



## CHAPTER 2

### INTO THE WOOD

At the front of the dining room, the Best Man raised his glass. “Please join me,” he said, “in toasting the Bride and Groom!”

Chairs scraped as the wedding guests rose to their feet.

“The Bride and Groom,” they chorused as one, except for Lee who burped instead.

Lisa downed the last of her orange juice and sat back on her seat. Mum was busy telling Lee off, while Dad was happily chatting to a distant family member on the next table. His bad mood

had vanished, helped by the wine he’d consumed during the meal. His cheeks were so red they almost matched his hair. Lisa glanced around the large room. She hadn’t quite realised how many of Dad’s side of the family were ginger until the wedding. They all seemed to share Dad’s freckles too.

Lisa had always wished she had freckles like Dad. When she was six she’d even drawn her own using a permanent marker. She’d considered giving Lee a few more, but decided he had enough anyway. So she’d given him a beard instead.

There had been a lot of tears that night as Mum tried to scrub off the results.

Lisa glanced at her watch. It was nearly six o’clock but the temperature hadn’t dropped at all. In fact, it had got worse. Lisa felt so clammy, her dress sticking uncomfortably to her back. The hotel the happy couple had chosen for the wedding reception was pretty but so, so hot inside.

THE  
CHANGELING

CAVAN SCOTT



## CHAPTER 2

### FRIENDS

Catherine Willows is weird. I feel really mean saying that – especially as I’m not exactly one of the cool kids myself – but it’s true.

She’s only been at our school for two weeks, and she’s already attracted a lot of attention to herself. The wrong kind of attention, if you know what I mean. The kind of attention that gets you picked on.

For a start – she skips everywhere. And I mean everywhere! From class to class, in the playground – I even caught her skipping from one of the toilet cubicles to the sink to wash her hands.

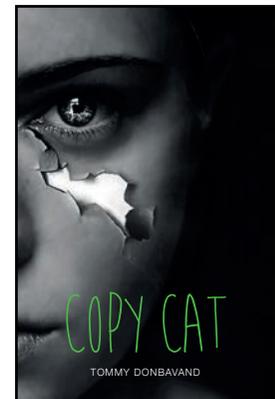
She dresses in a strange way, too. We all have to wear uniform at our school and it’s pretty dull. Black trousers or skirt, white shirt, black blazer and school tie. We look like a bunch of depressed clones shuffling along the corridors from room to room. But not Catherine...

She’s covered the lapels of her blazer in metal badges with slogans like ‘I can do it!’, ‘The best I can be!’, and ‘Top of the Class!’. Add to that the frilly collar of her shirt, the pink bobbles at the back of her socks and her blonde hair in bunches, and you can see why she stands out from the crowd.

“I feel sorry for her,” I said to my best friend, Fiona, one lunch time.

“Sorry?” said Fiona, spitting out a lump of potato. “For weirdie Willows?”

“Yeah,” I said, cleaning my glasses and putting them back on to look over at her. “She always sits by herself at lunch time.”





## CHAPTER 1

Omak sat in the driver's seat of the Blood Bug, his small, armoured car. He revved the engine and drove straight at the car in front of him. The street and buildings flashed by. He could see the tough, iron plate that covered the other car's front. It was so close that he could even see the scratches that scarred its blue paintwork and the loose rivets that rattled as it bounced towards him.

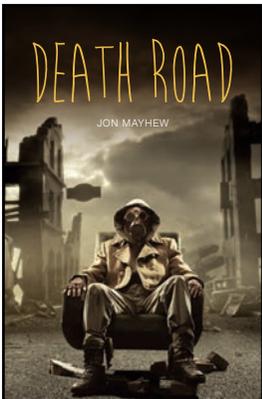
"Silva Dacosta," Omak muttered. "You're not getting this job."

The screaming engine noise filled the car as it flew towards Silva's car. Silva wasn't chickening out either. One of them would have to brake or they would smash into each other.

Omak could see Silva's wide eyes, her short, spiky white hair through the tiny windscreen. If he didn't brake now, that would be it!

He dragged the steering wheel to the left and felt the rear end of the car drift. The whole Blood Bug rattled along as it turned into a skid. Sparks flashed from the front wing as it clipped Silva's car. Omak swung the steering back and managed to straighten out. The seat belt gripped his chest and shoulders as he slammed on the brakes and came to a squealing stop.

Omak nearly head-butted the dashboard of his car as he stopped. He looked out to see Silva's buggy, Blue Flash, half on the road half on the path, its rear tyres smoking. He jumped out. Silva was climbing out of her car too.





## CHAPTER 2

Mr Brandy's shop had rapidly become the children's favourite place to visit in Dewbank. A light, airy bookshop, a million miles away from the usual musty, dusty village bookshops they were used to. Always at his desk in the middle of the shop was Mr Brandy, with his tweed trousers and waistcoat, almost hidden behind the widescreen, state-of-the-art computer that sat on the desk.

"Oh sorry," said Mr Brandy as Tamsin, Chase and Paul entered the shop behind him, "I'll just turn that off." He silenced the music blaring from

the computer, looking slightly embarrassed. "Just listening to the new Kasabian album."

Tamsin smiled. Mr Brandy looked like a geeky English gent, but he had an air of cool about him – he even had better taste in music than any of them.

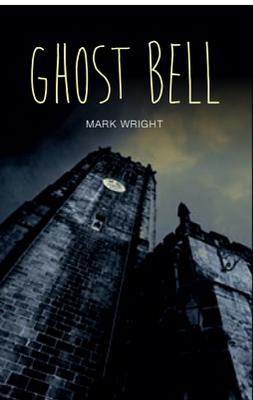
"The latest in that vampire series you like came in this morning, Chase," said Mr Brandy as Chase started scanning the shelves packed with books. He always seemed to have some new recommendation for them. "Now Paul, you seem to have had a shock."

"It's that creepy bell tower. There's summat up there," said Paul.

"I rather doubt that," replied Mr Brandy. "It's been closed up for decades. Longer, even."

"But I saw somebody," insisted Paul.

"You were seeing things," said Chase, drifting over from the shelves with a book in her hand.





### CHAPTER 3

## THE UNDERGROUNDERS

The once-great cities of the world were now a mess of broken buildings and rubble-strewn roads... and London was no exception. There was a reason for this. Many years earlier, a mutant species of insects had evolved deep underground. The Insectoids were clever but cruel and they wanted to rule the earth. However, they knew they had to wait until the time was right.

Then, when the Ebola virus swept across the globe killing countless millions, the Insectoids saw that their day had come. They poured out of their lairs and launched their attack.

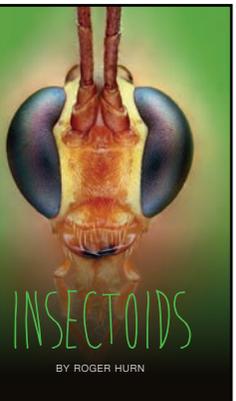
Humanity tried to fight back but, already devastated by the virus, they didn't stand a chance. The ruthless mutants destroyed everything and everyone who stood in their way.

Then, when the war was done, the Insectoids took over the cities and towns. The few remaining humans fled and hid wherever they could find shelter from the wrath of the Insectoids.

However, when the survivors grew tired of living like animals, a band of warriors called the Shadow Rangers led the fight back. Now Matt and Gemma were taking the fight into the heart of London. It was madness... but they had no choice.

Matt and Gemma slipped along the shattered streets. Then Matt held up his hand. "Listen up, Gem, I can hear Insectoids coming."

The two Rangers ducked behind the tumbledown wall of a ruined house. They were not a moment too soon. As soon as they'd taken





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### THE SNAKE

Our headmaster, Mr Davies, was standing at the front of the hall with his arms crossed.

“What has got into you lot?” he asked. “In the past week alone, I’ve had pupils sent to me for bringing in cigarettes, putting flies in drinks and even leaving dead chickens lying around.”

I knew what had got into them all. Fake cigarettes, plastic flies and rubber chickens were all things you could buy from a joke shop. Whatever was happening in the school, it was all coming from that new shop in the precinct. I decided to check it out.

“From now on, anyone caught disrupting lessons will be suspended,” said Mr Davies. “And I’m cancelling fancy-dress day for Halloween. You can still give a pound to charity if you like, but school uniform must be worn.”

I could hear tutting and muttering coming from all around me.

“I’ve already got my costume,” a girl called Megan whispered in the row behind me. “I’m wearing it whatever he says.”

A girl with long, blond hair at the front of the hall stuck her hand up.

“What is it?” asked Mr Davies.

“There’s a spider, sir!” said the girl. A large, black shape was scuttling over the floor in front of her.

“I hardly think it’s going to harm you,” said Mr Davies.

JOKE SHOP

TIM COLLINS





## CHAPTER 2

### DINNER

Mark was lying along the sofa, taking up all three cushions.

“Shift!” I said, trying to squeeze on the end.

“There’s no room!” he whined. “Sit somewhere else...”

I looked around the room. There wasn’t anywhere else. Aside from the sofa and Mum’s armchair, there was a dining table – but that was piled high with clean washing, ready to be ironed and put away.

Gone were the days when we sat there and ate as a family.

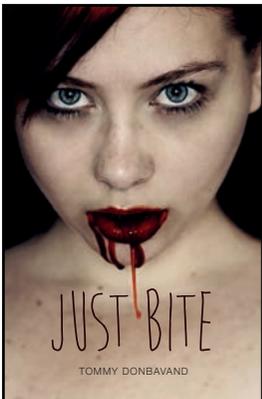
So it was either the floor – again – or... I spun one of the dining chairs around and sat on it, facing into the room. I grabbed the two remaining boxes from the arm of the sofa to see what Mum had ordered for me.

Four pieces of fried chicken and a portion of chips covered with cheese. I could almost hear my arteries screaming for mercy.

“Kitchen towel?” said Mum, handing over a length of absorbent tissue instead of cutlery. So we were expected to eat with our fingers again, then.

“Don’t get any grease on that clean washing!” she warned as I balanced my dinner on the edge of the table. There was a third box already there – the free garlic bread. I felt the fumes sting my eyes.

“I thought you wanted this...” I said to Mark.





## CHAPTER 2

As Liam told Mister Scratch about Katie and his concerns that she was getting bored with him, the older man sat completely still, almost statue-like, as he listened. Liam didn't mean to talk for so long, but once he started he found that it was actually rather nice to explain his worries and concerns about his relationship to this complete stranger. He talked about the first time he met Katie, the first time that he knew that she was the girl he wanted to go out with, and the first time that he was able to muster the courage to speak to her. He talked about how Darryl had mocked him, saying that she was 'out of his league', and how it had felt so good to push that

back in Darryl's face when Katie agreed to go to the cinema with him. He didn't think that Darryl liked Katie that much, probably scared that she would take Liam away from him, that he would lose his best mate – and no matter what Liam said, no matter how much he tried to reassure Darryl, he knew that his words were falling on deaf ears.

“Tell me why she's not here,” Mister Scratch interrupted. “Tell me your fears.”

Liam paused, considering the question. It was one he'd been asking himself for the last half hour.

“She's been distant lately,” he admitted. “She's been harder to talk to, as if she's had a secret that she's keeping from me.”

“Does she keep secrets?” Mister Scratch stared at Liam, his eyes unwavering. In the end Liam had to look away.

“No,” he replied. “That is, not that I know of. I mean, who knows, eh?”





## CHAPTER 2

# SPECIAL POWERS

As Todd drifted off to sleep his thoughts were on Lexie. Her scent, her touch, her kiss. Her lovely face drifted into his mind. Closer and closer she came. Her lips parted in a smile as the heaviness of sleep closed over him.

But what was going on? Her mouth continued to widen. Her teeth glinted white... and then sharpened to points. Like little daggers. Two rows of jagged daggers set within a gaping black hole. And then dark red goo began to ooze out from between the pointed teeth. It trickled down her pale chin – blood. Her green eyes rolled upwards and fell backwards into black, hollow eye-sockets.

Todd's shriek echoed around his bedroom walls as he sat bolt upright. Sweating. Shaking. He lay awake the rest of the night.

Next morning, Webby and the others were hanging around the playground in no hurry to go into class. Webby grabbed him round the neck, grinning. "Look at you! Another late night? You sure know how to party!"

His mates crowded round, wanting to know what he'd been up to. He spotted Lexie in the background. But before he could say anything to anyone, Elspeth pushed her way through the crowd. She stood right in front of him, hands on hips.

A hubbub of whispers sprang up. Then fell silent as Elspeth spoke. "I believe you're having trouble sleeping at night?"

This was a new Elspeth. Sure of herself. Todd tried to find some witty reply but his mind went blank. The confident way she was looking at him was weirdly unnerving.





## CHAPTER 3

On Friday Carla came to school with her lips scarlet once again.

“Carla Evans, go and clean that muck off your face this instant!” ordered Mr Tuff at morning registration.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Carla replied. The rest of the class stared at her in astonishment.

“I don’t think I can have heard you correctly,” said the teacher.

“No?” said Carla smoothly. “I’m so sorry. You must be going deaf as well as bald.”

The classroom went utterly silent. After a few moments Mr Tuff managed to splutter “Detention! This lunchtime!”

Carla was laughing quietly to herself as she left the classroom.

At lunchtime, Natasha was sitting eating her sandwiches when Mr Tuff came over to her. “Natasha, have you seen Carla?”

Natasha shook her head. “Not since English first thing.”

“But I thought you usually sat together at lunchtime.”

What could Natasha say? Up to this week, they’d sat together every day – with Josh too, most of the time. But on Tuesday Carla had gone off with Ms Simmons to get the mirror, and since then she’d disappeared every lunchtime.

“If she doesn’t turn up for detention then I will see that she doesn’t take part in the school play,”





### CHAPTER 3

## THE VISITOR

I went for a walk after I'd eaten my Calippo the next day.

If I go for a walk in London, it's usually around Westfield Shopping Centre or to Roxy's flat. I never walk just for the sake of it, with nowhere to go and no one to see. But it was another hot day and I was already starting to feel more at home in Hobb's Green.

A path opposite the Post Office sloped down to a stream. I walked alongside the water for a few minutes before plonking myself on a patch of soft grass.

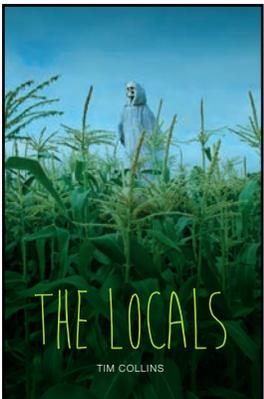
My sit soon turned to a lie and my eyelids began to feel heavy. I unzipped my top, shoved it under my head and closed my eyes.

I could hear the flowing of the stream, the cawing of birds high above and distant accordion music from the village. They were Morris dancing again, or skipping around the maypole.

I wondered if I'd been wrong to think that all that stuff was lame. I'd always wanted the newest music, the newest trainers and the newest phone, but I was starting to see the appeal of really old things too.

I must have drifted off while I was thinking about this because the next thing I can remember is a pile of leaves and twigs blowing over and forming themselves into the same devilish face I'd seen in the carvings.

The face fixed its cold, acorn eyes on me, opened its leaf mouth and let out a high giggle. The leaves on its cheeks and forehead flapped open



“GO JAE!” cheered Hannah, the team captain, as Jae put the ball perfectly through the netball hoop. “She’s so fast!” she said to Mia who was playing in defence.

“Yeah...” Mia nodded as Jae jumped up and down with joy.

“I heard Mrs Wood tell Jae to try out for the county team,” Hannah said. “How about you?”

“Actually, I’m thinking of leaving the squad,” Mia said.

“You can’t leave!” said Hannah. “We need you.”

“What?” Jae shrieked, overhearing them.  
“Leave? Since when? You didn’t tell me!”

“Well I don’t have to tell you everything!” snapped Mia. She marched towards the changing rooms, leaving Jae behind, bewildered.

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“Look at these old photos!” Mum said, holding up a faded black-and-white picture. “There’s Nan when she was about your age.” She pointed at a teenage girl with the same long, black hair as the twins, frowning against a background of lush, green trees and busy fishermen.

“Trip to Lake Tai,” Jae read aloud from the back. “Cool, this one’s from China!”

Mia was still fed up. She and Jae had hardly spoken all the way to Nan’s house and Mum was too busy to notice that something was wrong. “I know we need to clear it out for the new owners,” she kept saying, “but your nan would be so sad to see her things getting chucked away like rubbish.”

Mia hated seeing Nan’s things disappearing one by one. Nan had died a year before and Mia still missed her every day. Nan had never treated the twins like they were the same person – she never gave them identical presents, like everyone else did, and she never mixed them up. “I always

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