concentrating so hard his tongue was sticking out, contorting his fingers across the frets to form his first chords until they were sore with the effort.

He kept going so long, his fingertips must have been rubbed raw. I wanted to go in there to see how he was getting on but I know he’ll lose his enthusiasm if I’m standing over him. If he’s serious, I’ll do everything I can, everything I can afford.

I have to tell him about Mission Control but I’ve spent so long pushing it away, denying my past. It was easy when Jason was little. He accepted it was just the two of us. When he was old enough to ask questions about his dad, I didn’t tell him much. I didn’t want to talk about Daz.

Jason needs to know about Daz and the band – especially now he’s learning the guitar. I’m being selfish but I’m just not ready to tell him yet.

I dip my brush into the dark green tone I mixed on my palette for the shadow but my hand’s shaking too much by the time it reaches the canvas. The paint looks too thick and black and I’m in danger of ruining the whole thing.

The photo I’m working from is one I took in the spring – a grove of ash trees with a path running through the middle. The painting will have menacing shapes coming out of the shadows in the background, but the rest of the painting needs to be light and innocent in contrast.

Maybe I can rescue it in the morning. I wipe the brush on a rag and clean it in the jam-jar of water. I shouldn’t have started working in

artificial light but I had to do something to keep myself occupied.

I need something to stare at now. Other people's problems to get occupied by. I'll never get a TV though. Jason got sick of asking me. It must make him a total freak at school. Elsa always said TV rots your brain. I can't afford the licence fee anyway.

There's an anxious tightness in my chest. I should go to bed but I can't face another sleepless night with that New Model Army song 'No Rest' getting stuck in my head, taunting me with the past I've tried to forget, with its lyrics reminding me there is no rest for the wicked. The only cure is to read myself to sleep – I used to read Jason's *Harry Potter* books, but he's going through a phase of Stephen King horrors. I picked up a pastel-pink chick-lit novel for 50p from a second-hand bargain bin. That'll have to do. Sometimes, I read until dawn. Sleep just doesn't come.

I fill the kettle and put it on the AGA. Rain trickles down the kitchen window. While I'm waiting, I tidy away the pots from the draining board. I feel a flash of anger. The plates are greasy and burned-on food is stuck to the casserole dish. Jason's washing up was slap-dash tonight. Then I remember how he couldn't wait to rush back upstairs and get on with playing the guitar. I smile and rinse the plates.

I make myself a cup of chamomile tea. It might help me to sleep. Or it might make me need a piss in the middle of the night, risking my neck on the stairs on the way down to the bathroom in a dopey semi-conscious state.

Shit. 'No Rest' is in my head already. If I ever see Justin Sullivan again, I swear I'll smack him. The song hovers around my head all the time, like my personal soundtrack, even though I haven't heard it in years. God, I loved New Model Army. I learned the tricky bass part to that song when I was still at school. It almost drove me mad, but it was worth it.

My heart thumps in time with the bassline in my head, which has somehow morphed into 'Rootless in Babylon'.

I stop in front of the cupboard under the stairs. I put my tea down and open the door. It's stacked with paintings. Some of them are waiting to be taken to local galleries and cafés, in the hope that they'll be accepted for sale.

Most of the paintings in the cupboard are ones that haven't sold –

and pictures that went wrong, waiting to be covered in white gouache so I can start again. I stack the canvasses against the side of the stairs. Just a quick look. What harm can it do?

The back of the cupboard smells musty.

I need a torch but it's in the shed so I try to do everything by touch. The roughness of corrugated cardboard; metal clasps and sharp corners of old suitcases – full of things that belonged to Elsa. We packed the fragile ceramics away together when Jason was learning to walk, but I put Elsa's clothes, photographs and jewellery in here when she died.

That was nine years ago and, ever since then, I've been waiting. Someone might come to claim Wren Cottage and everything in it. Elsa told me to look after the house but I've got no right to be here, really. So I keep quiet.

Cobwebs brush my face as I reach to the back of the cupboard. Behind the boxes, I feel a slim rectangular shape with a fake leather texture. I grasp the handle and pull it away from the wall. Instantly, I remember the weight of the flight case.

I lay the case down on the living room floor, kneeling over it. I snap open the metal clasps without thinking but take a deep breath before I force myself to open it. It's a shock to see the bass. It's still a beautiful thing, its angular shape like a piece of abstract sculpture.

The paint is black and shiny but the strings are tarnished and slack against the neck. I remember now, de-tuning it before I put it away. I did that automatically, having heard stories about the necks snapping when they were in storage, even though I was completely broken inside myself. Back then, this bass, my Gibson Thunderbird, was my baby. I bought it just before we recorded the first album.

Now my baby is a thirteen year-old boy who towers above me. I didn't even know I was pregnant when I moved into Wren cottage when I hid my bass at the back of the cupboard, not wanting to get rid of it, but not ever wanting to look at it again.

It feels strange to be picking the bass up, holding it. My first instinct, like earlier, is to turn the tuning pegs. I start with the E-string, then I stop. Jason might hear me.

I pick up a crumpled piece of A4 paper lying in the case. I straighten it out. The set list from the final gig, Spiral Sun free festival.

Staffordshire, May 1994.

The song titles, in Daz's spiky handwriting, have run so badly in the rain they're barely legible; the ink has separated into different colours. Not that I need to read it to remember.



We kick off with 'Twisted Skin', then one of our new ones – 'Forgotten Alien'. I'm playing the dub bassline, watching the stage lights reflecting off the wet faces and waterproofs in the audience – a sea of dancing cagoules. My sense of foreboding about tonight has disappeared and I feel warm for the first time today, under the bright glare of the lighting rig. We've almost made it. These people are dancing in the rain because of us.

The Spiral Sun festival booked us at the last minute – couldn't believe their luck to get us, on the verge of the big time. Treated us right – a portacabin backstage; a proper rider with a slab of lager. Ash said it was a chance to try out the new songs on a loyal audience. It's working. People seem to love the new stuff, despite the weather.

Daz is on form too. He wasn't talking to me before we went on stage but now he's bending down to share the mic like old times to sing in harmony, grinning at me, pleased with the gig.

Pete's behind us, shaking the stage, he's hitting the drums with so much force. I glance over at Ash, eyes closed, lost in his own world of spiralling electronic noise and samples.

It's a gamble, playing new songs in front of an audience for the first time. In all the rain, the festival looks like a disaster, but the gig's going so well for us so far, after all those months of hard work and arguing in the studio.

It feels like we're saying goodbye to our old way of life: cheap cider and the backs of Transit vans. Time for the next chapter of Mission Control.

I start to sing the first verse.



I don't want to think about what happened after that...

Too late. I'm sobbing, holding onto the piece of paper. I stare at Daz's writing – apart from Jason, it's all I've got left of him. I shouldn't be doing this, I really shouldn't. What if Jason came downstairs and found me? I'd have to explain everything.

Something damp brushes against my legs. I let out a small scream and sit up. I laugh weakly with relief. It's just the cat. Her tortoiseshell fur is wet, flattened against her back. She's come in from a prowling in the rain for a nice sleep near the warm AGA, only to find a strange black shape in the middle of the living room and the woman who gives her food in a heap on the floor.

She lies down inside the flight case and rolls around on the purple plush lining to dry her fur.

'Patti – no!' She glares at me and slinks into the kitchen.

I pick the bass off the rug and put it carefully back in its case, drying the plush with my sleeve. I slip the set list under the strings.

The bass isn't going back into the cupboard, even if I don't dare to play it again. I stack the paintings back into the cupboard. I'm putting the bass under my bed. I don't care if I can't sleep.

I almost knock the mug of chamomile tea over as I carry the flight case upstairs. It's stone cold.

Chapter 2 Musical Differences

Jason

My Ultimate Burger wobbles as I carry it upstairs to Ben's room. My mouth waters at the thought of it. Mum made porridge for breakfast. That's what we eat when she's running out of money, with home-made jam in the middle of it.

This morning it went rubbery and got stuck to the bottom of the pan. The cat brought a dead vole into the kitchen and dumped it in front of the AGA. I bet most people's mums would scream, but Mum grabbed her camera, lay on the floor and started taking close-up shots of it. She made me look at it through a magnifying glass. Gross. But kind of fascinating. Its teeth were orange, and its front paws were sort of frozen in prayer as if it begged for mercy before Patti pounced on it. Then Mum scooped the vole up on a bit of old cardboard and buried it outside. Patti was disgusted with us for being so ungrateful.

I didn't really feel hungry after that, so I secretly scraped out most of my porridge under the blackcurrant bush in the garden. Cycling to Matlock Bath gave me my appetite back.

The Ultimate Burger is a tradition at Ben's house – we make burgers and pile on anything else we fancy from the kitchen. Today it's baked beans, crispy bacon, thick slices of cheese, brown sauce and tinned sweetcorn. Mum says tinned sweetcorn has no nutritional value. She grew some corn in the garden this year. We ate it at the end of the summer, roasted in tin-foil over an open fire.

Rachel, Ben's sister, squeezes past us on the landing, dangling her car keys from her fingers – she's just passed her driving test. She only turned seventeen a few months ago, but she was desperate to pass her test to get to gigs at Rock City in Nottingham.

'Why aren't you both enormous? Look at the amount of crap you eat. It's not fair.' She pulls a disgusted face.

'Have you noticed how much Jase has grown recently?' Ben says. 'He needs feeding constantly, around the clock – he only gets nuts and carrots and things at home.'

'Yeah and haven't you noticed he's not got a face like a pizza?'
'You've got a face like a horse –'

Rachel's eyes flash. She flounces past Ben and flicks his teetering burger with her long dark purple fingernail. The top layers tumble like a collapsing tower block, scattering sweetcorn all over the landing carpet.

Ben's face flushes red. He is a lot shorter than me now. I swear we were the same height in January. I had to roll these jeans up – they trailed on the floor. Now there's a gap where you can see my socks. If I grow much more, people are going to point and laugh at me in the street – not just Bradley Smeed and his Year Ten cronies – but little old ladies and the rambling groups that pass Wren cottage. At least Mum might make some money if she turns me into a performance art freak show.

I put my plate on the floor and help him to pick up the sweetcorn and the top of his burger bun. Ben puts it all right back on his plate.

'It's okay,' he says, blowing on the top half of the burger bun. 'Two second rule.'

I laugh. The bits of sweetcorn are covered in carpet fluff but Ben doesn't seem bothered.

'You're so lucky, not having a sister.' Ben sighs.

'She's not so bad.'

'She's always been nice to you.'

I open the door to Ben's room. The rest of the stairs are inside the room, which is quite cool but his dad put banisters up so Ben didn't fall down them in the middle of the night. Ben's dad is the Health and Safety guy at a quarry. He tries to make everything safe. He won't let Ben out on his bike without his cycling helmet. I've had mine since I was ten, and my head has grown so much now it hurts to put it on. I haven't told Mum.

Ben's house is a tall Victorian terrace on the side of the hill but it's all modern inside. Ben's attic is like the control room of a spaceship, with silver lights set into the ceiling. His desk is stuffed with gadgets. It's so warm, we're just in t-shirts, even though at my house we're already wearing jumpers, wrapping ourselves in blankets in the living room and going to bed with hot-water bottles.

I've been allowed to have a fire in the fireplace in my bedroom for a year now. It's so tiny, you have to sit right next to it to get warm. The sloping ceiling's great for posters but all the furniture's old. If I bounce

around too much to music, the floorboards wobble and the CDs or records jump; and I've started banging my head on the ceiling. Ben's jealous I'm allowed to burn things, and he hasn't got a record player – but I'd love to have his room.

We met at playgroup. We were both playing in the sand-tray, pretending our toy cars were crossing a vast desert. Ben was wearing a stripy t-shirt. He was older than me, already three, but I was better at painting. One day, I got into trouble for getting both of us covered in poster paint. It was my idea. We were doing hand-prints and I thought it would be fun to do a full body print instead. Mum thought it was funny – and clever of me. When we got home, Aunt Elsa treated me like some kind of genius and took a photo which is still in a frame in the living room – one half of me is red and the other half is blue.

Ben's family has had to put up with me ever since. His parents can't really get their heads around my mum. They think her paintings are morbid but they bought one of them a few years ago, to save us from a really tough patch when our electricity got cut off. They must have felt sorry for us. It's a pretty good picture of a winter tree on a bleak hillside. They hung it at the end of a dark corridor near the spare bedroom.

I get a tape I bought in the charity shop out of my guitar case and hold it out for Ben. The grainy cover shows four people looking seriously at the camera. The man in front has gaunt cheekbones and veiny-looking hands. He's holding his right hand up, like he's pointing or beckoning.

'Wow...Television. Marquee Moon.' Ben stares at the tape like it's treasure from a lost civilisation. 'They mentioned it on this thing I was watching about punk.'

'It's sort of quieter than you'd expect punk to be.'

'Maybe it's not just about having spiky hair and a leather jacket and stuff.'

Ben touches the mouse-pad on his laptop. He goes to his favourites and finds a YouTube movie.

'You've got to see this.' He takes an enormous bite out of his burger.

The video starts playing and Ben makes it fill the whole screen. A skinny guy with teeth like tombstones, in ripped blue jeans, with an

acoustic guitar plastered in stickers. He's talking incredibly fast about the history of punk rock, and it sort of rhymes. I eat my burger as the video plays. I miss what he's saying as I crunch through the bacon. He thrashes out chords on his guitar and sings, almost as fast as his talking. He plays the chords fast and heavy-handed.

Ben grins through a mouthful of food. He's finished his burger by the time the video ends. He has this glowing look, like he's just found a new religion and wants to convert me too.

'Anti-folk. My new musical direction. Like folk but punk at the same time.'

'He said something about Patti Smith. Mum named our cat after her. I didn't know she was famous. Mum just said she was a woman with a growly voice.'

'He said stupid on purpose became the new smart. That's so great. It doesn't matter that I can't do those boring guitar scales.'

'Any more of those worksheets from your guitar teacher?' I ask.

Ben pulls a face.

'I quit last night. Musical differences.'

'Are you nuts?'

'I couldn't stand it – all those scales. I asked him to teach me a few Ramones songs but he said punk ruined music. I had a big row with him.' Ben slaps his forehead in exasperation. 'According to him, Clapton is God. He says he likes the Blues – but he just wanted me to learn wanky guitar solos. Dad went mental. He's been mates with that guy for years.'

'If you don't have guitar lessons, how am I supposed to learn anything?'

How selfish do I sound? I know Ben's struggling, but those scales make sense to me, like ladders of musical notes.

'You seem to be doing pretty well by yourself,' Ben says. 'You're better than me already.'

'Learning on this crappy old thing?' I get my guitar out of its case and check the tuning. It looks knackered compared to the electro acoustic Ben's dad bought him for his birthday. But it's weird how my guitar hardly ever goes out of tune. One day, when I got back from school, it had been cleaned, and it had a new set of strings. Mum said it must be the guitar pixie. She had a stupid smirk on her face.

‘Why don’t you ask for an electric for Christmas?’ Ben asks. Not even the guitar pixie could stretch to that.

‘Oh, you think Santa will just look at his list and say Jason Knight’s been a good boy – and put a Stratocaster in his sack for me?’ It’s my turn to sound bitter.

Sometimes Ben forgets. He’s not spoilt, but his parents would buy him anything. Rachel’s only just passed her driving test and they bought her a Ford Ka that’s only a few years old – and a Satnav so she doesn’t get lost.

‘Your guitar’s not so bad. You could use it as an advantage.’

I stare at him. I just don’t get it.

‘Like Seasick Steve.’

‘Who?’

Ben’s clicking away on YouTube again. Another man sitting down with a guitar on his knee. An old man with a long white beard, wearing a baseball cap and a plaid shirt. Other lads our age are looking at porn on the internet – at least they say they are. We must be totally sad. Even though Mum’s art books are full of boobs.

The man says, in a deep American growl, that his guitar has only got three strings. It’s a battered old thing, much worse than mine. He says he’s going to do “three string trance boogie” – suddenly there’s an amazing noise coming out of it. I can’t help tapping my foot, like Seasick Steve, who’s kicking a wooden box in time with the music.

‘Isn’t it great?’ Ben grins at me. ‘I should be learning to play stuff like that, not boring shite –’

Suddenly I’ve got an idea that could help both of us.



To find out more, follow *@anne_grange* on Twitter
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When teenager Jason Knight picks up a battered acoustic guitar in a charity shop, he just wants to form a band with his best friend Ben and stop being

- bullied by his nemesis, Bradley Smeed.



Jason's guitar playing stirs up memories for his mum Kaz. She's been keeping her true identity secret: fourteen years ago, she ran away from cult stardom in the band Mission Control, traumatised by the death of her lover, troubled guitar genius Daz Lightning.

Will Jason discover the truth and become a rock god?



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