

CHAPTER 2

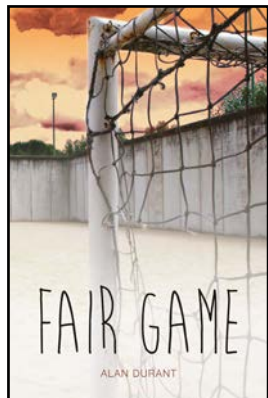
BORED

I found it hard to settle back on Earth. I was given a place to live. There were no jobs but I had my state bounty. Every citizen had one – a sum of money to live on. I had no family – my parents and my two sisters had died in the Great Plague of 2069. I'd had a few friends but I couldn't get back into my old life. I'd been happy to spend my days at the X-Dock before I went to jail. We'd played on the simulators all day and tried to think up new virtual games. But when I came back it all seemed so empty, pointless, a waste of time. I wanted action, exercise. I

wanted to play football. My friends just laughed at me when I told them.

“Why would anyone want to kick a pig's bladder?” they said. They thought the whole idea was ridiculous. They thought I was nuts. Maybe I was. A year on Penal Colony 156 was enough to turn anyone crazy. But I didn't feel crazy. I felt full of life and energy. I didn't want to spend my life sitting in front of a screen. I wanted to get out in the open air, to play a game with physical contact. I wanted to play proper football.

I was bored. Every day was dull as dull could be. I even started to wish I was back in prison. I thought of Danny and the others on the Penal Colony, playing football, and I envied them. Why was everyone on Earth so boring? Why didn't they want to get out and play, like me? Surely, I thought, there must be other people who felt the way I did? I sent out some blogcasts asking if anyone was interested in playing real football. I said what fun it was and what good exercise, too.





CHAPTER 3

RAINING

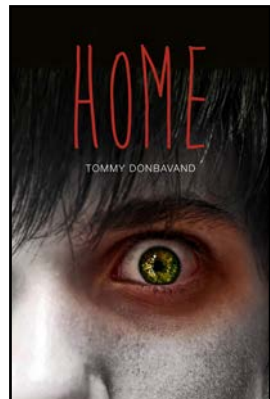
It rained the day of Max's funeral. I don't know if you've ever been to a funeral. If not, count yourself lucky. They're horrible. I'd been to a couple in the past – one for my grandad, and another for our elderly next-door neighbour. But this was worse than anything I ever could have expected.

Fourteen years Max and I had been together, with barely more than a day apart. He'd been born three minutes before me which meant, according to him, that he always got to open his birthday presents first, and he blew out the first lot of candles on the cake.

The first time we'd ever been separated was when we were invited to Lenny Cook's sleepover when we were eight, but I couldn't go because I had chicken pox. Even then, we didn't last an entire night apart. Lenny's mum rang my mum at midnight to say that Max couldn't sleep without me and he wanted to come home. She drove all the way to get him in her pink Eeyore pyjamas.

She wasn't wearing pink today, though. She was in black, like everyone else. Fiona even had a black stocking pulled over the white plaster cast on her leg.

I stood at the edge of the grave and watched as my brother's coffin was lowered into the ground. It looked too small, somehow, almost as though he couldn't have fitted inside comfortably. I don't know why that bothered me – that he wouldn't be comfortable. Crazy the kinds of things you think about at times like this.



I continued down the aisle, casually lowered my arm down to my side and caught the hidden block of cheddar with my fingers. Then I reached into my bag for my shopping list and swiftly dropped the cheese inside.

Cheese on toast for tea tonight, then.

I was proud of this bag. The best one I'd built in ages. It was made of a stiff material that didn't shake too much when I dropped things into it, and it was completely lined with tin foil to stop security tags from setting off the supermarket's alarms when I was ready to leave. That was just as well, as I already had two mobile phones, a handful of DVDs, a jar of pasta sauce and a loaf of bread in there.

Now all I had to do was get rid of the idiot in the guard's uniform. Honestly, what kind of a man works in security at a supermarket? Couldn't he get a job with the real police?

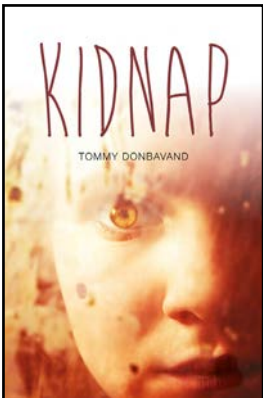
I lifted my left hand up and scratched my nose, taking a quick look into the mirror I had taped to my palm. This was another brilliant invention of mine. It meant that I could keep watch behind me without having to turn around. Yep – there he was. Peering at me from around a shelf piled high with eggs.

I'd seen this bloke a few times before. He was older than the other guards employed by this branch – maybe in his forties. He was overweight, too – which meant I could outrun him, if it came to a chase. That didn't mean I fancied running out of here, though. I'd much prefer a casual walk home with my 'purchases'.

I had to lose him.

I waited until a family passed behind me, their trolley piled high with shopping. For a moment, it took me back to the old days. Back to when my...

No, I didn't have time to reminisce. I had to lose the goon in the uniform.





CHAPTER 4

THE WOODS

It had been years since Lucas had been down into Cleeve Woods. He could see why. The place was creepy, even in the daytime. The trees seemed to smother what little light could break through their branches.

He sniffed. The air itself smelled rotten. All musty leaves and fox dung. Like a graveyard. Lucas sighed. *Like a graveyard?* Now he was just freaking himself out. He checked his watch: 5.45. The others were supposed to be here by now. He shivered. He didn't want to be here when it got really dark.

A twig snapped behind him. Lucas spun around so fast that he nearly lost his balance.

"Who's there?" he asked, crying out in alarm when he felt someone tap him on the shoulder from behind. He twisted to see Mia grinning at him.

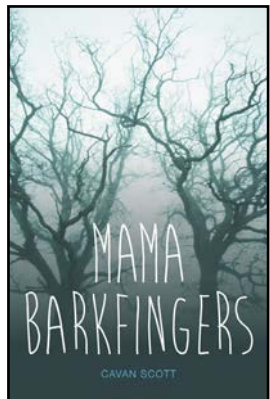
"What's the matter?" she asked, twirling a lock of hair innocently around her finger. "Seen a ghost?"

"Yeah. Funny," Lucas said, his heart hammering in his chest. He looked around, his eyes narrowing. "Where's Jack?"

She shook her head, pulling her finger from the curl of hair. "He's got stage fright."

"No, I haven't," said a voice from behind the trees. "I just look ridiculous."

Lucas peered into the gloom. "Jack?"





CHAPTER 1

HOME ALONE

Lee first saw the face through the front door.
A nose pressed against the frosted glass.
A steamy smear spread from the lips. Dark eyes
peered in. Blinking. Staring. Scary.

Lee threw himself on the floor and lay still. His
heart was thumping like mad. No one ever
called at their house. Mum always told him not
to answer the door to strangers. He'd never felt
so scared. Not in his own home. He just hoped
the eyes hadn't seen him.

Being alone had never been a problem before.
Lee was used to it. Until now. He'd always liked

being in the house on his own. It was the only
time he could do what he liked. No one to nag
or fuss. But all of a sudden it felt different. Who
could he call for help? No one was next door –
they were away. It was already getting dark.

The phone was just out of reach. Lee grabbed
a leg of the wobbly hall table. It shook and
crashed down on him. The phone, note pad,
pens and a pot plant fell on top of him. As he
lay at the foot of the stairs, he wished he hadn't
snapped at his mum at breakfast.

“Of course I'll be all right here by myself. I'm
fourteen. I like being on my own. Why do you
treat me like a helpless zombie?”

But now he couldn't manage – and he knew it.

There was nothing Lee could do. The dark
shape through the glass was pushing a key in the
lock. It jangled and clicked as Lee pulled himself
across the floor towards the door. He'd try to fix
the chain before the door could open. He might



fields, was to be their new home. It even had a name – Stancliffe House. Frances was excited and couldn't wait to move in. She and Tom had chosen their bedrooms. Now all they needed to do was shift the enormous pile of boxes littering the front lawn into the house to begin unpacking.

Mum picked up a box. "Come on, Tom, love, let's get these inside."

Tom wasn't listening. He'd climbed up onto the stone wall surrounding the garden and was sitting cross-legged, opening his book.

"I'll just finish this chapter."

The tip of his tongue stuck out in concentration as he lost himself in yet another book about space, or time travel, or something. Frances loved her little brother, but sometimes he could be a pain.

"Tom, if you don't come and help, I'm going to nick your bedroom!"

Tom looked up and glared. "Don't you dare, Fran!" Frances laughed as he leapt from the wall and ran towards her.

"Got to catch me first!" she giggled, racing away across the lawn, dodging between two boxes.

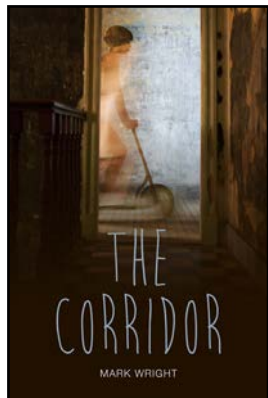
"Hello," a voice called from down the lane. "Moving in today?"

"That's right," said Dad, greeting the lady who walked up to the wall. Frances thought she looked quite old with her grey hair and creased face, but she walked with a quick step and her blue eyes were bright.

"Kids, this is Mrs Gardner. She lives in the house at the bottom of the lane."

Mrs Gardner smiled. "And you two must be Frances and Tom?"

Frances said hello uncertainly. Tom just smiled shyly.





CHAPTER 5

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Sally watched in horror as her dad talked to the men. One of them reached inside his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper. No, it was a photograph. Her dad took it, looked at the picture and shook his head.

“They’ve got to him,” whispered Tyler, trying to pull her back up the hill. “They’re after you, too, now. Because of me.”

Sally tried to stop him. “No. Dad wouldn’t help them.” The thought of it was making her feel sick.

Tyler gazed at her with those brilliant blue eyes. “They’re clever. They know what to say to make people do what they want. He won’t have a choice.”

Tears pricked Sally’s eyes. “But he wouldn’t hand me over,” she insisted.

“Sally, if you go back, they’ll hurt him too. Maybe worse.”

Sally imagined her dad struggling with the men – the flash of light, his clothes lying discarded on the floor.

Tyler was still speaking. “We need to find somewhere else to go.”

Sally thought of something. “My grandad. He lives near here. He’ll help us.”

Tyler shook his head. “No. It’s too dangerous.”

Behind them, they heard the doors of the men’s car slamming. The engine starting.





CHAPTER 3

“WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING HERE?” demanded Gort, he and the guard brandishing their swords.

Indigo picked up a piece of wood and drew a tree house in the soot on the cave’s floor.

“You are saying this is some sort of game?” demanded Gort.

Indigo and Tyler both nodded.

“I do NOT believe you for one minute!” snapped Gort. “Search the cave!”

The guard searched the cave, turning over rocks and lifting up clumps of moss. Indigo and Tyler watched him very closely. Their hearts thumped when he walked right over the escape hatch and then snapped some stalactites off the cave’s ceiling. One of these was less than three centimetres away from the ceiling panel where the tape recorder and cassettes were stashed. But after a quick look he moved back towards Gort.

“Nothing here,” reported the guard with a shrug of his shoulders.

Gort narrowed his eyes and took a long look at the ceiling. His eyes seemed to be focusing on the exact place where the secret panel was. For a few seconds, the twins were sure he was going to walk right over and pull it open.

But instead, he muttered under his breath and ordered the guard to bring the twins outside.

