

OVERVIEW OF CHARACTERS:

SHANTI

a 15-year-old girl

MO

(Mohan) – Shanti's ten-year-old brother

JASMIN

Shanti's best friend

RIVER

a student at Shanti's school
(Beech Grove School)

JUSTIN

a student at the neighbouring school
(Millbridge Comprehensive)

BRENDA

(Ms Henderson) – a teacher at
Shanti's school (Beech Grove School)

MR EVANS

(Tom) – a teacher at Justin's school
(Millbridge Comprehensive)



Hope is green grass
in spring.

NOAH, 15

STANTI

CHAPTER ONE

I was running in sand, dragging my brother Mo behind me. At ten, he couldn't run as fast as me. His weight, like the sand, dragged me down. A billboard loomed out of nowhere: Mo's face, scared and enormous. Under the picture in capital letters: "WANTED FOR MURDER". They were coming to get him. I had to get him to safety, but we were moving slower and slower. I couldn't lift my feet, I couldn't breathe, and suddenly Mo's hand was gone. I struggled to break the surface of the dream and woke up gasping in the darkness of my bed.

It was only a dream. Except it wasn't. Justin was lying unconscious in hospital with a cracked skull. And they said my brother had done it.



It all started with the frogspawn. For weeks the younger pupils had been watching it around the edge of the pond, and it had got to the point

where you could actually see the little black squiggles wiggling inside the see-through jelly.

Then on Monday morning when we got to school, most of the frogspawn lay smashed to pieces on the hardcourt. It was no use trying to rescue it. It had been lying in the March sun over the weekend, and the tadpoles were dead.

We knew who had done it. The old concrete hardcourt next to the pond is only separated from Millbridge Comprehensive by a hedge that marks the boundary of the Beech Grove School grounds. The hedge has gaps. Directly behind the hedge the ground slopes down to a gravel space in front of a high wall that is the back of the Millbridge Comprehensive gym. Before everything went wild, the older students often hung around in this space, vaping secretly and generally messing about. Sometimes they'd aim insults up the slope at us, if we were anywhere near the hedge.

I actually cried when I saw the frogspawn on the concrete. I cry easily, but that's because I feel things really keenly. It's always been like this, even before Mum got sick. It feels to me like everyone else has an extra skin, which I lack. Once when I had peeled a boiled egg, I suddenly thought that I felt exactly like that soft white egg without a shell. Or does everybody feel like this, but we just don't talk about it? At any rate, I often feel as if things that happen to other people actually happen to me, too. I wasn't just crying about the frogspawn. It was about all those younger children who had been so excited because of the tadpoles, and especially about my ten-year-old brother, Mo.

Mum's death just before Christmas had been really hard for Mo. For me it had been different. For me, her illness had been the really bad part. She had been in so much pain from the cancer. Dad had tried to shield me, but I was old enough to understand a lot of what was going on. It had been a horrible year. By the end of it, Dad and I were

basically supporting each other and keeping things going, and we had protected Mo from just how bad things had been for Mum. But this meant that for Mo, Mum's death was a big shock. He had still been expecting her to get well and come home. Overnight, he almost stopped talking altogether. But he had a couple of really good friends at school. They built dens, dug holes, planned stuff, and were there for each other. And Mo spent a lot of time up trees, which did him good. I thought he was going to be okay.

Brenda had early morning duty that Monday and was there when we discovered the frogspawn massacre. Brenda teaches art and also biology, or 'nature studies' as it's called for the younger ones. "It reminds you of *The Massacre of the Innocents*," she said, looking down at the hardcourt. Brenda is a very intense person. Later on I asked her what she had meant, and she told me about Ruben's famous paintings of Herod's soldiers killing all the baby boys to stop Jesus from becoming king. I did not want to see those pictures.

We couldn't prove anything, but it wound the tension between the two schools up a notch.

Now I was really worried about Mo again. He loved that pond. It was just about the only thing he actually did talk about. Among his peers, he was something of a frog expert. That morning, Mo collected the frogspawn from the hardcourt in a bucket and buried it all in a hole next to the pond. After school, as we walked home together, he made a rare statement. "I'm going to find out who did it," he said. "I'm going to find out, and then they'll be sorry."



Hope is like gambling.
Sometimes you lose,
sometimes you win,
but you keep trying.

KONSTANTIN, 15

JUSTIN

CHAPTER FIVE

I've got the right clothes and stuff, and I keep up. But that's not enough. Mike's got better trainers than me and his phone is always the latest model. But it's me they listen to – usually. You've got to go right to the edge. You've got to go over the edge. You stop when you've gone that bit too far. That's how you keep them watching you.

It was Mike's idea to go up to the pond. So I upped the game by saying we should let the water out. But we couldn't work out how to do it, and it just seemed like too much bother. We ended up flinging frogspawn at each other. Then it seemed like this creepy horror movie idea to chuck the frogspawn on the hardcourt.

It was just a bit of fun. I've got nothing against those weirdos at Beech Grove School. They do their thing, we do ours.

But later I saw that my chain from Dillon was gone. I was really pissed. It must have come off when we were shoving each other around by the pond. I remember Mike grabbing my T-shirt at the neck and pulling

. really hard. But when I went back to look, I couldn't find the chain.
. I went alone. You don't ever, ever let the others see weakness they can
. use against you.

. I don't let people see it, but I miss my big brother Dillon. We used to
5 spend a lot of time on the PlayStation. He also bought me cool stuff.
. I tried not to think about where he got the money from. Then there was
. a break-in at the shopping centre and the police arrested Dillon that
. same day. I kept on saying over and over in my head, "Dillon didn't do
. it. Dillon didn't do it." As if I could make it true. Dillon had been caught
10 shoplifting before, but this was a much bigger deal. CCTV filmed Dillon
. and his mate at a side entrance, and there were fingerprints, too. It was
. enough for them to be convicted really fast. It was a repeat offense,
. and now Dillon was 18. He got a grown-up's sentence and went to real
. prison. He's doing two years and it's horrible at home without him.

15 I'm going to look for my chain again. I really want it back.

