# WARD 13

TOMMY DONBAVAND

## CHAPTER 1

# THE LONER

*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Mark Jackson pulled himself higher against his pillows, all thoughts of achieving the high score on his skateboarding game lost.

*The bed was coming back.*

He winced as a dagger of pain shot through the break in his tibia. His science teacher would have been proud to discover that he knew the name of at least one of the bones in his leg – even if it had taken a skate park accident, a plaster cast and now an impending operation for him to learn it.

*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Mark glanced around the faces of his fellow patients in Ward 13. Why weren't they paying attention? Surely they could all hear the squeaking wheel of the bed as it came closer. Surely they had begun to notice the same pattern he had…

He caught two of the nurses – the one with the curly hair and the one called Helen – sharing a nervous glance. They knew – he was certain of that. That's why he could never get a straight answer out of either of them.

How long had the bed been away? Mark grabbed his PS Vita, closed the game and checked the time. 5.40pm. Almost dinner time. That meant the bed had left the ward just over four hours ago. Four hours. Was that how long it took to complete a hernia operation? Who knew?

*SQUEAK. SQUEAK. SQUEAK.*

Mark could hear the porter's shuffling footsteps accompanying the dodgy wheel. The bed was almost here. The bed that, when it had left the ward not long after lunchtime, had contained a patient. An older guy, called Jack. The guy who was suffering with a hernia. The guy who didn't have any family to visit him when the doors to Ward 13 were opened to the public every night.

Jack had been the ringleader of the group he jokingly called 'The Loners'. He had been the one to notice that Mark also sat alone during visiting hours, his head buried in his video game. On Mark's third evening, he had limped across the ward to join him.

"Visiting time again, huh?"

Mark had nodded, barely looking up from his game.

Jack hadn't been put off. "You expecting anyone tonight? Mum, or dad?"

Mark had shaken his head. "Don't have parents."

"Oh, I'm sorry…"

"Don't be," said Mark, looking up at Jack properly for the first time. He glanced at the Royal Navy tattoo on the man's forearm. "I'm not sorry. You don't miss what you've never had."

"I guess not," Jack had said. "No other family, then?"

Another shake of the head. "I live in Keating House."

"The children's home? Down by the High Street?"

"Yep."

"But you must have carers there?"

Mark had nodded. "They can't leave the other kids to come and sit with me, though. We're short-staffed most of the time."

"The other kids? Your friends…"

"Not allowed out after six o'clock – but I'm playing one of them online right now. His name's Liam."

"Well, I guess that's as good as having a visitor," Jack had smiled. Then, he'd pushed himself to his feet and started to limp back in the direction of his own bed.

BEEP. Mark had paused the game. "What about you?"

Jack had paused and turned. "Me? No. No one. There was my sister, Elsie – but she's been gone a while now."

Mark had waved the handheld console in Jack's direction and grinned. "I'll tell Liam you said hello."

"You do that!"

*SQUEAK! SQUEAK! SQUEAK!*

Mark could see the shadow of the bed as it approached the entrance to the ward. Just a few hours earlier, Jack had waved groggily to him as he'd been wheeled away for his operation. Now Mark would know whether his suspicions were true, or if he was imagining everything. He screwed his eyes shut and crossed his fingers tightly. *Please please please please please please…*

The porter's hands trembled as he turned the bed into Ward 13 and slowly pushed it back to its spot by the far wall.

Mark waited until he could hear the bed passing the end of his, then he forced himself to open his eyes and look.

His skin turned cold.

The bed was empty.

Jack was gone.