

**GAME
CHANGER**

Also by

TIM BOWLER

Midget

Dragon's Rock

River Boy

Shadows

Storm Catchers

Starseeker

Apocalypse

Frozen Fire

Bloodchild

Buried Thunder

Sea of Whispers

Night Runner

BLADE:

Enemies

Flight

Firestorm

Endgame

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First published 2015

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-279415-4

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

FOR MY MOTHER WITH LOVE

CHAPTER 1

I'm trying to pretend yesterday didn't happen. Trouble is, they won't let me. I thought all I've got to do is keep out of the way, say nothing, and they'll see I'm safe; and I am safe, I'm totally safe, I just want to get on with my own stuff. I'm indoors most of the time anyway. I'm not called Mole for nothing. So what's to worry about? They could leave me alone and everything would be fine, but no. The email stares at me from the screen.

We gotta talk.

Then a phone number, a mobile. I check the email address again. Nothing that gives away a name, just random letters and numbers. I think back to yesterday, read the email again, click Reply and type an answer.

Nothing to talk about.

But that won't do. I delete the words and try again.

I won't say anything.

That feels wrong too. I listen to the sounds in the house: Dad washing up the supper things downstairs, Mum walking up and down the hall, talking on the phone. I'm just wondering where Meggie is when she knocks on my door.

'What you doing, big guy?' she calls.

I quickly cancel the unsent email and switch off the computer.

'Nothing much.'

She comes in and walks over. She's got a dressing gown on and a towel round her neck and her hair's wet from the shower. She puts a hand on my shoulder.

'Nothing much?' she says.

'Yeah.'

'Sounds like fun.'

She pulls up a chair next to me.

'You OK?' she says.

'Yeah.'

'Just switched off your computer?'

'Yeah.'

'Screen light's still on.'

I switch off the screen. She looks over my desk, picks up the top book from the pile.

'I know,' she says, glancing over it, 'nosy little sister.'

'I don't mind you being nosy.'

She studies the book cover.

'*Treasure Island*. You must have read this nine times, Mikey.'

More like twenty-nine times, but I don't tell Meggie that. She puts the book down again and turns to me.

'So what happened yesterday, big guy?'

'Nothing.'

'You were doing great,' she says. 'Mum and Dad are really pleased with the way you're trying to face things. But I didn't tell them how quiet you were coming back, how you were like . . . closed up. Was it that bad, where we went?'

'I chose the place, so it's my fault if it was.'

Meggie frowned.

'Maybe I should have fought you harder and taken you somewhere else. I was really worried when you told me where you wanted to go, Mikey, so noisy and crowded and everything, all the things that freak you out, normally. I thought you were being a bit overambitious.'

She's probably right—she usually is—but I was trying to show some bottle. I thought—I'll choose a tough place, a really tough place, all the things that scare the pants off me, and it'll be a real test for me to see if I can handle it, and I was handling it, sort of, till the stuff happened. I don't answer Meggie. Don't know what to say to her.

'Mikey?'

'Call me Mole like everyone else does.'

'Mum and Dad don't call you Mole, and I'm not going to either.'

I stare into Meggie's face. It's so hard to think of her as thirteen. She seems two years older than me rather than two years younger, but it's always been that way. It's only when she's got Lucy and her other mates round and they go all girly that she seems her true age. I hear another knock at the door, then Mum puts her head round.

'Making hot drinks,' she says. 'Anybody interested?'

'Cocoa, please,' says Meggie.

'Mikey?'

'Hot chocolate, please.'

'Come down in ten minutes.'

And Mum closes the door. Meggie stands up, rubbing her hair with the towel.

'Mikey, you still haven't told me what went wrong yesterday.'

And I can't. I can't get Meggie involved, or Mum and Dad. I've got to think what to do, and I need time for that. It's complicated, really complicated. I'm hoping it'll be one of those things that'll go away if I don't do anything. Once they see I haven't said or done anything, they'll work out I'm no danger. I stare at the blank computer screen.

We gotta talk.

It's like the words are hiding there, even with the thing switched off. I feel Meggie's hand on my shoulder again.

'You were doing really well, Mikey,' she says. 'You managed half an hour at that place. That's good, that's really good. Maybe that's what scared you a bit. You're not used to it. But I was with you going and coming back, and we can do it again, tomorrow maybe, after school. We could go to the same place, so you get used to it, or maybe another place. Somewhere you feel really safe.'

I feel Meggie's hand leave my shoulder.

'See you downstairs,' she says.

And she's gone. I switch on the computer again, call up my emails, and there's another one: same meaningless address, but some new words.

Ring the number.

I stare at the message, call up the old one. The mobile number sits on the screen, waiting. I lean back in the chair. Outside in Denbury Close all is quiet. I stand up, walk to the window, and peer out. Darkness has fallen over the neat, familiar road. All my life it's seemed safe

and reassuring; suddenly it doesn't. The clean cars, the well-tended gardens, the double garages, the immaculate houses—all seem hostile now. For the first time I see how many places there are to hide round here.

I make my way downstairs. They're all in the sitting room and their silence matches the silence in the close outside. We have our hot drinks. Dad does the crossword, Mum the Sudoku, Meggie texts her friends. I stare at the fire, the only thing making any noise right now.

'One for you here, Mikey,' says Dad suddenly.

I look round at him, but he's still studying the crossword. He reads out the clue.

'Name of the ship in *Treasure Island*. Ten letters.'

'*Hispaniola*.'

Mum chuckles, but says nothing.

'Thanks,' says Dad.

And they all carry on, Dad with his crossword, Mum with her Sudoku, Meggie with her texting. The fire goes slowly down. Back in my room later, as I make ready for bed, I switch on my computer again. There are four more emails from the same address. But it's just one message, repeated four times.

Talk to us and live mikey. Talk to anyone else and people gonna die. Including you xxx

CHAPTER 2

The darkness feels good. I burrow down deep in the bed. I like being called Mole. I know they mean it as an insult but I don't care. Moles do what I like doing. It's natural for them and it's natural for me. The thing is, if you don't have the fear, you can't understand the fear. That's what pisses me off about my shrink. He might have studied case histories of other people like me but he can't really understand what we go through unless he feels the fear himself.

And he doesn't. He's got no idea. He goes out of his house like almost everybody else does, and he never thinks twice about the terrifying openness of the world, the great, yawning void. He studies his cases and talks to his patients and gives us all his clever, wordy advice, and then he goes out and gets on with his brilliant life. I say 'us all' as if I know his other patients, but of course I don't. I never see them. Most of the time I don't even make it to his clinic.

Unless Meggie can get time off school and come with me. Usually he comes here, which is more expensive for Mum and Dad, and I feel bad about that, even though

they tell me it doesn't matter. But I guess it's not so much of a problem now that he's stopped coming so often. He insists I'm making progress and he doesn't need to see me so regularly, but he knows and I know that he's given up, because I'm making no progress at all, and the fear's still there, only it's bigger. It's turned into terror.

That's why books console me, specially novels by authors from another age, like Charles Dickens and Herman Melville. The people in their stories aren't real and the people who wrote them are long dead, so they don't feel real either. I'm never going to meet any of them outside of books, never going to have to deal with them face to face. So books are safe, and when I read, I feel safe too. Till I close the book.

The darkness folds around me, and now the warmth of the bed, and the silence outside in the close, and in my room. But the words don't go away. I see them against the blackness, just as they appeared on my computer screen, and they seem to speak aloud to me, like strange robotic voices in my ear.

'Talk to us and live, Mikey,' they say mechanically. 'Talk to anyone else and people gonna die. Including you.'

Yeah, right. I believe the second and third bit, so I'm keeping quiet there, but the first bit? Talk to us and live? I'm not stupid. I know what'll happen if I make contact with these people. So ringing won't help. Ringing will just bring them nearer, and they're near already. I can feel them close. I push my head out from the covers and peer about the dark room.

That's something that always chills me: how the darkness fades the longer you're in it. I don't want the darkness to fade; I want it to stay as black as possible, so it hides me really well, but it always eases, even after I've had my head under the covers. The room's clearer than the last time I saw it, and if it's clear for me, it could be clear for somebody else hiding here.

I stare round at the murky shapes, growing more visible by the minute. Nothing's moving and everything's still quiet outside the house. Doesn't feel right, though. I slip out of bed, pull my dressing gown on over my pyjamas, and peep round the side of the curtain into Denbury Close. Nothing moving down below, nothing I can see. I look up at the sky. Dull clouds, no stars or moon.

There should be much more darkness than this outside. I don't like it when everything's so clear. I leave the window and walk over to the bookshelves. I know where my books are by feel alone, every single one of them, but right now I can even see the writing on the spines, the books with larger lettering anyway. I wish I couldn't. This darkness is just too bright. I run my eye over the titles.

Oliver Twist.

I pull the book down. It's not my favourite Charles Dickens but never mind. I take it over to the armchair in the corner, slump down with my legs pulled into my chest, and hug the book in the darkness. After a while I hear footsteps on the landing: Meggie's, heading for the loo. Just as well I've got the light off or she'd see it and come and check I'm OK, and I'm not. Right now I'm a long way from OK. I open the book, stare at the blurry

text, but the only words I pick up are the ones chanting in my head. *People gonna die, people gonna die.*

Die, die, die.

I close the book, hug it again, then hear the click of the bathroom door and Meggie's footsteps once more, only they're not heading back to her room: they're heading this way. A pause outside my door, then it quietly opens and I see her head appear in the gap. But she doesn't see me. She's staring towards the bed. It takes her a few moments to realize I'm not there, then she turns, quickly, as if in a panic.

'I'm over here, Meggie.'

She sees me curled up on the chair.

'Mikey,' she says, with obvious relief, 'what you doing sitting in the dark?'

'What you doing checking me out?'

She closes the door behind her and walks over.

'I often check to see if you're sleeping,' she says.

'I didn't know.'

'That's because you're always sleeping when I look in.'

'So why do you check, then?'

'I check when I'm worried about you.'

'But if I'm always sleeping when you look in,' I say, 'there's obviously nothing to worry about.'

I don't mention the times I've sat here in the darkness on the nights when she didn't check.

'I just know you often don't sleep,' she says. 'So I'm guessing you curl up on that chair and think and worry, even if I haven't seen you doing it.'

'You don't know I do that.'

'You're doing it now.'

I don't answer.

'What are you hugging to yourself?' she says suddenly.

I hold out the book. She takes it and stares at the jacket.

'Can't read this,' she says eventually. 'Too dark.'

'Don't put on the light.'

'I wasn't going to.'

She hands it back to me and stands there, looking down. Yet again I wonder at her being thirteen. It's almost like Mum standing next to me. She reaches out suddenly and ruffles my hair. Like Mum does.

'It'll be OK, Mikey,' she says, and she quietly leaves the room. I wait till I hear her own door click, then pull the book back into my chest and close my eyes.

'Die, die, die,' say the words in my head.

CHAPTER 3

‘Mikey, come out of there.’

I don’t answer, and I don’t need to. All Dad’s got to do is open the wardrobe door. It’s not like it’s locked or anything, and he knows that. He tries again, though.

‘Mikey, it’s half-past seven in the morning and we shouldn’t have to keep going through this.’

I glance round the inside of the wardrobe. I’ve got so used to its musty smell down the years it feels as normal as the hanging clothes brushing the top of my head in the dark. If the wood wasn’t so hard and the space so cramped, I’d sleep in here every night. The door opens suddenly and there’s Dad’s face, and Mum’s too, looking in at me. They’re trying not to be angry, but I know they are. I hate making them like this.

‘Mikey,’ says Mum, ‘you can overcome this. You know you can, because you’ve done it before.’

I’ve also stayed all day and all night in the wardrobe before, but there’s no point reminding her of that; and she is right. I’ve made it out of here quite a few times—just not often enough to keep us all happy. They’re still watching me, confusion on their faces, along with the

anger and frustration. I want to help them so much, I want to see the pain in their eyes disappear, but it's not good. I can feel the old familiar sweat over my body, the coldness round my neck, the shudder in my stomach. I feel for a book to clutch and realize with horror that I didn't bring one with me when I shut myself in here—and I always bring a book. Even *Oliver Twist* would have done, but I think I left it on the chair.

'Here it is,' says Meggie's voice.

She appears from the left, just behind Mum and Dad, and she's holding a book, but it's not *Oliver Twist*: it's *Moby Dick*, much better. Herman Melville should get me out of here. I hold my hand out for it, but Meggie shakes her head and stays out of reach.

'Meggie, that's blackmail,' I say.

'You don't need it, big guy,' she says. 'I'll give it to you if you really want, but you don't need it.'

I scramble out of the wardrobe, stand up in front of them, then grab *Moby Dick* from Meggie.

'I do need it,' I say.

I stare down at the familiar picture of the great whale, the tiny boat, the men at the oars, the harpoonist, the heaving sea; then feel a hand on my arm. It's Mum's.

'Let's get you to school today, Mikey,' she says.

'Yes.'

'Mr Cable's back today, isn't he?'

'Yes.'

'So that's a good reason for going in.'

I can think of a few hundred for not going in, but I just give Mum a hug. She moves a little awkwardly against me.

‘What’s wrong?’ I say.

‘You’re holding that book at a funny angle and it’s digging into me.’

I start to pull back, but she draws me closer.

‘I still want the hug,’ she says, ‘with or without the book.’

I try to adjust it so she doesn’t feel it.

‘That’s better,’ she says.

I feel Dad and Meggie watching us, and it suddenly hits me again: the silence all around. It’s like nothing’s happening out in Denbury Close, and nothing in here either, like we’re all leading soundless lives. I think of the other houses and wonder if they’re just as quiet inside, and I suddenly wish Mum and Dad would listen to the radio in the mornings, or Meggie would put some of her rubbish music on.

But it’s probably just me. Silence and space go together, like two parts of the void. Dad gives me a fatherly pat. I go on holding Mum, but there’s a second pat from Dad, and I know I’ve got to let go. I hate all these games as much as they do. I wonder what they’d think if they knew the bigger game I’ve got to play now. I drop the book on the bed and step back from Mum. She smiles.

‘Let’s make it a school day, Mikey.’

‘Rather than a wardrobe day.’

‘Exactly.’

She takes me by the hand and leads me out through the door and down the landing towards the bathroom.

‘I can do this bit, Mum.’

She lets go at once.

‘Of course, darling.’

She walks back towards the door of my room. I see Dad and Meggie waiting there, watching, and for the thousandth time in my life, I feel the old guilt dump itself on me, like it wants to squash me into the floor. Maybe one day it will. Mum walks past the others and sets off down the stairs.

‘Breakfast in twenty minutes,’ she calls over her shoulder.

Dad follows, with a glance in my direction. I flash him a smile and he manages one back before he disappears from view. Meggie’s still standing in my doorway. I look grumpily over at her.

‘What are you gawping at?’ I mutter.

She walks slowly up to me and stops. She’s already dressed for school. For all I know she’s had breakfast, got her bag packed, maybe spent the last twenty minutes on her phone or online, hooking up with her mates. She gives me a smile.

‘See you downstairs, big guy.’

And she turns away. I dive into the bathroom, rush through showering, dry off, hurry back to my room, get dressed, switch on my computer. I’ve been dreading this moment. All through the night I’ve been feeling the thing pulling me, because I know it’ll have more messages, more warnings, more death threats probably, and all through the night I’ve been resisting, or rather huddling inside the wardrobe and pretending it’ll go away if I just ignore it. But I can’t ignore it now, specially now I’ve got to go to school. I can’t leave the house without reading everything they’ve said.

But to my surprise there are no more messages, from them or anyone else. I stare at the blank screen. I'm almost disappointed, not because I want more messages but because it cost me so much last night to stop myself running to switch on the computer. I lean back in the chair, watching the screen, then, on an impulse, delete every single one of the messages that have come in, switch off the computer, and make my way downstairs to join the others.