



CHAPTER 3

FACES OF STRANGERS

Over the next few days Eric started to feel a bit better. Not his memory. That was as blank as ever. But he felt stronger, and he didn't hurt so much. He was allowed out of bed. He could use the loo rather than a bed pan. Although that had been better than the tubes!

The first thing he did was to stare at his reflection in the mirror. A skinny, bruised-lipped, brown-eyed stranger stared back. He checked his teeth. He had a couple of fillings. He couldn't remember getting them. His hair was dark. Someone had kitted him out with a comb, toothbrush and stuff. He ran the comb through

his hair, hoping his brain would remember how he styled it — if he styled it. Nothing looked right so he gave up.

Today he'd been allowed to take a walk along the corridor.

Everywhere he went, the policeman wasn't far behind — like his shadow.

"Shouldn't you be out catching criminals?" Eric asked, feeling really bugged at being watched like a hawk.

It was the sour-faced policeman. He looked down his long nose at Eric. "I'm watching you, aren't I?"

"Why?"

"Make sure you don't do a runner."

It seemed the dumbest answer. "Why would I do that?"





CHAPTER 3

The water works were quite far from Omak's flat. A huge pump drew water from deep under the earth. The water was stored in massive water tanks that covered the area and rose up above the walls that kept the city safe. The plant filled the eastern part of the city where some of the wealthier families lived in big houses, close to the water. Some even had small gardens. Omak had never seen anything like it.

"Work hard, Omak, and you might be living in a house like that one day," Fergal had said.

Several weeks had passed since Omak started working with Fergal at the water works. Now

he sat on top of one of the water tanks looking out across the desert. Clouds of dust swirled in the distance, possibly a swarm of snappers or a Postie on a mission. Fergal clambered up the ladder and sat next to him.

"You wishing you were back out there?" Fergal said.

Omak shrugged. "Sort of," he said. "I haven't made the best start here, have I?"

"Nonsense!" Fergal said. "You know your way round the pumps like a professional!"

"That's because of all the time I've spent on the Blood Bug's engine," Omak said. "Anyway, I don't mean that."

"So you've had a few arguments with the workmen here..." Fergal began.

"A few?" Omak said. "I have one every day. I'm not used to being told what to do." He gave a smile. "Except by Mum, of course."

DEATH
WHEELS

JON MAYHEW





CHAPTER 2

SILVER AND GOLD

It all changed when Maya met Magnus Gold. Mr Multi-media. A man with a huge empire of music, technology, films, books, sweets, T-shirts, perfumes, shoes.

People like Magnus Gold are the new gods. Nobody goes to church any more, but they do worship at the altar of people like Magnus Gold.

He's tall, tanned and smoothly muscular, bulging out of a white silk shirt and a velvet suit. Yeah, I bet he works out. Keeps his private life pretty much under wraps, but I reckon all the women he's been out with have been paid to have short-term 'relationships' with him. He's been seen

with arm-candy like Jenna Spaul and Kat Kaine. Starlets just over half his age.

I don't reckon he's interested in them.

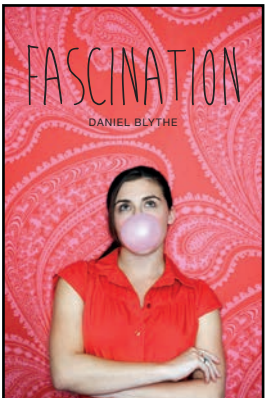
Really. You can see it in his eyes.

He thinks of women the way I do — beautiful, sleek, dazzling company, but not for *that*. I know it. I can see these things.

It was Zoe who approached Maya first. Zoe Silver. Magnus Gold's henchwoman, his head judge, his star-picker from his Saturday night sensation *The Bomb*.

She put comments on Maya's YouTube first of all, saying how talented she thought Maya was. Of course, Maya had no idea at first who "ZoZo81" was — thought she was just another fan. Then "ZoZo81" followed her on social media, and that led to emails, and meetings.

Zoe Silver — not her real name, of course. I think her real name is something like Smith or





CHAPTER 2

FLOOR 41

“All right, this is really creepy. Stop it.” I fold my arms and scowl.

“You want me to stop it? But you were only just saying how bored you were!”

Even in the humidity, a chill goes up my spine. “How do you know my name? Who the hell are you?”

“You want to know?” says the voice. *“Come up to Floor 41.”*

“Don’t be stupid. There is no Floor 41.”

“That’s what you think!”

I realise, now, where the voice is coming from. There’s a speaker in the wall behind one of the sofas. It’s half hidden by another of those giant potted ferns which are all over the place.

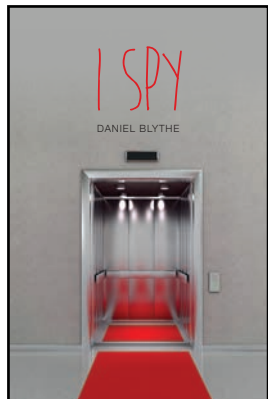
“The floors in the lift only go up to 40,” I say. “I’m kind of observant like that.”

“Maybe not observant enough. Look in the back pocket of your jeans.”

Frowning, a little fearful, I reach into my pocket. My fingers close over a slim plastic card, the size and shape of a credit card.

I pull it out, staring at it and turning it over. It is matte black, plain on one side apart from a magnetic strip. The other side has the bright red A of the Avalon Tower logo on it.

“What’s this?” I ask. “How did it get here?”





CHAPTER 2

KNOCKING ON DOORS

I try to get her to drink her tea and I tell her about my school day. I tell her what I've been studying. Tell her about Kim and my other friends. When the pie and veg are ready, I dish up our dinners. She picks at hers like there's something nasty in there, taking the lid of the pie off, and poking about with her fork.

"Mum, it's chicken and veg. We've had it before. It's nice."

She screws up her nose. "Tastes like metal."

"No, it doesn't."

Neither of us eat much. I'm aware of her all the time — rocking and muttering under her breath, pulling faces.

"So, who have you talked to today, Mum?"

Someone must have been in and given her something. I'll kill whoever it was. After all the time it's taken her to get off drink, then someone messes with her head again.

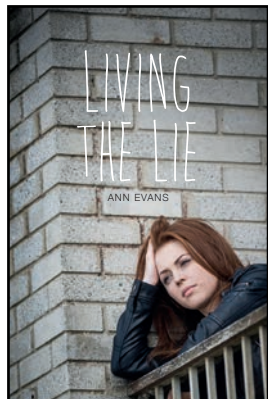
I put the TV on, wanting life to be normal. Well, as normal as it can be for us. I find a quiz show. She likes quizzes. She says it's how she got her education, listening to the questions and answers. Only now she sits back in her chair, as if she doesn't like what she sees.

"What?" I ask.

"There's that metal noise. Hear it?"

"What is it with metal, Mum? The telly sounds fine."

"No, he heard it as well!"





CHAPTER 2

TEN MILES AWAY

I stopped and looked back to the tunnel. We'd lost the man after just a few minutes of running.

He hadn't been a bounty hunter, just another ill old man who wanted his pain treating. His neck and forehead had been covered in sores, most of his teeth had gone, he'd been limping and his back had been bent. I was amazed he'd managed to come after us at all.

Maybe he'd drag himself back to his shelter under the bridge now, or maybe chasing us would be the last thing he ever did.

I kept this thought to myself. Esme hates seeing people suffer and leaving the man behind would be on her mind all night. But we had to get to the commune as fast as we could. Stopping for anyone would be too dangerous.

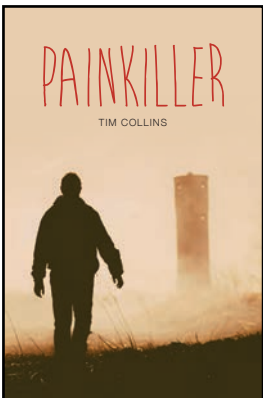
It was almost pitch black now. Thick clouds covered the moon and I had to keep my eyes down to avoid tripping over broken wing mirrors and exhaust pipes.

That's why I didn't spot the hostel until we were almost there.

There was a building called 'Harvester' on our left. It had been a restaurant too, I think. But now it was another hostel, with the usual piles of pillows and sheets outside.

There were no motorbikes around this one. We'd be safe, at least for a while.

Tiredness hit me as soon as I knew rest was coming, and the few metres to the hostel were as hard as the last mile.





CHAPTER 4

JONI

When Joni hadn't come home by 10pm, Riley was worried. She'd messaged her sister three times but had no reply. The young adult curfew was 10pm and if Joni was caught out by the Sector Guardians, she'd be in big trouble. It would affect her next Assessment score and the family could receive points on their Community Licence, which led to heaps of problems. Some families even moved away to lower grade sectors when that happened.

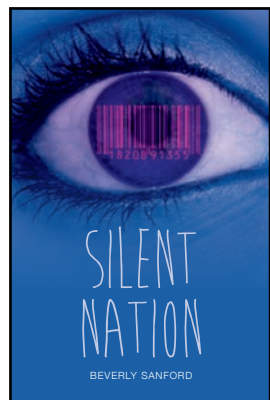
Riley had never forgotten her friend Felix, who lived two homes along when she was small. She and Joni often played with him. He made up

brilliant stories and adventures, and he could build clever things, like tiny robots. Joni always said he would grow up to be the Head of Technology at the Centre for Governance.

But Felix changed. He grew terrified of the screens, claiming that they could 'hear' and 'see' things. He tried to hide from them at first, then got angry and tried to shut them down when they came on for the bulletins. After it happened a few times, Mum said he wasn't well and that the Medical Advisors should 'fix him'. She tried to stop the girls from playing with him but they sneaked out when she wasn't looking.

One bright day in the summer, Felix attacked the screen in his bedroom with a hammer. Riley could hear him yelling all the way from the garden. Mum said a neighbour must have called the Sector Guardians, as they arrived in minutes.

"They'll take him to the Medical Centre," Mum said, arms around the girls. "He'll get help there. But my goodness, this will affect their Licence."





CHAPTER 2

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

As soon as his spaceship had landed, Lucas could feel the Earth's gravity pressing down on him. His parents had made him work hard to build his muscles when they were on Mars. In fact, Lucas had really enjoyed doing the exercises. They had been like a game, and the scientists had taken turns in helping. But despite all his hard work, Lucas's muscles still weren't strong enough for Earth. That meant he had to wear the skeleton of metal panels and rods he called the Armour. That had caught the interest of the media, who wanted to know everything about the boy they had named 'The First Martian'. He was the only alien on Earth. To them, that

meant he was a news story, not a person. NASA and the UK Government had done all they could to protect Lucas and his family — Lucas in particular. But some journalists showed they were unwilling to follow the rules, and that had made Harringden's security more appealing. Unfortunately, although Harringden kept Lucas safe from the outside world, it couldn't protect him from the other pupils.

If Lucas was being fair about Harringden, he would have admitted that the teachers tried really hard to defend him from the other students. He was just sorry that he needed to be protected. On Mars he hadn't needed any protection.

As usual, Lucas found Jess and Danny waiting for him when he arrived at Harringden. Jess's bright red hair made her stand out in a crowd, easy for him to see. It also made her easy prey for idiots with insults. "Carrot-top" and "Satsuma" were just two of the names she was called. Danny was tall and skinny and he was usually close enough to Jess to be spotted quickly enough. They both

THE FIRST
MARTIAN

IAIN MCLAUGHLIN



CHAPTER 2

GETTING IN SHAPE

“What have you got for lunch, Ella?” asked Jaz peering over into Ella’s plastic box.

“Salad,” replied Ella, filling her fork with leaves.

“What kind?”

“It’s just mixed leaves, cucumber, celery, and some cottage cheese.”

“Really? Is that all? *That* can’t fill you up,” said Jaz as she tucked into her tuna-mayo sandwich and grabbed a handful of sweet chilli crisps from the bag. “How do you keep going on that?”

“It’s fine,” said Ella. “It makes me feel kind of pure and healthy. I couldn’t eat all those carbs — I’d swell up like a balloon,” she added, wrinkling her nose at Jaz’s lunchtime choices. “And mayo’s got far too many calories for me. Salad doesn’t feel heavy on your stomach and I’ve got plenty of energy, so it’s no problem.”

“You should come to the gym with us,” said Lucy. “Use up some of that energy if you’ve got so much.”

“I think I might,” Ella replied. “I can probably afford the membership now I’ve got a Saturday job.”

Jaz and Lucy went to the gym twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays. Ella began to go with them. A personal trainer asked her what her aims were and she told him she felt she still had some flab to lose and wanted to look more toned. He showed her how to do a good all-round routine on the machines. Ella took to it straightaway and soon she started to love the way it made her feel.





CHAPTER 3

THE WASTELAND

Tanith didn't turn up the next day. I started to worry I'd upset her by asking about her illness.

I wanted to talk to Hailey and Nadia about it at lunch, but Nadia had got the part in the phone advert, so that was the only topic of conversation. Her role was to stare at the camera and say, "I want a plan that works for me." She kept repeating it and asking if it sounded natural. It wasn't something anyone would say in real life, so I didn't know.

There was no easy way for me to describe what I'd seen anyway. I tried mentioning Tanith to a

few people but no one would discuss her. It's like I was talking about someone they'd seen years ago, not hours ago.

It just made me feel worse. I was the only one who'd really noticed her, and instead of making her feel welcome I'd treated her like a freak.

I asked Mr Patel if he knew when Tanith would be coming back and he said he didn't. Even to her own teacher, Tanith had been nothing more than a shadow at the back of the room.

It was almost the weekend, which meant I could make up for what I'd done. I'd call round at Tanith's house and ask if she wanted to hang out.

We could go down to the shops and look at clothes or something. There's a place off Market Street that sells lacy black dresses and candles and stuff. I reckoned she'd like that.

The next day I got the X32 bus to the big Tesco and walked up Tyburn Road.

WASTELAND

TIM COLLINS

