



CHAPTER 2

DON'T PITY ME

Mum and Dad don't make a fuss. It's all pretty normal to them. Zoe has a fit, someone rings them. I get picked up, taken home – or to hospital. It depends on how long I fit for and where it happens. Today it was four minutes, so I was told. Mum keeps a record. Four minutes is about normal for me.

Later, Mum's sitting at the table, reading a letter. She looks up at me. Her face is odd, like she's a bit excited, a bit nervous.

"I've applied for a dog for you," she says. "A very special dog.."

"What!" I yell. I hate dogs. I've still got the scar on my leg from a dog bite years ago.

"There's an organisation that trains dogs for people who suffer like you..."

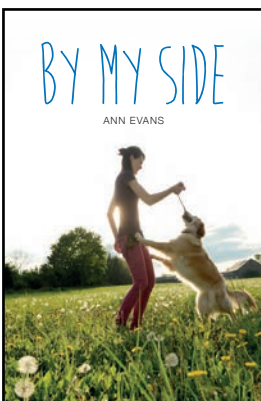
I don't want to hear any more. "No!" I shout. "Isn't my life bad enough?"

"Zoe, listen..."

I don't want to listen. I run up to my room and slam the door. I can't believe my parents would do this to me. Now they want me to walk around with a special dog, so the whole world knows I'm not right in the head. Why don't they just hang a sign round my neck?

I stare into the mirror, hating what I see. No wonder no one wants to hang out with me. Spots and lank, mousy hair. Can't believe Jake caught me today. It's a wonder he could even stand touching me!

I try not to think about Jake. What's the point?



about smell. Robots don't have a sense of smell, and can only repeat stock responses if you ask them about it.

"There's a really strong smell in the air," I said. "Do you know what it is?"

"It could be me," said Leon. He had a deep voice with a hint of the local accent. It was nothing like the flat monotone you usually hear from older robots. "I've been working for a few hours already."

I leaned forwards and sniffed him, something I would never have done to a real boy.

"It's not you," I said. "Don't worry."

He pointed to a green bottle of weed killer on the grass. "Could be that, I suppose. I can move it if it's bothering you."

That might have been a prepared answer. I had to push him further.

"I don't think it's that," I said. "I've been able to smell it ever since I arrived in this village."

"In that case, it must be boredom," he said, grinning. "This whole place reeks of it."

Even if Dad hadn't managed to give him a sense of smell, he'd given him a sense of humour. Impressive.

I spent most of that evening thinking about Leon. Not about how hot he was, because that would have been a really strange way to think about a robot. But let's just say I was admiring the work Dad had put in. I couldn't believe Dad had been secretly working on such a lifelike robot in the basement of our house. It had been two floors below me for the past year. It made me wish I'd been nosy enough to steal his keys and sneak into his basement.

I had to admit I'd have been totally taken in by Leon if I hadn't known he was a robot. And maybe, just maybe, I would have asked him on a

MR PERFECT

TIM COLLINS

Only then did Eden notice the note under the fruit bowl, written in blue ink. She picked it up, peered at it.

WORKING LATE AT THE LAB.
ALL-NIGHTER. ONTO SOMETHING BIG.
TEA IN MICROWAVE. SEE YOU
TOMORROW. LOVE DAD XX

Eden sighed, put the letter down. “Not even a text,” she said out loud.

It was normal to get this kind of note from her father. He was a Professor of Physics at the University, and always busy. She had hoped tonight would be different, though. He had promised her a film and curry night, just the two of them. These evenings were important, all the more so now Mum had gone.

Also, after Eden’s rubbish day, she’d been hoping to do twenty minutes of moaning in the kitchen. Stuff about not having the right shorts for stupid hockey, and Miss Bancroft picking on her again.

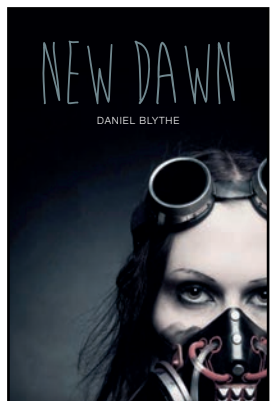
About what cows Courtney and Katie were being, and about how disgusting the lunch had been today. Basically, what a waste of time school was.

She stomped into the kitchen, checked out the plastic dish in the microwave. She wrinkled her nose at the lemony aroma. Thai green curry with pilau rice. Could be worse, she thought.

She flicked the TV on, watching BBC News 24 half-heartedly.

“— *growing crisis in the Middle East*,” said the newsreader’s voice, over pictures of tanks rolling along a desert road. “*The UN Emergency Council is still in session, uncertain as to how to deal with this turn of events. The President has said that in twenty-four hours, the Western world could face the horror of nuclear blackmail – unless the Geneva Conference produces the desired result.*”

That didn’t sound good, thought Eden. Mind





CHAPTER 2

Have you ever had one of those moments when everything slows down, and you get to consider your options in a single second before making the right decision? No? Me neither.

Instead, this was one of those moments when everyone standing around the outside of the canal café just... continued to stand around. Although now they stared in horror at the water where, only a second earlier, a small boy, no older than four years old, had tumbled in.

He still hadn't resurfaced, and a canal boat was heading towards where he had entered.

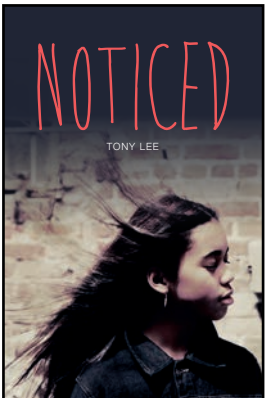
I'm not a great swimmer, I've never been heroic in any way, but I reacted on instinct.

Throwing my jacket onto my school bag, I kicked off my shoes and jumped in. I'd like to say I did some kind of cool dive, but it'd be a lie. All I cared about was pulling the boy out.

As I jumped in, he popped up, spluttering and screaming. All it took was a moment to grab him from behind and pull him to the bank where, now out of whatever trance they had been in, the onlookers were leaning over to help.

They pulled the boy and his soaking-wet rescuer out of the water just before the canal boat, now being frantically turned by the captain, slammed into us.

As I sat on the bank shivering, partly due to the adrenaline now leaving my body, a woman ran from the café in tears, scooping up the soaked little boy and holding him tight.





CHAPTER 2

COW

“Are you nuts?” exclaimed Angel near the end of double maths the next morning. “You’re going to go through with it?”

I shrugged. “I think so,” I said. “Why not?”

“Because it’s witchcraft!”

“Shut up!” I hissed. “Are you trying to get me into trouble again?”

I’d only just got back to class following a half-hour lecture about the ‘inappropriate colour of my hair’ by Miss Cowl, the deputy head (or Miss Cow, as everyone called her).

Apparently, it ‘didn’t give out a positive image of the school’, and I had three days to return my hair to its usual, dull chestnut-brown.

“But this is serious, Poppy...”

“Raven!”

“OK, Raven, whatever! You still shouldn’t be mucking around with that stuff.”

“Relax, I know what I’m doing...”

Angel shook her head. “No, you don’t,” she said flatly. “That’s why you had to buy that weird book off the internet.”

“So?”

“So – you had it delivered to my house, without telling me! What if my dad had seen it?”

“He didn’t, did he?”

No, but he might have – and he’s the church choir master!”





CHAPTER 2

The past raced through Lauren's mind as she walked home. She took the long route, hoping to delay the inevitable for as long as possible.

She hoped Sabrina and Lexi believed her story. She'd gone back into the diner in a daze after hanging up on Mum, and right away they had known something was up. She'd tried to sound normal, saying Mum was just freaking out because Lauren hadn't asked permission to go out. They knew her mum was strict – she'd only recently started letting Lauren out at weekends.

But the shock was harder to hide. She was sure it had been written all over her face. The girls hadn't pushed her about it, but it must have shown in her eyes because Lexi gave her an extra-big hug when she said goodbye. She'd just

have to think of something to tell them later; a little white lie so they wouldn't dig too deep and find out the truth.

The truth. What even was that? Lauren laughed out loud, causing an elderly lady to give her a sharp look. Lauren barely felt it – she'd been through a lot worse than a disapproving look from a stranger. And it was all thanks to Harry.

Lauren kicked a tin can across the street. *Harry*. How could things have gone so wrong? They'd been really close once upon a time. She'd always relied on her older brother, known he'd look after her. But then he got in with those awful lads and everything changed. Now she hated Harry more than she'd ever thought possible.

It was little things at first. Like the time a drag queen auditioned on a TV talent show. Lauren thought she was amazing, but Harry sneered and used a word Lauren really didn't like. He did it again when they watched a famous actress thanking her girlfriend as she received an award.

