

## CHAPTER 1

# SARAH

Jack Potter crept down the stairs as quietly as he could. He smiled to himself for being smart and remembering to take off his trainers before he started. His socks made almost no sound at all on the carpet.

But then — *Creak!*

Jack froze. He'd forgotten about the third step from the bottom! Maybe he wasn't so smart after all. This ancient house had loads of loose floorboards that could easily give him away. He made a mental note to draw a map of them all when this was over.

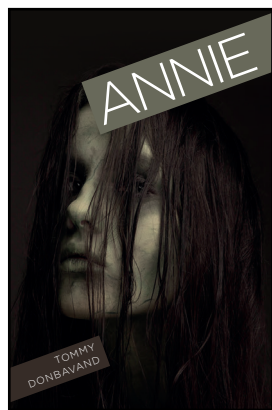
He paused a few seconds longer, just in case someone appeared in the hallway below to see who had made the noise. Thankfully, no one did. He'd got away with his blunder. This time. He'd have to be more careful in the future.

Once at the foot of the stairs, he pulled his portable camera from his pocket and clipped it to the frame of a painting that hung on the wall. Pressing his cheek against the canvas, he followed the camera's line of sight to check he would be filming in exactly the right place.

It was perfect!

Activating the camera's motion sensor, he tiptoed a few metres further then carefully pushed open the kitchen door — just enough to peek inside and check his victim was in there. Yep. There she was, chopping up a cucumber while listening to some boring classical music.

This was going to be great!





## CHAPTER 1

# SAM

### *Two Days Before*

The helicopters were low in the sky. Giant, black, shiny creatures, like a swarm. Chugging and clattering over rooftops and towers, banking and swooping.

Sam Rafford watched them as he made his way down the hill to college, his rucksack over one shoulder.

He wondered what the helicopters could see. How closely they could scan the town, the streets and the houses. Could they pick out individuals, mark them out as troublemakers? Three months ago he'd have thought this was ridiculous. Now it

seemed a lot less stupid. It was odd, how quickly people got used to new situations.

As he made his way down the hill, he took his phone out and watched the video Cait had messaged him. It was jerky and poor quality, but there was no mistaking what it showed. The video had been filmed from the middle of a crowd. A caption said O2 ARENA. Many people had one hand raised in the air, as if at a concert. But these people were not holding up lighters or phones. They had their arms stiffly upwards at 45 degrees. You didn't need to know a lot of history to recognise that gesture, Sam thought.

“What on earth are you watching, Sammy?”

He glanced up at his friend Jas's mildly accusing voice. He flicked the video off with his thumb. He didn't know why he felt guilty watching it — there was no reason to — but right now an explanation would have been needed, and he didn't feel like giving one.

“Just people,” he said.





## CHAPTER 1

# TOO MUCH SKY

“Joel. Have you finished chopping that wood?”

I am irritated by my sister’s voice. I’m looking out across the moors through my binoculars at a circle of sky edged in black. I am tracking a dot, a flicker. It could change my life.

“Joel!”

Elise’s voice is forceful, angry.

“All right!” I shout over my shoulder. “I’m coming.”

“Yeah, but you’re not, are you?”

“You’re not Mum!”

“No.” I hear the sadness in her voice. “I’m not.”

I am distracted by a flash of movement across the valley. Not the bird. No, I’ve lost that now. The glint of light on glass.

I track a car as it makes its way up the twisting lane towards the slate roof of Beck Croft. It’s the only other house nearby. Three miles away, across the moor, lies the nearest village. Twenty miles up the valley are suburbia and the town.

The sky here is usually grey. Huge and open. The moors look like hulking giants against the blue night. Until they slowly fade into the blackness and become part of it.

It’s just me and Elise, since Mum died. She’s 20, just five years older than me, so she is old enough to look after me. To be my guardian.

When she can be bothered.





## CHAPTER 1

# NOT HUMAN

*MADE's creations aren't born — they're built.*

That was the first line inside the booklet in Violet's hand. She held it in her fist as a car pulled up outside. Her mum bounced on the balls of her feet beside her. Maggie, Violet's older sister, rolled her eyes.

Violet looked down at the booklet. She kept her finger stuck in the page about the robot that was coming to live with them. They were getting a 13-year-old boy called Ollie.

Violet's mum saw her looking and smiled at her. "Isn't it exciting that the two of you are the same age?" she said.

"He's a robot," Violet replied. It wasn't exciting because Violet knew he'd be going to school with her. Her friends had already told her they didn't want him around — so what was she going to do?

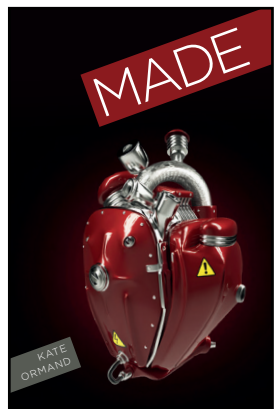
The porch light clicked on outside.

Violet moved to the side of the window and looked out at the two figures stood outside the door.

There was a man in a dark suit and silver tie talking to Ollie. The man guided Ollie forwards so he was standing in front of him. Ollie's movements were awkward.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Best behaviour, girls," Mum said as she stepped forwards.





## CHAPTER 1

# THE BOY NEXT DOOR

He arrived in the night — Amos. That should have told me. Warned me.

Amos — an unusual name for an unusual boy. That's what he said anyway. Only then, I hadn't known just how unusual.

Nor had I known that he would break my heart. Break it into a million pieces.

And I would break his.

\*

It was the start of the long summer holidays. I woke to hear voices coming from next door. Things being banged about. Furniture being moved. Those sort of noises.

So at last, someone had moved in next door. The house had stood empty for ages.

I was dying to know who our new neighbours were.

I *really hoped* it would be some fit guy.

I didn't actually expect it to be. That was my normal daydream. They say I'm a dreamer, a romantic.

But what's wrong with that?

I'm not such a dreamer that I don't do my school work. Just the opposite. My emotions and dreams are reflected in my artwork and my English. I write poetry and love stories. I paint in pastel colours, kind of like Monet. Sort of hazy, romantic colours — beautiful people, beautiful places, beautiful things.





## NOW

### *Immigration Centre — Dover*

“Tell us again exactly how old you are.”

“I already said. I am 15.”

“And how did you get to the UK?”

“Your police found me. In a lorry. Please, can you tell me where my brother is?”

“We just need you to answer a few more questions first.”

The grey-haired man in the dark suit reminded Samir of his maths teacher — same lines at the side of his eyes, same steely hair, same way of firing questions like bullets across a room.

“You say you are originally from Syria, right?”

“Aleppo. Yes.”

“And you claim you are underage and seeking asylum in the UK?”

This was the younger man. The one in the uniform — light blue shirt, navy lapels with shining brass buttons — the one with the soft eyes and shy smile who wrote everything down.

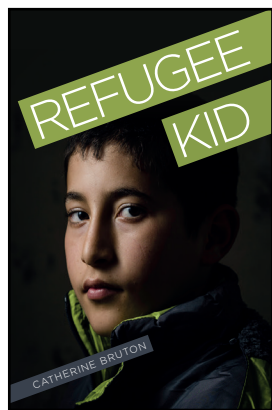
“Yes, with my brother. He is only six years old.”

“You understand that I am from the Home Office and my colleague here is from Immigration Services.” The older man spoke like he was posing a maths problem. “We are here to assess your claim for asylum. Do you need a lawyer?”

“No — yes — I don’t know.” There was no clock on the wall and Samir felt as if he had been sitting in the white room with the white desk and three metal chairs for hours and hours. “My brother, please. I promised my parents I wouldn’t leave him.”

“Ah yes, your parents. Tell us about them again?”

“I’ve already told you. I need to find my brother, Moosa. Do you know where he is? Please.”





## CHAPTER 1

# MOTHER

Carrie sat in the living room, smoothing out her shirt. She was waiting for her mum to turn up.

Her mother. Her actual mother.

Just saying the word out loud had been sending shivers down Carrie's spine for days.

Carrie couldn't believe how jittery she was. *I'm 16, and I'm this scared?* she thought, telling herself how stupid she was being. But she couldn't help it. She hadn't seen her mother since she was five, the same day she abandoned her in Birmingham's Bullring Shopping Centre.

Ever since then it had been just Carrie and her dad looking after each other. Eleven years of silence. Eleven years of longing for a mother who'd let go of her hand, then simply vanished.

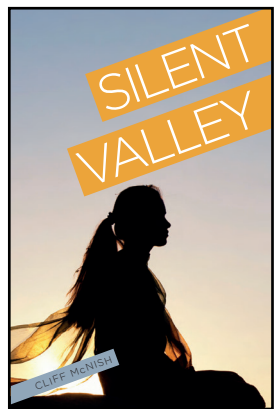
And now, as if returned from the dead, her mother Suzanna was back in her life again. She'd phoned Carrie's dad. "I want to see her," she'd told him. "I want to see my lovely daughter. To explain. If she'll let me. If she can find it in her heart."

\*

"I never stopped loving you, you know."

Those were Suzanna's first words when she sat down on the sofa, and they completely melted Carrie.

Moments before, she'd almost run out the house when the doorbell rang. Why should she see a mother who'd dumped her when she was so young? But part of her had always craved that missing mother-daughter relationship. And here





## CHAPTER 1

# HEADLINE

On the first day back at school after Easter, half the pupils were trying not to stare at Sasha. The other half weren't bothered about what people thought and just stared at her openly. Only Zoe and Alice weren't involved, because they were in the head teacher's study. This time however they were not there for being in trouble.

"I take it you're aware of what happened to Sasha Williams's brother over the holiday," said Ms Driver.

"Like we could miss it!" said Zoe, and she had a point. The news had been everywhere. Headlines online and in the local papers: **LOCAL BOY**

**FEARED DROWNED. BOY, 17, LOST AT SEA.** It had even made one of the national newspapers under the heading **ITALIAN HOLIDAY TRAGEDY**, with a small photo of Josh Williams in swimming trunks.

"Well," the teacher carried on, "as Sasha's friends, I expect you to support her through this difficult time. Her parents inform me that she is having some problems adapting and showing some... strange behaviour. I know I can count on you to help."

"Oh great," said Zoe as soon as they'd left the study. "It was bad enough hanging around with the boring cow last term. I'm not being stuck with her again if she's gone crazy."

"I thought you liked her," said Alice.

"As if! I just wanted a chance to meet that gorgeous brother of hers."

"But you're going out with Ben!"

