

## PROLOGUE

In a moment, Rick Rounder knew two things. The first was hard, cold and resting on his trapped fingers; and the second was a smell. Petrol, oh Christ no, not petrol. He knew the blade, knew it before the searing pain caused him to slump against the door and vomit in shock and agony. Freeing his bloodied hand, he rolled away. Sam moved to help and Rick shouted a warning – “Petrol!” – before collapsing at his brother’s feet.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Time steadied itself, waiting. The sun still shone out of a blue sky, the Minster still stood a safe distance away. Rick banished his pain and tried to think. Before thought could turn to action, the door trembled in its frame, then jolted for an instant, before splintering apart. Fire and smoke came out in a giant, incendiary burp. Needles of wood filled the air. As for Arthur Smitten – Smitty, school bully, failed father – whatever he had been, he was no longer any of these. Now he was a burning ball, rolling through the blackened doorframe and then, with final, unlikely grace, unfurling into a dive that took him over the balcony. Half consumed by flames, he flailed through the air and fell to earth.

“The Human Torch” was how the headlines in that night’s paper put it. There was no mention of the girl. That piece of news was kept back for a day.