

PRAISE FOR *I AM MARGARET*

*Great style – very good characters and pace.
Definitely a book worth reading, like The Hunger Games.*

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*An intelligent, well-written and enjoyable debut from
a young writer with a bright future.*

STEWART ROSS

This book invaded my dreams.
SR MARY CATHERINE BLOOM OP

*Margaret, Bane, Jon and the Major have stayed with me
long since I finished reading about them.*

RACHEL FRASER

*A wonderful and gripping book, and frightening too!
I'm profoundly impressed.*

ANNE HARRISS

I was enthralled! Can't wait to read the next one!

PENNY CAIRD

*A very good read – I stayed up too late reading the next chapter,
then the next...!*

LUCY OTTON



**I AM
MARGARET**
1st Chapter

CORINNA TURNER



unSeen

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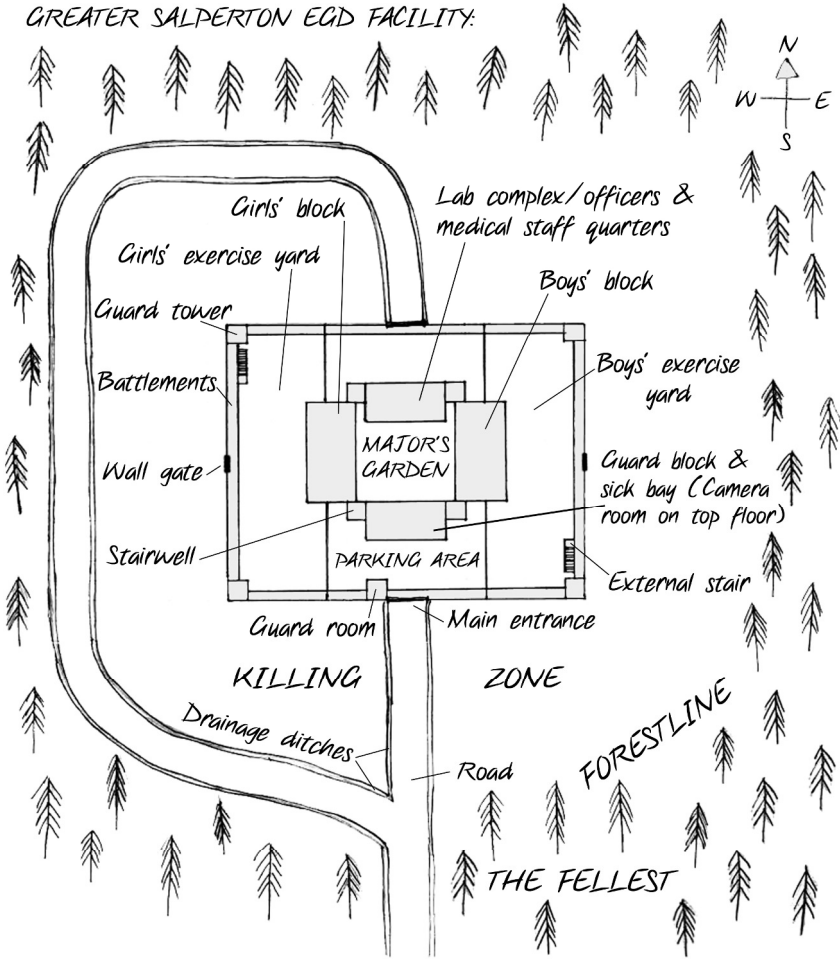
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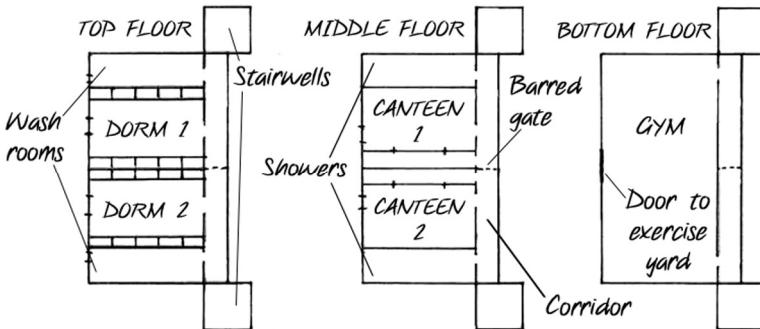
**“The sheriffs have told me that I shall die on Friday next;
and now I feel the frailty of mine own flesh which
trembleth at these news, although my spirit greatly
rejoiceth. Therefore for God’s sake pray for me and desire
all good folks to do the same.”**

St Margaret Clitherow, York, 1586

GREATER SALPERTON EGD FACILITY:



GIRLS' BLOCK:



1

SORTING

The dragon roared, its jaws so close to Thane's head that

I waggled the page gently in the air, waiting for my writing to dry. One final, blank double spread remained. Good. I'd made the little book myself.

The ink was dry. I turned to that last page and found the place on the computer printout I was copying from...

he felt his eardrums burst. But the sword had done its work and, eviscerated, the beast began to topple.

Thane rolled frantically to his feet and ran. The huge body obliterated where he'd been lying, but Thane wasn't interested in that. He kept right on running to where Marigold was struggling to free herself.

"That's the last time I go riding without my spurs!" she told him. "I could've cut my way out of here by now..."

Thane ignored her grumbles. He couldn't hear properly anyway. He whipped out a dagger and cut her free.

"Marigold?" He could hardly hear himself. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine. At least I had my rosary."

Thane thought of all the things he wanted to

say to her. The way he felt about her, he wanted to do everything just right. Could he get down on one knee without losing his balance and would he be able to hear what she said in reply...

Then Marigold's arms wrapped around him like vines around their supporting tree. And when she kissed him he knew the answer to all his questions was a heartfelt,

'Yes'.

I wrote the last word with great care and put the lid on the pen. All done. I smiled as I pictured Bane reading the tale. *Where are the slain dragons? Where are the rescued maidens?* he would complain. Just this once, in this story just for him, there were all the dragons he could desire. But only one maiden.

A funny way to declare your love, but I couldn't leave it unsaid. And if I *did* pass my Sorting... well, we were both eighteen, we'd be leaving school at the end of the year and would be free to register, so perhaps it was time we were finally honest with each other.

Picking up the printout of the story, I ripped it into small pieces and threw it in the bin, then closed the handwritten book, slipping it into the waterproof pouch I'd made for it. On my aged - but no less loved for that - laptop, I called up the file and pressed 'delete'. Bane's story was his alone.

The pouch went into my bag as I checked its contents again. Clothes, underwear, sewing things, my precious bookReader - filled to capacity - and what little else was permitted. No laptop, alas, and no rosary beads for Margaret in this all too real world. I touched the waterproof pouch - must warn Bane not to show the story around. A dangerous word had slipped in there, near the end. A little bit of myself.

The contents of the bag were all present and correct, as they'd been since last night. Zipping it up, I stood for a moment, looking around. This had been my room since I was born and how I wanted to believe I'd be back here this evening, unpacking my bag again... But I'd never been very

good at fairy tales. Happy Ever After didn't happen in real life. Not while you were alive.

I kicked at my long purple skirt for a moment, then picked up my jacket and slipped it on. Sorting day was a home clothes day. No need for school uniform at the Facility. I was packed and ready – packed, anyway – and couldn't delay any longer. I put my bag over my shoulder and headed downstairs.

My parents were waiting in the hall. I almost wished they weren't. That they were off with Kyle – *gone*. Mum's face was so pale.

"Margo, you can't seriously intend to go today..." Her voice was hoarse with desperation. "You know the chances of... of..."

"I know the chances of me passing are very small." With great effort I kept my voice from shaking. "But you know why I have to go."

"It's not too late..." Bleak hopelessness in Dad's voice. "The Underground would hide you..."

I had to get out of there. I had to get out before they wore down my resolve.

"It's too late to teach me to be selfish now," I snapped, switching automatically from Latin to English as I opened the front door and stepped out onto the step.

"Margo..."

I turned to meet Mum's embrace and I wanted to cling to her like a little girl, except that was how she was clinging to me. I stroked her hair and tried to comfort her. "It'll be all right, Mum, really," I whispered. "I might even pass, you know."

She released me at last, stepped back, mopping her eyes – trying to be strong for me.

"Of course. You may pass. Keep the faith, darling." Her voice shook; right here, right now, she could hardly get the familiar words out.

"Keep the faith," said Dad, and his voice shook too.

I cupped my hand and made the Fish with finger and thumb, behind my bag so the neighbours couldn't see.

"Keep the faith." It came out like an order. I blushed, smiled apologetically, took one last look at their faces and hurried down the steps.

The EuroBloc Genetics Department inspectors were waiting at the school gates to check off our names. I joined the line, looking into the boys' schoolyard for Bane. A hotel car pulled up and a white-faced woman helped a tall boy from the back seat – who was *he*? His hair was like autumn leaves... oh. He held a long thin white cane with a soft ball on one end. Blind. My insides clenched in sympathy. What would it be like to have no hope at all?

"Name?" demanded the inspector on the boys' gate.

"Jonathan Revan," said the boy in a very cold, collected voice. "And wouldn't it be an awful lot simpler if my parents just dropped me at the Facility?"

The inspector looked furious as everyone sniggered their appreciation at this show of courage.

"Name?" It was my turn. The blind boy was passing through the gates, his shoulders hunched now, as though to block the sound of the woman's weeping. A man was shepherding her back to the car.

"Margaret Verrall."

The woman marked off my name and jerked the pen towards the girls' yard.

"In."

Inside, I headed straight for the wall between the schoolyards. Bane was there, his matt black hair waving slightly in the breeze. His mother used to keep it short, to hide its strangeness, but that'd only lasted 'til he was fast enough to outrun her. The inspector on the boys' gate was shooting a suspicious glance at him.

"Looking forward to being an adult?" Bane asked savagely, watching Jonathan Revan picking his way across the schoolyard, his stick waving sinuously in front of him. Something clicked.

"That's your friend from out at Little Hazleton, isn't it? The preKnown, who's never had to come to school?"

"Yeah." Bane's face was grim.

"Did you hear what he said to the inspector? He's got some nerve."

"He's got that, all right. Shame he can't see sod all."

"He'd have to see considerably *more* than sod all to pass."

"Yeah." Bane kicked the wall, scuffing his boots. "Yeah,

well, I always knew there was nothing doing.”

“It was nice of you to be friends with him.”

Bane looked embarrassed and kicked the wall even harder.

“Well, he’s got a brain the size of the EuroBloc main server, he’d have been bored out of his mind with only the other preKnowns to talk to.”

Oh no, perhaps I flattered myself, but... if Bane was preoccupied with Jonathan Revan... He hadn’t realised I was in danger! I should’ve said something – months, *years* ago. But no one talked about their Sorting. How could he not have *realised*? We’d known each other since, well, forever. He’d always been there, along with Mum and Dad, Kyle, Uncle Peter...

“Bane, I need to talk to you.”

He looked around, his brown eyes surprised. He sat on the wall and rested his elbows on the railings.

“Now? Not... after our Sorting?”

Were his thoughts running along the same lines as mine earlier? I sat as well, which brought our faces very close.

“Bane... it may not be very easy to talk... after.”

His eyes narrowed.

“What d’you mean?”

“Bane...” There was no easy way to say this. “Bane, I probably won’t pass.”

His face froze into incredulous disbelief – he really hadn’t realised. He’d thought me Safe. *Bane, I’m so sorry...*

“You... of course you’ll pass! You’re as smart as Jon, you can keep the whole class spellbound, hanging on your every word...”

“But I can’t add up to save my life.”

There was a long, sick silence.

“Probably literally,” I added, quite unnecessarily.

Bane remained silent. He saw the danger now. You only had to fail one single test. He looked at me at last and there was something strange in his eyes, something it took me a moment to recognise. Fear.

“Is it really *that* bad, your maths?”

“It’s almost non-existent,” I said as gently as I could. “I have severe numerical dyslexia, you know that.”

“I didn’t realise. I just never...” There was guilt in his eyes,

now; guilt that he'd gone through life so happy and confident in his physical and mental perfection that he'd never noticed the shadow hanging over me. "Didn't Fa... your Uncle Peter... teach you enough?"

"Uncle Peter managed to teach me more than anyone else ever has, but I'm actually not sure it's possible to teach me *enough*."

"I just never thought..."

"Of course you didn't think about it. Who thinks about Sorting unnecessarily? Anyway, this is for you." I put the pouch into his hand. "Don't let anyone see it until you've read it; I don't think you'll want to flash it around."

His knuckles whitened around it.

"Margo, what are you *doing* here? If you think you're going to fail! Go, go now, I'll climb over and distract the inspector; the Underground will hide you..."

"Bane, stop, stop! I can't miss my Sorting, don't you understand? There was never any way I was going to get out of it - no one's allowed to leave the department with preSort age children and after today I'll show up as a SortEvader on every system in the EuroBloc..."

"So go underground!" He dropped his voice to a whisper. "You of all people could do that in an instant!"

"Yes, Bane, I could. And never mind spending the rest of my life running, can't you see why I, *of all people*, cannot run?"

He slammed his fist into the wall and blood sprung up on his knuckles.

"This is because of the Underground stuff, isn't it? Your family are in too deep."

"Bane..." I captured his hand before he could injure it any more. "You know the only way the sanctuary will stay hidden is if the house *isn't* searched and if I run, what's the first thing they'll do?"

"Search your house."

"Search my house. Arrest my parents. Lay a trap for the next Underground members who come calling. Catch the priests when they come. You know what they do to the priests?"

"I know." His voice was so quiet I could hardly hear him.

"And you want that to happen to *Uncle Peter? Cousin*

Mark? How can you suggest I *run*?"

He said nothing. Finally he muttered, "I wish you'd given this stuff up years ago..."

Bane had never understood my faith; he knew it would probably get me killed one day. He'd tried his hardest to talk me out of it before my sixteenth birthday, oh, how he'd tried. But he accepted it. He might not understand the faith angle, but getting killed doing something to piss off the EuroGov was right up his street.

The school bell began to ring and he looked up again, capturing my eyes.

"I suppose then you wouldn't have been you," he murmured. "Look, if you don't pass..." his voice grew firmer, "if you don't pass, I'll have to see what I can do about it. Because... well... I've been counting on marrying you for a very long time, now, and I've no intention of letting anything stop me!"

My heart pounded – joy, but no surprise. How we felt about each other had been an unspoken secret for years.

"Anything, such as the entire EuroBloc Genetics Department? Don't bite off more than you can chew, Bane."

He didn't answer. He just slipped an arm through the railings and snagged me, his lips coming down on mine. My arms slid through the railings, around his strong back, my lips melted against his and suddenly the world was a beautiful, beautiful place and this was the best day of my life.

We didn't break apart until the bell stopped ringing.

"Well," I whispered, looking into his brown eyes, "now I can be dismantled happy, anyway."

His face twisted in anguish.

"Don't say that!"

He kissed me again, fiercely.

"Don't worry..." His hands cupped my face and his eyes glinted. "Whatever happens, *don't worry*. I love you and I *will not* leave you there, you understand?"

Planting one last kiss on my forehead, he swung his bag onto his shoulder and sprinted across the schoolyard, the pouch still clasped in his hand. I watched him go, then picked up my own bag and followed the last stragglers through the girls' door.

The classroom was unusually quiet, bags and small cases cluttering the aisles. Taking my place quickly, I glanced around. There were only two preKnowns in the class. Harriet looked sick and resigned, but Sarah didn't understand about her Sorting or the Facility or anything as complex as that. The known Borderlines were every shade of pale. The Safe looked sober but a little excited. The pre-Sorting ban on copulation would be gone tomorrow. No doubt the usual orgy would ensue.

Bane's last words stuck in my mind. I knew that glint in his eye. I should've urged him much more strenuously not to do anything rash. Not to put himself in danger. Now it was too late.

"I saw you and Bane," giggled Sue, beside me. "Jumping the gun a little, aren't you?"

"As if you haven't done any gun jumping yourself," I murmured. Sue just giggled even harder.

"Margy...? Margy...?"

"Hi, Sarah. Have you got your bag?"

Sarah nodded and patted the shabby bag beside her.

"They explained to you, right? That you'll be going on a sleep-over?"

Sarah nodded, beaming, and pointed at me.

"Margy come too?"

"Perhaps. Only the most special children will be going, you know."

Sarah laughed happily. I swallowed bile and tried not to curse the stupid driver who'd knocked her down all those years ago and left her like this. Tried not to curse her parents, who'd put her into care, sued the driver for his Child Permittance so they could replace her, and promptly moved away.

"Children..." The deputy headmistress. She waited for quiet. "This is the last time I will address you as such. This is a very special day for you all. After your Sorting, you will be legally adults."

Except those of us who would scarcely any longer count as human. She didn't mention that bit.

"Now, do your best, all of you. Doctor Vidran is here from the EGD to oversee your Sorting. Over to you, Doctor

Vidran..."

Doctor Vidran gave a long and horrible speech about the numerous benefits Sorting brought to the human race. By the time he'd finished I was battling a powerful urge to go up and shove his laser pointer down his throat. I managed to stay in my seat and concentrated on trying to love this misguided specimen of humanity, to forgive him his part in what was probably going to happen to me. It was very difficult.

"...A few of you will of course have to be reAssigned, and it is important that we always remember the immense contribution the reAssigned make, in their own way..."

Finally he shut up and bade us turn our attention to our flickery desk screens for the Intellectual Tests. My happiness at his silence took me through Esperanto, English, Geography, History, ComputerScience, Biology, Chemistry and Physics without hitch, but then came Maths.

I tried. I really, really tried. I tried until I thought my brain would explode and then I thought about Bane and my parents and I tried some more. But it was no good. No motivation on earth could enable me to do most of those sums without a calculator. I'd failed.

The knowledge was a cold, hard certainty in the pit of my stomach all the way through the Physical Tests after a silent, supervised lunch. I passed all those, of course. Sight, Hearing, Physiognomy and so on, all well within the acceptable levels. What about Jonathan Revan, a preKnown if ever there was one? Smart, Bane said, really smart, and Bane was pretty bright himself. Much good it'd do Jonathan. Much good it'd do me.

We filed into the gym when it was all over, sitting on benches along the wall. Bane guided Jonathan Revan to a free spot over on the boys' side. In the hall through the double doors the rest of the school fidgeted and chatted. Once the end of semester assembly was over, they were free for four whole weeks.

Free. Would I ever be free again?

I'd soon know. One of the inspectors was wedging the doors open as the headmaster took his place on the stage. His voice echoed into the gym.

"And now we must congratulate our New Adults! Put

your hands together, everyone!"

Dutiful clapping from the hall. Doctor Vidran stood by the door, clipboard in hand, and began to read names. A boy. A girl. A boy. A girl. Sorry, a young man, a young woman... Each New Adult got up and went through to take their seat in the hall. Was there a pattern...? No – randomised. No way to know if they'd passed your name or not.

My stomach churned wildly now. Swallowing hard, I stared across the gym at Bane. Jonathan sat beside him, looking cool as a cucumber, if a little determinedly so. *He* wasn't in any suspense. Bane stared back at me, his face grim and his eyes fierce. I drank in the harsh lines of his face, trying to carve every beloved detail into my mind.

"They might call my name," Caroline was whispering to Harriet. "They might. It's still possible. Still possible..."

Over half the class had gone through.

Still possible, still possible, they might, they might call my name... my mind took up Caroline's litany, and my desperate longing came close to an *ache*...

"Blake Marsden."

A knot of anxiety inside me loosened abruptly – immediately replaced by a more selfish pain. Bane glared at Doctor Vidran and didn't move from his seat. Red-faced, the deputy headmistress murmured in Doctor Vidran's ear. Doctor Vidran looked exasperated.

"Blake Marsden known as Bane Marsden."

Clearly the best Bane was going to get. He gripped Jonathan's shoulder and muttered something, probably *bye*. Jonathan found Bane's hand and squeezed and said something back. Something like *thanks for everything*.

Bane shrugged this off and got up as the impatient inspectors approached him. *No... don't go, please...* Yes! He was heading straight for me – but the inspectors cut him off.

"Come on... Bane, is it? *Congratulations*, through you go..." Bane resisted being herded and the inspector's voice took on a definite warning note. "Now, you're an adult, it's your big day, don't spoil it..."

"I just want to speak to..."

They caught his arms. He wrenched, trying to pull free, but they were strong men and there were two of them.

"You *know* no contact is allowed at this point. I'm sure your girlfriend will be through in a moment."

"Fiancée," snarled Bane, and warmth exploded in my stomach, chasing a little of the chill fear from my body. He'd read my story already.

"*If*, of course, your *fiancée*," Doctor Vidran sneered the un-PC word from over by the door, "is a perfect specimen. If not, you're better off without her, *aren't* you?"

Bane's nostrils flared, his jaw went rigid and his knuckles clenched until I thought his bones would pop from his skin. Shoulders shaking, he allowed the inspectors to bundle him across the gym towards Doctor Vidran. *Uh oh...*

But by the time they reached the doors he'd got sufficient hold of himself he just stopped and looked back at me instead of driving his fist into Doctor Vidran's smug face. He seemed a long way away. But he'd never been going to reach me, had he?

'Love you...' he mouthed.

'Love you...' I mouthed back, my throat too tight for actual words.

Then a third inspector joined the other two and they shoved him through into the hall. And he was gone.

Gone. I might never see him again. I swallowed hard and clenched my fists, fighting a foolish frantic urge to rush across the gym after him...

"*Really*," one inspector was tutting, "we don't usually have to drag them *that* way!"

"Going to end up on a gurney, that one," apologised the deputy headmistress. "So sorry about that..."

Doctor Vidran dismissed Bane with a wave of his pen and went on with the list.

"They might..." whispered Caroline, "they might..."

They might... they might... I might be joining Bane. I might... *Please*...

But they didn't. Doctor Vidran stopped reading, straightened the pages on his clipboard and glanced at the other inspectors.

"Take them away," he ordered.

He and the deputy headmistress swung round and went into the hall as though those of us left had ceased to exist. As we kind of had. The only decent thing to do about

reAssignees was to forget them, everyone knew that.

One of the inspectors took the wedges from under the doors and closed them – turned the key, locking us apart.

My head rang. I'd thought I'd known, I'd thought I'd been quite certain, but still the knowledge hit me like a bucket of ice-cold water, echoing in my head. Margaret Verrall. My name. They'd not called it. The last tiny flame of hope died inside me and it was more painful than I'd expected.

One of the boys on the bench opposite – Andrew Plateley – started crying in big, shuddering gasps, like he couldn't quite believe it. Harriet was hugging Caroline and Sarah was tugging her sleeve and asking what was wrong. My limbs felt heavy and numb, like they weren't part of me.

Doctor Vidran's voice came to us from the hall, just audible.

"Congratulations, adults! What a day for you all! You are now free to apply for breeding registration, providing your gene scans are found to be compatible. I imagine your head teacher would prefer you to wait until after your exams next semester, though!"

The school laughed half-heartedly, busy sneaking involuntary glances to see who was left in the gym – until an Inspector yanked the blinds down over the door windows. Everyone would be glad to have us out of sight so they could start celebrating.

"After successful registration," the Doctor's cheerful voice went on, "you may have your contraceptive implants temporarily removed. The current child permittance is one child per person, so each couple may have two. Additional child permittances can be bought; the price set by the EGD is currently three hundred thousand Eurons, so I don't imagine any of you need to worry about that."

More nervous laughter from the hall. Normal life was through there. Exams, jobs, registering, having children, growing old with Bane... but I wasn't in there with him. I was out here. My stomach fluttered sickly.

"ReAssignees, up you get, pick up your bags," ordered one of the inspectors.

I got to my feet slowly and picked up my bag. My hands were shaking. Why did I feel so shocked? Had some deluded part of me believed this couldn't really happen?

Around me everyone was moving as though in a daze, except Andrew Plateley who just sat, rocking to and fro, sobbing. Jonathan said something quietly to him but he didn't seem to hear.

The inspector shook Andrew's shoulder, saying loudly, "Up." He pointed to the external doors at the other end of the gym but Andrew leapt to his feet and bolted for the hall. Yanked at the doors with all his strength, sobbing, but they just rattled slightly under his assault and remained solidly closed. The inspectors grabbed him and began to drag him away, kicking and screaming. There was a sudden, suffocating silence from beyond those doors, as everyone tried not to hear his terror.

Dr Vidran's voice rushed on, falsely light-hearted, "And I'm *sure* I don't need to remind you that you can only register with a person of your own ethnicity. Genetic mixes are, *of course*, not tolerated and all such offspring will be destroyed. And as you know, all unregistered children automatically count as reAssignees from birth, but I'm sure you're all going to register correctly so none of you need to worry about anything like that."

They'd got Andrew outside and the inspectors were urging the rest of us after him. It seemed a terribly long way, my bag seemed to weigh a very great deal and I still felt sick. I swallowed again, my hand curving briefly, unseen, into the Fish. Be strong.

"And that's all from me, though your headmaster has kindly invited me to stay for your end of semester presentations. Once again, congratulations! Let's hear it for Salperton's New Adults...!"

The school whooped and cheered heartily behind us. A wave of crazy, reality-defying desperation swept over me – this must be how Andrew had felt. As though, if I could just get into that hall, *I'd* have the rest of my life ahead of me too...

Reality waited outside in the form of a little EGD mini-bus. Imagine a police riot van that mated with a tank. Reinforced metal all over, with grilles over the windows. Reaching the hall would achieve precisely *nothing*. So *get a grip, Margo*.

I steadied Sarah as she scrambled into the minibus and

passed my bag up to her. She busied herself lifting my bag and hers onto the overhead luggage racks, beaming with pride at her initiative.

"Thanks, Sarah." A soft white ball wandered into my vision – there was Jonathan Revan, the last left to get in after me. I almost offered help, then thought better of it.

"Jonathan, isn't it? Just give a shout if you want a hand."

"Thanks, Margaret." His eyes stared rather eerily into the minibus. Or rather, through the minibus, for they focussed not at all. "I'm fine."

His stick came to rest against the bus's bumper and his other hand reached out, tracing the shape of the seats on each side, then checking for obstructions at head height. Just as the EGD inspectors moved to shove him in, he stepped up into the bus with surprising grace. I climbed in after him just as the school fire alarms went off, the sound immediately muffled by the inspectors slamming the doors behind me.

"Bag?" Sarah was saying to Jonathan, holding out her hand.

"Sorry?"

"Bag," I told him. "Would you like her to put your bag up?"

"Oh. Yes, thank you. What's your name?"

"Sarah."

"Sarah. Thanks."

Bet he wouldn't have let me put his bag up for him! Sarah sat down beside Harriet, so I took a seat next to Jonathan. The first pupils were spilling out into the schoolyards and I craned my neck to try and catch a glimpse of Bane. A last glimpse.

"Any guesses who set that off," said Jonathan dryly.

"Don't know how he'd have done it, but yeah, I bet he did."

The minibus began to move, heading for the gates, and I twisted to look out the rear window, through the bars. Nothing..

We pulled onto the road and finally there he was, streaking across the schoolyard to skid to a halt in front of the gates just as they slid closed. He gripped them as though he wanted to shake them, rip them off their hinges or throw

them open...

The minibus went around a corner and he was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinna Turner is a Catholic Christian with roots in the Methodist and Anglican churches. She has an MA in English Language and Literature from Greyfriars Hall, University of Oxford, but has foolishly gone on to work with both children and animals! Juggling work with the disabled and lambing (and editing her parish magazine), she spends as much time as she can writing.

She has been writing since she was fourteen and likes strong protagonists with plenty of integrity. A keen cinema-goer, she lives in the UK with her Giant African Land snail, Peter, who has a six inch long shell and an even larger foot!

Comments? Questions?

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