



Chapter 1

The Paradise Street All-Night Bus Station

Peligan City was worn out and rain-soaked and the dark clouds that hung over it cast long and murky shadows. Only the city centre escaped the gloom, with its circus of dazzling casino lights and flashing billboards. Beyond that, hidden behind the glare and the smoke, were the back streets where steam rose up from the sewers like mist. There, far away from the slot machines and the car horns, the only sound



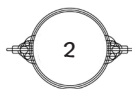
was the rustling of the rain and the wet smack of footsteps as Lil Potkin ran down the road, her shadow stretching and shrinking as she passed through the yellow pools of light beneath each street lamp.

She arrived at Paradise Street out of breath and just in time to see her bus, a lumbering double-decker, chug away in a cloud of black fumes. As it passed her, the back wheel sank into a pothole; Lil recoiled half a second too late and got slapped in the face by a wave of puddle water.

‘Hey!’ she spluttered, glaring after the disappearing rear lights. She tried to think of a good comeback while the grimy liquid dripped off the end of her nose, but nothing came to mind, and there was no one around to hear it anyway.

She looked at her watch, and then reluctantly turned to the waiting area. It was 8.35 p.m. She had half an hour to kill and nowhere better to kill it.

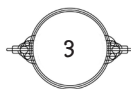
As she stepped through the automatic doors,



she was hit by the glare of fluorescent tube lights. The waiting room was a grid of chipped white tables bordered by pairs of plastic chairs, all securely bolted to the floor. High-level speakers leaked electronic background music, just loud enough to be annoying but not so loud that you could actually hear what song was playing. But it was warmer than outside, and it was dry.

Lil, a wiry twelve-year-old with cup-handle ears and a belly full of ambition, wore her hair cut into a bob with a short fringe and a signature yellow rain mac. A small rucksack, containing a well-thumbed book, a notepad and a nest of chewed pencils, was slung over her shoulders.

Wary citizens avoided the city centre after dark but Lil wasn't easily scared. She'd been stalking the streets for years, looking for a story, sticking her nose in where it didn't belong, waiting for a scoop big enough to get her onto the staff of the underground news pamphlet the *Klaxon*. She'd been unlucky with her

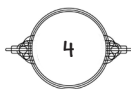


previous cases – they had both come to nothing – but Lil knew that she just had to keep at it. Her hero, the great investigative journalist A. J. McNair, once said that ‘news is everywhere, if you know where to look’ and Lil’s eyes were permanently peeled.

The waiting room had only a few inhabitants: a couple of stubble-faced night workers drinking tea; cleaners in overalls, probably on their way to factories or office blocks; and a large family clutching suitcases, who looked like they would be spending the night there.

On the opposite wall was a noticeboard. A muddle of flyers covered it, overlapping haphazardly, like they had been drawn there by a powerful paper magnet. Lil flicked back through the notices offering services rendered and items for sale until she caught sight of a crumpled and crayon-drawn plea half buried under adverts for cheap appliance sales.

*LOST TOY! Help me find my best doll.
PLEASE. He has one good eye and blue*



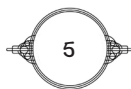
trousers. Someone has taken him and never given him back. Even though he is all I've got.

Below there was a badly drawn picture of a winking egg character with arms and legs and a few strands of seaweed-like hair.

Lil blew out her cheeks. The doll obviously meant a lot to the kid; it wouldn't do any harm to make a few enquiries and, anyway, it was no worse than her last investigation, The Case of the Stolen Bin Lids, or the one before that, The Mystery of the Forgotten Laundry Bag.

There was an address she couldn't quite make out at the top of the note. Lil gave the page a sharp tug and as it came away a horrible feeling of dread crept over her: a whisper, like the draught of a cellar door opening onto a darkened staircase. A shadow flitted at the corner of her eye; she turned quickly but there was no one there.

Everyone was right where they had been. No, she looked again – there was a new face and

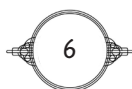


it was staring right at her. Sitting by the window, only a few tables away, was a boy. His skin was so pale it was almost white, and the arms of his grey sweatshirt rode up, revealing his bony wrists.

Lil felt her ears turning red and let her eyes glide past, like she was just casually taking in the room, pretending she hadn't seen him. People didn't generally look right at you in Peligan; they kept their eyes to the ground, in case they saw anything they might have to do something about. Lil wasn't like that, but it didn't mean she liked being stared at.

Putting on a breezy stride, she made her way to an empty table and sat down, ignoring the grim sensation of soggy jeans pressing against her skin. Then, taking out her reporter's notebook, she pulled the pencil from its spiral binding and flipped the cover open with a well-rehearsed flick of the wrist.

She held the flyer up as though she was copying down details and used the cover to peer over it. The boy was still staring. Lil tucked



her hair behind her ears and then untucked it again. *What was his problem?* She ignored him for as long as she could, chewing thoughtfully on the end of her pencil, then she drew a big bubble question mark on the next blank page of her notebook and coloured it in.

Eventually her curiosity got the better of her and she lowered the flyer.

He wasn't staring any more. A newspaper lay face up in front of him and he was absorbed in reading the cover story with his head bowed low and a lock of fair hair falling untidily over his forehead.

A man in a donkey jacket lurched into the seat opposite the boy and took the newspaper. The boy looked up but didn't say anything. The man licked his thumb, opened the paper and shook it out. After a minute, she saw him shiver and pull his jacket collar up. He looked about him uneasily, and then without a word he stood up, dropped the paper on the floor and moved to another table. The boy watched him go.

The lighting overhead buzzed and flickered.



Lil lowered the flyer a little more. She took in the boy's tattered trainers and the frayed hems of his jeans and felt bad for pretending she couldn't see him earlier. She had been thinking about getting a hot drink to pass the time; maybe she would get one for him too.

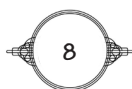
As she stood at the drinks machine looking at the choices, Lil flipped her coin with practised nonchalance. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that the boy was looking at her again – *probably pretty impressed by my coin flipping*, she thought – and dropped the coin. It rolled over to where he was sitting.

'Fantastic,' she said under her breath, and then out loud: 'Sorry. I dropped some money under your table.' The boy looked startled as she approached. He blinked uncertainly back at her.

Lil looked at the coin and then at the boy. 'It's right there.' She pointed. 'Could you reach down and get it for me?'

Only his Adam's apple moved as he gulped noisily.

'Too much trouble for you to just pass it to



me?’ Lil frowned at him. ‘Fine, keep it if you want; you look like you need it more than I do.’ The boy just stared, his dark eyes round. ‘You don’t say much, do you?’

He shook his head, swallowed and then croaked, ‘Sorry,’ in a voice that sounded like it hadn’t been used for a while

Lil shrugged. ‘That’s OK; some people say I talk too much.’

He gave her an awkward smile. Lil tucked her hair behind her ears and then untucked it again straight away and returned to the drinks machine.

As she stood there, waiting while the thin chocolate was squirted into the paper cups, a cold, creeping feeling began to spread through her bones. She glanced over her shoulder; someone was standing outside the automatic doors and they were stuck on open.

She carried the two cups over to the boy’s table and held one out for him.

‘Is that for me?’ he said, like he couldn’t really believe it was.



‘You looked cold.’

‘I am.’

His eyes were seriously dark, almost black. He frowned at the cup as if he was concentrating really hard. When he reached out to take it Lil noticed a deep scratch across the back of his hand. It distracted her just at the moment she passed the hot chocolate to him, and she felt her skin bloom into a fresh set of goose pimples. She let go of the cup too soon and it fell through their hands, hitting the floor in a watery brown splatter.

‘I thought you had it,’ said Lil. ‘Sorry . . .’

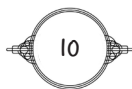
The boy looked mortified. He sat there completely still, staring at the brown puddle.

‘It’s not the end of the world,’ Lil said, chucking the discarded newspaper over it and swooshing it around with her foot. ‘Here, have mine.’ She held it out to him.

The boy hung his head.

‘Go on, take it,’ she insisted.

‘No!’ he shouted suddenly. ‘I mean, it’s OK. I don’t want any.’



‘Sure? It’s not as bad as it looks.’

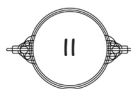
He nodded sadly. ‘I’m sure.’

The strip lights buzzed and went off.

Lil had never been afraid of the dark, but in that moment, blinded by the sudden blackness, her heart began to race. A second later the emergency lights came on and the room was cast in a sickly green glow. The boy was still sitting there. He looked lost. Lil thought, *He probably doesn’t have anywhere to go*. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the last of her money minus the bus fare. As she held the coins out to him she noticed her own hand was trembling, so she put the money on the table and pocketed her hand.

‘There,’ she said. ‘You can buy another one, if you like.’

He didn’t take the money and Lil wondered if maybe he was embarrassed to, but it was almost time to go, so she returned to her table to get her stuff. As she made for the doors a toothless old woman called after her. ‘Are you just going to leave that money there?’



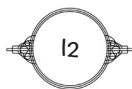
Lil paused and looked back to the table by the window.

The boy had gone.

The night bus home was almost empty. Lil climbed to the top deck and took a seat near the front. She half closed her eyes and leant her head against the window, where it gently bumped as the bus spluttered and chugged its way along the ring road, while Peligan City crawled slowly by, skulking behind the lines of street lamps.

She looked out at the patterns of light and shadow that mapped the city she knew better than the lines on her mother's face: the disused municipal gardens with empty rectangular lakes and boarded-up pavilions; the patterned grids of the tower blocks and lines of terrace houses.

Up ahead she could make out the glow of the bonfire-studded 'Saints' area, where slums had sprouted from the skeletal remains of the old town, and beyond that the cloudy yellow glimmer of the industrial quarter whose factories spat up flumes of smoke from their chimneys.



And there on the hill, towering above everything stood Fellgate Prison, known to all as ‘the Needle’, a floodlit high-rise that stretched up into the sky, skewering the smog like a giant stick of dirty candyfloss.

