

Clay

# One

He arrived in Felling on a bright and icy February morning. Not so long ago, but it was a different age. I was with Geordie Craggs, like I always was back then. We were swaggering along like always, laughing and joking like always. We passed a Players back and forward and blew long strings of smoke into the air. We'd just been on the altar. We were heading for Braddock's Garden. We were on Watermill Lane when a red taxi rattled past us. Black fumes belched from it. The sign at the top said it was from down at the coast.

'What's that doing up here?' said Geordie.

A bit of communion wafer was still stuck to my teeth. I poked it free with my tongue and swallowed it, then drew on the cigarette again.

'God knows,' I said.

The taxi stopped fifty yards away, outside Crazy Mary's house. Crazy came lolloping out with her red hair flying. She had a big flappy flowery dress and tartan slippers on. The kid got out of the taxi. He pulled a battered brown suitcase after him. Crazy paid the driver then the two of them headed for her front

door. She looked back at us. She tried to put her arm around the kid but he twisted away and went inside. Crazy followed him and the door slammed shut.

The taxi driver leaned out of his window as he went past.

‘What you two nebbing at?’ he said.

‘Nowt much,’ I said.

‘Why don’t you nick off back to Whitley Bay?’ said Geordie.

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘Nick off, Fishface.’

And we laughed and belted on towards the garden yelling,

‘Fishface! Fishface! Fishface!’

We went through the ancient iron gate, ducked through the thorns, splashed through the edge of the clay pond, went into the quarry, went into the cave. There was writing on the wall again. We held matches up to it. All it said was, *We’re watching you. Your doomd.* Then a big black X. Somebody had tried to draw a skull as well but it looked like they’d given up cos they were too useless.

‘Thick as clarts,’ I said.

I wiped dirt over it all.

Geordie lit another fag. He sharpened his knife on a stone.

He pointed it at me.

‘Soon there’ll be a proper battle,’ he said.

I sucked the fag.

‘Aye,’ I said.

‘It’ll be just them and us,’ he said.

I shivered. I tried to laugh.

‘The Battle of Braddock’s Garden,’ I said.

I looked out at the sheer craggy quarry walls, the thick weeds, the deep clay pond, the ruins of Braddock’s house above. The sparrowhawk flew out from its stony nest and flapped up into the open sky.

‘Who was that at Crazy’s?’ I said.

He shrugged.

‘God knows,’ he said. ‘Wouldn’t like to be him, though, holed up with that loony.’

He took a syrup of figs bottle out of his pocket and lobbed it over. It was half-full of the wine that he’d stolen after Mass that morning. I screwed the top off and swigged and smacked me lips. The wine was sticky and sweet and you could soon feel the little bit of dreaminess it brought.

‘Pinching altar wine’s a sin,’ I said.

We laughed and snapped some sticks, getting a fire ready.

I pointed to the ground.

‘You’ll burn in Hell, George Craggs,’ I said.

‘Naa,’ said Geordie. ‘Not for that. You go to Hell for proper sins. Like nicking a million quid.’

‘Or killing somebody,’ I said.

‘Aye.’ He stabbed the knife into the ground. ‘Murder!’ He swigged the wine and swiped his hand across his lips. ‘I dreamed I killed Mouldy the other night.’

‘Did you?’

‘Aye.’