



## CHAPTER 1

# ALONE

Connor woke up and found himself alone in a silent house. He checked the bedrooms, the bathroom, the kitchen and the living room. There was no one anywhere.

“Jane?” he shouted. “Matt?”

He couldn’t bring himself to call them Mum and Dad yet. Maybe he never would.

It didn’t matter anyway. They weren’t here.

He grabbed a bag of salt-and-vinegar crisps from the kitchen and ate them as he wandered around. Jane and Matt would never have let him

do that. Crisps and chocolate were strictly for the evenings, and only if he’d been good and hadn’t lost his temper all day.

But they weren’t here now and he could do what he liked.

Connor glanced over at the patio door. A sheet of plywood covered the glass he’d broken the night before. He shouldn’t have thrown the rock, but Jane and Matt shouldn’t have told him he wasn’t allowed a phone.

How was he meant to settle in and make friends at his new school if he didn’t even have a phone?

Jane and Matt had been so angry that they’d sent him to his room. Then he’d heard Matt talking on the phone, then...

Then...?

He couldn’t remember the rest of the night at all. He must have fallen asleep early.





## CHAPTER 1

# FRANK'S FRYER

"Why don't you sit down?" Mum said. Everyone knows that when your mum says that, she means *sit down now!*

So that's what I did. I sat down opposite Mum and Dad, crossed my arms and stared at the mark on the kitchen table where I'd put the frying pan down last year and burnt the wood.

"Miss Carter's been on the phone," began Mum. "She said you've been skipping classes."

I gave nothing away. I just kept staring at the burn mark.

"She's worried about you."

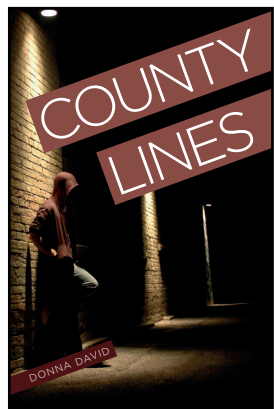
"You mean she's worried about my grades," I mumbled.

"Of course she is," snapped Dad. "You're spending your maths lessons in the toilets!"

"Actually, I was on the tennis courts," I replied. I gave him what I hoped was a smug look. "Extra PE, you know?"

Dad banged his hands down on the table, making us all jump. "Is this all some sort of joke for you? Do you think it's funny?"

I shrugged. He wouldn't understand. None of them would. Sometimes it was just all too much: the constant reminders that we're in Year 11 now, the revision sessions and booster lessons and mock exams. Sometimes the thought of sitting through another class made my skin itch and my head pound, and all I could do was find somewhere quiet, somewhere as far away as possible from where I was supposed to be.





CHAPTER 1

# GOOD DAYS, BAD DAYS

“Mum! I’m home...”

I stop, key still in the lock. No smell of dinner cooking. No TV. Something isn’t right. I just know it.

Dropping my school bag, I race through the house. “Mum!”

“Ellie...”

She sounds weak and my heart sinks. It hits rock bottom when I see her slumped on the kitchen

floor. There’s a puddle of tea and smashed crockery all around her.

“Oh, Mum!” I kneel and throw my arms around her. She’s been crying, but her tears are dry now. “Did you fall?”

“My legs just gave way. I couldn’t get up.” She tries to smile. “Nothing new.”

“How long have you been stuck here?”

Her eyes stray to the smashed mug and bowl. Her breakfast.

I feel like weeping. “All day! You’ve been stuck here all day? Why didn’t you ring me?”

“Couldn’t reach my phone.” Her chin crumples. “I’m dying for the loo.”

“Oh, Mum!” I hug her. This ME illness she suffers with is so unfair. It’s a big mix of problems. There’s no real treatment for it. It just saps all her energy and makes her body ache. She wasn’t





## CHAPTER 1

# 60 MINUTES TO GO

“You are trapped. You have one hour to solve the puzzles and find a way out or you will remain locked in here forever. So, think carefully — it’s time for you to... learn your lesson.”

Paige shivered. Even though she knew this was a game, that the words were just a recording, it still felt creepy to be locked in a room with no way out. They couldn’t even communicate with the outside world. The man who’d greeted them was dressed like an old-fashioned teacher. He wore a black gown and one of those flat, black hats with a tassel on. His face was hidden by a

black mask. He’d said they had to store all their stuff, phones included, in a locker before they were allowed in.

“I can’t believe we’ve come to school on a Saturday,” said Dan, looking around them.

It wasn’t really a school, of course, but the place had been decorated to look like a classroom, complete with desks and a big whiteboard on one wall. It wasn’t a very realistic classroom, though; it had a strange mix of equipment. There were large, complicated books on subjects like chemistry, but then there was a jolly ABC poster more suited to a reception class. And no classroom they’d ever known — and they were Year 12s now — had contained a treadmill, an old-fashioned wall telephone or a safe with a combination lock.

“Yeah, I reckon the theme’s a mistake,” said Trip. “Who wants to go to school when they don’t have to? And you have to pay — how much?”





## CHAPTER 1

# THE DIARY

The removal van sputtered to life.

Beth's stepdad pushed down on the start button of their small electric car, ready to follow the van. Her mum sat in the seat in front of her, and Beth sat in the back between boxes. She had her arm squashed up against the window. She was leaving the home she'd grown up in. The place she had always lived.

Beth's dad had moved back to Ireland, back to where he was raised and where his family still lived. Never mind this family. Never mind Beth.

The drive wasn't far but they were going to a new area and Beth would be starting a new school. Her mum assured her that she'd make new friends there.

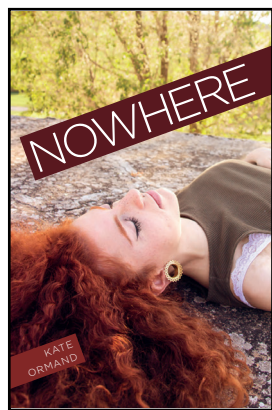
The community they were moving to was gated, and it had everything they'd need behind its walls. Beth's mum was going to be the new secondary-school history teacher there and her stepdad had landed a job as a chef at one of the town's restaurants.

Beth's mum had given her an e-booklet about the town, the slogan in italics on the first page:

### APPLEGATE

*You'll never want to leave. You'll never have to...*

Beth had the e-booklet open on her tablet now and she swiped her finger across the screen. Their electric car moved slowly, full of extra luggage. The removal van let out puffs of black smoke and wobbled dangerously each time it turned a corner.





# OFFSIDE

## August 7

What do I need this journal for? They want me to write in it because Mum died? That's stupid, yeah? Writing stuff in a notebook won't bring Mum back. You've got to be an idiot to think it will.

## August 8

Nadia thinks I'm an idiot. She reckons I should use this journal. She thinks it'll be good for me to write down how I feel. Why? I talk to her about it.

It's not that I don't like talking about Mum, it's that I don't like talking about her not being here. Every time I talk about her I have to remember she's gone. I just don't want to remember that. It's hard enough without being reminded constantly.

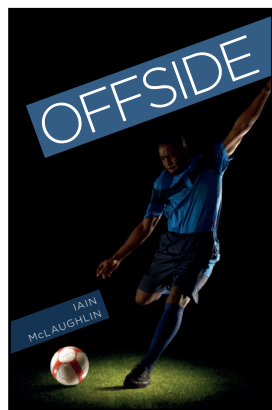
Nadia is usually right about stuff but I think she's wrong this time. I'll do it, but only because she wants me to.

## August 10

Should I write this? Well, here goes. I feel guilty because I'm happy with Nadia. It feels wrong. I should be thinking about Mum but I'm thinking about Nadia instead. I feel guilty about that. I can't talk to nobody about it neither. Wait. That should be 'I can't talk to anybody about it either'. Mum hated it when I got grammar wrong.

I can't talk to Dad about me and Nadia. It wouldn't be fair to him, me getting with Nadia while he's getting over Mum dying. I can't talk to Naz either. He's my best mate but Nadia's his twin sister. She doesn't want him to know yet. He is either going to go totally cray-cray or think we're family already or something. Whatever he does, it'll be weird to begin with.

I'm not writing cray-cray again. It looks stupid written down.





## CHAPTER 1

# PRIVATE

Funerals are weird but wakes are weirder. Burying someone is bad enough, but then having a party? It just feels... wrong.

When I first heard the word 'wake', I nearly laughed. Stupid name. The person wasn't awake and never would be again. *Sheesh!* The only person I knew who would also have seen the funny side was Dad. But he wasn't around to share the moment with, seeing as it was *his* wake we were holding.

"Bo, make yourself useful, please," hissed Mum, handing me a plate of limp-looking sandwiches.

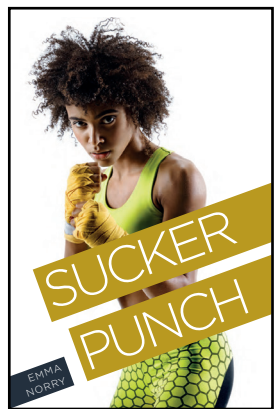
Our house was crammed. Dad had been a friendly guy and, as a plumber, he had a reputation for honesty, so even though you wouldn't imagine customers coming to a wake, loads had turned up.

Aunty Hilda, his sister over from the Caribbean, was snoozing in my room, so Mum stopped me from sneaking upstairs, even though all I wanted to do was hide.

I handed out drinks and sandwiches while people murmured quietly about how great Dad was and offered us their sympathies.

Being at the graveside was strange. I didn't cry. I hope that doesn't sound cold or uncaring. Of course I was sad. I was *ruined*. I love Dad. *Loved*. He wasn't one of those distant, come-home-late-from-work dads. He made silly jokes and rarely raised his voice.

When I was ten and obsessed with face-painting, he let me loose on his face, armed with Mum's old make-up.







## CHAPTER 1

# GOING OUT

Raheem's grandmother had an old-wives' tale for every occasion.

Popping knuckles caused arthritis. Swallowed gum stayed in the belly for seven years. Almost anything could cause a cold — showering after dark, going outside with wet hair, walking on tiles without socks.

All nonsense. Of course, he'd never dare say that to her face. Arguing with a grandparent probably brought three years' bad luck.

Even though he didn't believe her stories, he sometimes found himself following her rules,

even when she wasn't around. He avoided walking under ladders, and always saluted magpies. It was habit.

"Raheem!" his nine-year-old sister Zainab shouted down the stairs. "Quick! Emergency!"

"What is it?" He zipped up his coat. "I'm going out."

"Spider!" Zainab's face appeared over the banister.

"Ask Mum." He stuck a foot into his trainer.

"She's in the shower, please come and get it! Please?"

"I'm going to be late. I'll get it when I get back."

Zainab ran down the stairs in her bunny slippers. "You know I can't sleep with a spider in my room." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "What if it crawls in my mouth?"

