



## **Brook Crooks**

By Keith Gray

They'd built this massive gate. And the first thing I thought was, Who'd want to break into Brook High? Then I thought about Panny and Phil wanting to break *out*, and that made me laugh. Full-on Alcatraz-style escape stuff. Dodging searchlights, teachers with rifles at the staffroom windows. I reckoned Panny would make it to freedom but Phil was a dead man, a bullet in the back of the head - he'd never been able to run three metres without needing to stop for a ciggie and a burger.

The gate surprised me. I'd been thirteen when Dad just upped and decided to drag us right across the other side of the country and into the middle of nowhere. And maybe not everything would be 100% exactly the same after two years, but I'd had it in my head I was going to walk right into the school, just wander into whatever lesson Panny and Phil were having, and sit down at a desk next to them like I'd never even been gone. Surprise! They'd think it was the funniest thing ever. The teachers would go ballistic. I grinned massively as I thought about the looks on Panny's and Phil's faces - just full-on priceless. It'd be Kenzie, Panny and Phil, the *Brook Crooks*, back together again.

The gate was locked. I stuck my head through the bars and at least the school on the other side was the same as I remembered. Maybe most people would call it ugly but after being

stuck in the middle of nowhere for so long I reckoned Brook's grey boxes looked fantastic - because I knew it all so well.

Raymond Ave is Brook's back entrance and it had always been just a gap in a shabby hedge - shabby because me, Panny and Phil shoved kids like Toby Mitten through it at least twice a day. The people who lived along here had always kept complaining about noise and bikes on the pavement and litter and stuff. I reckoned it was them who'd got the gate put up. It probably forced everybody to use the main entrance on Straub Street, even though it was the further way around for anyone who lived this side of the estate.

It was starting to rain, just spitting, but I never used to walk the long way before and didn't want to do it now. I didn't see why I had to change. So for old times' sake I climbed the gate.

I was halfway up when someone hammered on a window. I was quick to jump down.

This old man in the front window of the nearest house shouted at me like I was a dog.

'Down! Down!'

You know that patch in the middle of a leather chair, collapsed and saggy and creased from too many fat backsides? That's what his face looked like. He waved a phone at me, threatening to call the police or school or whoever.

'Down! Down!'

I pointed at my feet. 'I'm down, aren't I?' I held out my hands like, What's your problem?

I took my own sweet time to zip my coat all the way up under my chin, push my hands into my pockets, and kick at some loose tarmac stones. Then when I decided I could be bothered, I slouched away up the middle of the road, letting him watch me go.

But as soon as I turned the corner I ran. I wanted to get to the main entrance before school finished. I knew Panny and Phil were always quick off the mark getting out.

I've been going on at Mum to let me come back for ages. The thing is, my new school, I reckon it's a school for weirdoes and arseholes. It's this tiny, little school in this tiny, little middle-of-nowhere village, middle-of-nowhere county. Postcode: N0 WH3R3. But it's definitely the school to go to if you want to learn how to be a bigger arsehole.

And the biggest of all is Mickey Thomas - full-on capital A, capital H. It's like he's the one who gets to decide who's 'in' and who's *cool* and who has their bag nicked and filled with cow crap from his dad's farmyard twice a week. But his idea of cool is so weird - he knows the names of different tractors. After two years he still calls me 'New Kid' and 'City Dick' and copies my accent. Or what he thinks is my accent.

He's big - massive enough he can carry a cow in each hand. He reckons he bites the heads off chickens. He makes up his own rules too, like: Anyone wearing blue trainers on a Tuesday has to pay him £5. But only after he's already seen me in my favourite Adidas. So either I pay him or I end up walking around in just my socks all day. The other kids go along with him, thinking he's funny. I just don't get it. It's like the school is this whole other place and all upside down to how it should be.

I've tried to get in with Mickey. I've tried to like tractors. I've told him about some of the things me, Panny and Phil have done. Like when we super-glued a maths book to Toby

Mitten's face. The teachers said he always had his head stuck in a book - we just pinned him down and made it come true.

Me, Panny and Phil call ourselves the *Brook Crooks* but we only ever mucked about for a laugh. Mickey Thomas only ever seems happy when he's making my life a full-on nightmare, in his nightmare school, in his upside-down weird elsewhere world.

Dad doesn't care that he's thrown me into this messed-up place where I don't know anything, that's obvious. Both him and Mum talk to me like I'm still ten. They haven't totally banned me from keeping in touch with Panny and Phil but I only use the school's email, just in case. Mum only got freaked out about stuff at Brook because she went snooping in my inbox and no way am I going to trust her now. Who knows what middle-of-nowhere place Dad's going to want to move to next time.

But I don't tell Panny and Phil everything. What I say is some of the stuff that Mickey Thomas does to me, just make out it's me and Mickey doing it to someone else.

I made it to Brook's main entrance the second the bell went, sweaty but glad I'd run.

Two seconds later people started pouring out onto Straub Street. The rain wasn't that bad but most people had hoods or caps or brollies. Some of the teachers were as desperate to get away as the kids, honking their car horns to chase dawdlers out of the middle of the road. I reckoned keeping that new gate at Raymond Ave locked just clogged up these gates here.

I worried I might not see Panny and Phil in amongst it all. What if I missed them? I'd come all this way. They might not even be at school today. Maybe they were having an *Xbox* Day, crashed out on Phil's floor.

Thinking that made me massively jealous. The best days had been when Phil said something like, 'Let's vote about tomorrow. Personal Development Studies with Mrs McHenry, or an *Xbox* Day?'

Maybe I missed *Xbox* days most of all. The three of us just shooting stuff up, larking about, hanging around - no teachers, parents, arseholes. Full-on best mates.

I reckoned I should ask someone if they knew Panny or Phil and if they'd seen them around today. Or if I could borrow someone's mobile so I could text them. I knew Phil's number off-by-heart. But it felt weird that there were so many people I didn't recognise - all younger kids who'd started Brook after I'd left.

But then I spotted an umbrella held higher than anybody else's. I only knew one person that tall.

'Panny!'

At least I thought it was Panny.

'Panny!'

It was him, definitely. But he'd done something stupid to his hair - like he was trying to look like a pop star. I shoved against the flow of kids.

'Hey! Panny!'

I got a kick out of how surprised he looked. 'Kenzie? What're you doing here?'

'I'm back for the weekend, aren't I? Staying at my uncle's.' I grinned up at him. 'Trust me, where I live, and my school - it's driving me full-on insane. I needed to get back to Brook just to save my life.' I stood there like a big grinning puppy-dog idiot and had to have a word

with myself to calm down. 'Where's fat-boy Phil anyway? Nicking someone's burgers and pies?'

Panny glanced back over his shoulder. 'Dunno. He'll probably be out soon, I think he was in today.' He saw I looked confused and shrugged under his brolly. 'We don't really hang around much anymore.'

I knew he was joking, so laughed.

He shrugged again. 'I've got to go. I'm meeting my girlfriend.'

I laughed harder. Hoping he was still joking. 'Come on, the three of us back together. It's like a reunion tour, yeah? We can get Toby Mittens, make him cry for old times' sake.'

Panny looked at me like I was the one not making sense. 'I'm meeting Harriet.'

'Harriet?' I only knew one Harriet. 'You're seeing Harriet Festival? With the massive chestivals?'

'Don't say that.'

'We always call her Harriet Chestivals.'

'When we were twelve, maybe.'

'Is she why you've got your hair all-?' I reached out as if to ruffle it. I was only messing, and was far too short to even reach that high. But he slapped my hand away - hard.

He glared at me. Then patted and finger-combed his flicky fringe to make sure I hadn't ruined any of his style.

We stood there in the rain. He didn't look right with an umbrella but I didn't want to say so. Other kids flowed past us.

I said, 'I'm not back long. Maybe-'

'I promised Harriet.'

'Just un-promise her.'

He shook his head. 'Call me tomorrow if you want.'

'I've not got my phone on me.' It was in Mickey Thomas's back pocket. Or under his tractor's back wheel. Or up a cow's backside. Somewhere I'd never see it again anyway.

Panny shrugged.

We stood there in the rain.

'I just thought it'd be a laugh,' I said, still wanting to win him over. 'Me, you and Phil - *Brook Crooks* reunited.'

At last he smiled. 'Brook Crooks. Right. I forgot you used to call us that.'

How could he forget? It was all I ever thought about out there in the middle of nowhere. 'So, come on,' I pushed. 'Tonight, we could-'

'I promised Harriet. Call me tomorrow, yeah?'

I didn't remind him about my phone because he was already lost in the flow of kids through the gates, holding his broolly close to his head to protect his stupid hair. I couldn't believe I was really seeing the real Panny run off like that. The real Panny didn't give a shit about girls - or hair.

Not that I was going to give up. If anybody could make the real Panny appear - like magic, like a mad rabbit out of a fancy hat - Phil could. I just had to find him.

But he found me.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder making me jump. A voice shrieked into my ear, *'Stranger danger! Stranger danger!'*

My grin was so full-on massive it could have split my head in two.

'Hey, Kenzie.' He was grinning too. 'What're you doing back?'

But my grin fell off - just splashed to the ground. Because it was a total shock. Fat Phil was thin.

'Wow,' I said, choosing my words carefully. 'Where's the rest of you?' He laughed. I didn't. He looked like a right gym-jockey. The one chin he had left was like a chunk of brick. I said, 'Seriously, you've changed. Why aren't you fat?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Why aren't you pretty?'

I still didn't laugh. He'd been funny when he was fat. Now he just seemed thin and sarcastic.

We were jostled by kids pushing past. I shoved back, getting annoyed.

Phil said, 'Listen, thanks for all your emails. Sorry I haven't replied much. Sounds like you're having a full-on time with your mate, though, yeah? Mickey? I can't believe how lucky you are escaping this place.'

I didn't know what he meant, but didn't want him knowing the truth either. 'I saw Panny. Did you know he's got an umbrella?'

Phil rolled his eyes again. ‘Yeah. Who’d have guessed he even knew how to work one, right?’

‘He said you don’t hang around much anymore.’

‘Things’ve changed, I suppose.’

‘I haven’t.’

‘I can tell.’

I didn’t like the way he said it, and wasn’t sure if he was being thinly sarcastic, so ignored it. ‘I reckon we should get together though, yeah? While I’m back. You could get Panny to meet us, couldn’t you? Get together for an *Xbox* day or something?’

‘Don’t see why not. Could be a laugh.’

‘Course it’ll be a laugh.’ And I laughed loudly to prove it. ‘A massive laugh. Full-on.’ I decided he might be weird-looking thin-Phil on the outside, but he was still *Phil* Phil inside. ‘*Brook Crooks* back together again.’

He laughed so hard he actually rocked back on his heels. ‘How d’you remember all this stuff?’

I could have asked, How d’you forget?

There was only a trickle of kids going through the gates now and right at the end of that trickle was another face I recognised. One that hadn’t changed a bit. Toby Mitten. Skinny, spotty, runty Toby Mitten. Trust him to be the last out of school on a Friday.

I nudged Phil’s arm. ‘Shall we?’

He looked blank. 'What?'

'Toby Mitten. You wouldn't believe how much I've missed punching him. I reckon I've got withdrawal symptoms.'

But Phil shook his head. 'Don't.'

Toby had seen us and slowed. He'd rather get soaked in the rain than have to walk past us. And that made me feel good. He remembered me all right.

But Phil waved him over. 'Toby hangs around with me these days.'

I looked at him, wanting to see him grin or wink or even being sarcastic. I would have grinned or winked back.

Toby Mitten came right over to us. 'Hi,' he said to me. 'Long time no see.' He said it right to me. 'How're you doing?' He even held his hand out for me to shake.

I was massively offended. Who did he think he was? I wanted to punch the *Long time how're you doing?* right off his stupid face. But Phil grabbed my arm.

'Hey! What?'

'We're mates,' Phil said.

I don't think I'd have been more surprised if Mickey Thomas had flown out of the sky riding on his favourite tractor. 'But he's Toby Mitten,' I said. I tried to pull my arm out of Phil's grip.

He wouldn't let me go. 'We're mates,' he repeated.

I don't think I'd have been more hurt if Mickey had landed his tractor right on top of me. 'But *we're* mates. Kenzie, Phil and Panny. *Brook Crooks*, right? Remember?'

Phil let go of me, rolled his eyes. 'Brook Crooks sounded lame even when we were twelve.'

I stood there. Just stood there. I stood there and didn't know what to say.

Phil said, 'Toby helps me with my homework. How else am I going to get away from here? You're lucky. Don't think I'm planning on staying in this hole forever either.'

I stood there getting wet. But getting angry too. Because I couldn't understand what was happening. Two years I'd spent in a middle of nowhere place that I hated, wanting to come back here. Two years I'd wanted my old life back. I'd full-on loved everything about Brook. But everything had changed, and I just couldn't get my head around why. I was getting hot right behind my eyes.

Weird thin-Phil said, 'Maybe Toby can do that *Xbox* day with us. That'd be a laugh, right? I'm sure Panny'd-'

It was too much. Way too much. I spun on Toby. All my anger volcanoed up in me. I lashed out, swung for him.

But he was quicker than me. I felt his fist before I saw it. I felt it a lot. And I fell back onto my arse.

Phil jumped in between us, almost as if he was trying to stop Toby from punching me again. Which was bizarre. I was sure it should be the other way around. But my nose throbbed and the puddle I was sitting in just made me feel cold and stupid and I wasn't in the mood to hit anyone anymore. So I just sat there.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Phil looked at me like I was the weird one. ‘Get a grip, can’t you? Grow up or something. Maybe you’re the big man at your new school with your big new mate, but not here.’

I couldn’t tell him the truth about Mickey Thomas. I might have done, but not in front of Toby Mitten. So I just sat there.

‘Come on, Toby.’ And with a final look of disgust weird thin-Phil walked away.

But Toby said to me, ‘We’re going round my house, if you want to come with us.’

‘Piss off.’

‘Just leave him,’ Phil shouted. And they did.

When they’d gone I stood up again. I touched my nose - winced. I was alone at the gates now, everybody else had gone home. I looked at Brook’s grey blocks of classrooms and science labs, the drama hall, the library, the gym. They looked the same. I’d thought I knew them all so well, but... But now I reckoned this was an even worse weird upside-down elsewhere kind of place than my new school.

I had a big, thick pen in my pocket. I wrote ‘*Kenzie woz ere*’ on the nearest gatepost, but put the date from two years ago. I hoped the rain wouldn’t wash it away.

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