

“I didn’t! Mum and Steve bought it as a late birthday present. They’re paying for lessons and everything.”

Mark let out a low whistle. He jerked his baseball cap back so the peak stood up straight from his head. “They must be rolling in it. My mum got me a packet of bacon for my birthday and told me to make myself a birthday sandwich.”

I watched our gang clustered around the car. It had been one of those years — racing our bikes under the flyover, getting smashed in Perry’s Park, and we were always each-other’s alibis when we snuck out to a party. Jade never stopped moving. She bounced on her squeaky-clean Adidas trainers, her dark curls pushed back with a mesh of gold pins. Mark had his hands in his tracky bottoms, looking longingly at the car. Cloggers was jumpy, as always, winding her long blonde hair around her fingers.

Sometimes I felt like I knew those faces better than my own.

I imagined myself running my hands over the smooth metal of the car. It was only tiny, not my movie-star dream car, but hey, any car is better than no car at all. No chance of a surprise Ferrari from *my* mum.

“Not like it, Vinny?” Jade asked, sticking her lip out.

I shrugged. “S’alright, I suppose.”

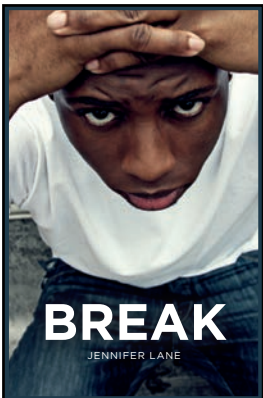
“Doom and gloom — typical Vinny!” she said and the others smirked. “Let’s take it for a spin, then!”

Cloggers’ blue eyes got even wider — they seemed to take up her whole face. “What? Can you even do that?”

“Mmm, technically,” said Jade with a wicked grin.

Mark scrunched up his face. “I’m not getting in there with you, mate. I’m too young to die.”

“Oi! I’ve been practising. I drove around Morrison’s car park four times this morning with Steve.”





CHAPTER 2

SURVIVOR

Zac stumbled back in the following afternoon.

“They told me to come and speak to you again,” he said, sitting on the chair.

I smiled at him. “Sorry for being mean yesterday.”

Zac shrugged. “That’s OK.”

I pointed up to the small chunk of black plastic at the top of the glass partition. “That’s a mic. They record everything I say because they think I’m going to blurt out some clue about how I survived the zombies. Is it any wonder I feel uncomfortable?”

“I get that,” said Zac. “But things are getting pretty grim out there. We’ve only got a couple of years before all the food and supplies run out. After that we’ll have to abandon the compound and fight the zombies. They think you’re our best chance of finding a cure before then.”

I felt a wave of anger running through me. Hot shivers flashed up my back, and my fists curled so tight my nails dug into my palms. I wanted to tell Zac that if I was our best hope, then we had no hope at all. They’d kept me prisoner for six months. They’d found nothing. It was over.

But I kept this to myself. I needed to stay friendly.

“So how did you get to the compound?” I asked.

“In Dad’s plane,” said Zac. He looked down and shuffled his feet. “I guess we were pretty rich, not that money means anything now.”

I wished I could call Mum and tell her I was friends with the richest people in the world, and I

**FINAL
GIRL**

TIM COLLINS





CHAPTER 2

FAME

Mum and Dad forgot to put the alarm clock on and Jamie's phone was out of charge. So the first thing that woke him up was the doorbell ringing. Jamie groaned and rolled over in bed. He heard someone going downstairs and opening the door, a murmured conversation and someone running back upstairs. "Terry! Terry!" Mum said as she ran past Jamie's bedroom door. "It's a man from the newspaper, he wants to interview you about last night!"

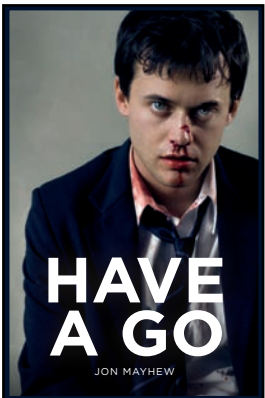
The news reporter looked up and smiled as Jamie shuffled down in his tracksuit bottoms and vest.

"Ah, are you Jamie?" he asked. "You must be very proud of your dad." The news reporter was in his twenties, with black hair and a trendy beard. He wore suit trousers and a shirt underneath a heavy, hooded parka coat. Jamie glanced at the bag with cameras and notepaper that sat on the sofa next to the news reporter.

"Yeah," Jamie said. "It was really scary."

The news reporter pulled out his notepad. "You were there," he continued, "so, tell me what happened."

Jamie shrugged and told the man what he remembered. He wasn't sure if some of the things he remembered were bits of a film he'd seen. In his head, dad had struggled with the robber for ages, ducking punches and diving out of the way. "In the end, the robber had Dad by the throat and Dad just managed to grab the tin of beans and smack him in the head with it."





CHAPTER 4

ARCADE

KT wanted to go on all the rides. The faster and louder the better. She was a total thrill junky, and it wasn't just the rollercoasters.

“Dare you to steal one of those sugar dummies,” she said as they went past a stall selling rock and candyfloss.

“KT, you are insane!” said Molly, but she was giggling. She felt high on the heat of the day. KT's wild energy was infectious.

“If you are too chicken, I will!”

And then KT was darting towards the stall. The attendant was busy with a group of tourists. KT winked at Molly, grabbed a dummy, and they ran for it.

They collapsed, panting with laughter, by the arcade. The smell of fried fish from a nearby stall made Molly realise she hadn't eaten all day.

“Won't your parents be worried?” she asked KT.

“Doubt it,” said KT. She'd told Molly they'd recently moved from London. Her parents weren't around much. “Your turn!”

“No way!”

“Listen, I rescued you from your tragic revision prison. The least you can do is get me...” KT looked around, licking her lips — her eyes landed on a ‘Hook-a-Duck’ stall covered with soft-toy prizes, “... a teddy!”

“But...”



Talking of Nadia, we're meeting for lunch after her lecture. Then we'll go shopping. Maybe that will make me feel more Christmassy.

P.S. Lunch means chips.

P.P.S. I love chips.

9.30pm

It's Christmas. The X Factor told me so — lots of times, in lots of different shops. You know it's properly Christmas when you hear the X Factor Christmas song.

OK, I actually feel a bit Christmassy now. Five hours of non-stop music would make even the Grinch love Christmas. It was playing in every shop we went into this afternoon.

What did I buy? I'm glad you asked.

The honest answer is 'not much'. That's OK, though. This was just the beginning of my

Christmas shopping. This was when I go looking for presents I might buy. It's like the army sending out scouts.

I had to find out what choices I have when it comes to presents. You don't just buy the first thing you see. Us poor students have a limited budget to work with. I have to make a list of things I could get for people and then work out what I can afford. This is proper shopping.

I don't just buy the first bit of tat I see and stick it in bright paper. Except for my brother's present, but he's rubbish at Christmas. He's rubbish at most things. Actually, I found him something really great. He doesn't deserve it.

He doesn't deserve a great sister like me either.

Nadia is baking again. Smells like choc-chip cookies. Yum. Chips for lunch and cookies at home? University is going to make me so fat.





CHAPTER 2
**STRANGER AT
THE DOOR**

My mind was in a spin. I'd learned enough about Swamp Plague to know that it was carried through the air, and also human to human. Any contact with an infected person could bring on death within minutes. I kept a tight hold on Nate. Partly to try and protect him — but partly to steady myself. I needed a plan. And I needed to be strong.

I tried the TV and radio again: nothing but static. I tried my phone: still dead. My mind went to Nell. What if she'd been killed too?

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“OK,” I said to Nate. “We’ve got to get out of here. But we’ve got to be careful.” I got Nate’s hoodie and wrapped a scarf round his nose and mouth. Even though it was summer, I couldn’t risk his skin being uncovered. The washing up gloves were on the sink so I put those on him too.

“Where are we going, Josh?” he asked. “I look stupid.”

“We’re alive. Let’s keep it that way.” I tried to smile.

I covered myself up, too, and then filled a bag with some food from the fridge. I didn’t dare touch any of the leftover party food. Nate took a glass off the sink and went to fill it with water. I knocked it out of his hand.

“We don’t know if it’s contaminated,” I said. “Only drink from bottles.” I took some cans from the fridge and put them in the bag too.

Nate started to cry. “I’m scared, Josh. I want Mum and Dad.”

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dished out. Dodging the back of his hand — or trying to. He'd had years of it.

But no more.

He ran on, towards the industrial estate. Cold November rain lashing into his face.

He hated nicking stuff. But that's what hunger did to you. Steal food or die of hunger — or go home.

And no way was he doing that.

He glanced back. No sign of anyone coming after him. He raced on, weaving past empty crates and heaps of old car tyres. Too late, he spotted a small, white dog dart in front of him. It yelped as his feet tangled with its thin body and he went sprawling. The pork pie rolled, coming to a stop in a puddle.

“Ah no!”

The dog skittered off, tail between its legs.

He rescued the pie, so hungry he'd even wolf it down covered in mud.

Gary spotted the dog watching from under some crates. It looked terrified and his heart went out to it. He inched closer, speaking softly.

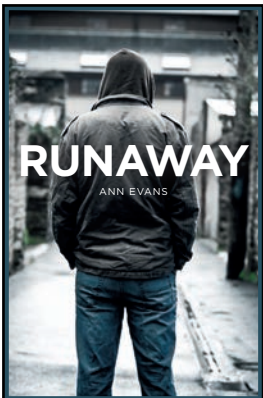
“Hey! You OK, little doggy? Didn't hurt you, did I?”

It backed away, hiding in the shadows, trembling.

It reminded Gary of himself. Of his first nights sleeping on the streets in a strange city. He'd been scared to death.

It wasn't how he'd planned it, his great escape from a brutal home. It was no wonder his mum had left years before. His dad was a monster.

He'd been planning his escape to a new and better life for months. He'd had a paper round and saved all his wages. Opened a bank account. Got a cash card and everything.





CHAPTER 2

PARTY GIRL

“Guess where I was last night,” Jade says.

We have a free period at school and are meant to be studying in the library. We have a mock exam tomorrow and I’m really worried about it. I don’t feel like I’ve done enough revision. But Jade really wants to talk and I suppose a quick chat won’t hurt.

I close the maths textbook I am looking at and give Jade my full attention. I’m hoping if I let her tell her story then we’ll be able to get back to work.

“Where were you then?” I ask.

“Rainbows!” she announces with a proud smile. I have no idea where this is or what she is talking about. When I look blank, she looks at me as though I’m an alien.

“On Pepper Street!” she explains.

Pepper Street? Now I really don’t understand. I know where Pepper Street is. Everyone does. It’s a street in the city centre filled with pubs, clubs and bars. I guess Rainbows is one of the clubs on Pepper Street. But I’m confused about how Jade could have got in.

“Isn’t it all just for over-eighteens up there?” I ask.

Jade digs about in her bag and pulls out a small card. On the card is a passport-sized picture of her, her name and her date of birth. I look carefully at the date of birth. It’s wrong and would make her two years older.

