



My story begins with me sitting on a bed, looking out of the window.

I know that doesn't sound like much. But let me tell you where the bed is, and what I can see from it. This bed is right in the corner of a room only just big enough for it, and the bed is only just big enough for a kid my age.

(Twelve – just about to be thirteen – and skinny.)

The window is the size of the whole wall, made of special tinted glass that means the room stays the same temperature all the time. The room is locked shut and you need an electronic keycard to open the door. If you could open it, you would be in a long corridor with absolutely *nothing* in it apart from cameras in the ceiling and a fat man in a purple jacket and trousers sitting opposite on a plastic chair. Sleeping, most likely.

This fat man is called a *warden*. And there are lots of them here. But I think he is probably the fattest.

The corridor with the cameras and the fat warden is on the seventh floor of a building which is like a big upside-down boat made of glass and metal. Everywhere you look there are reflections – of you, other faces, the storm clouds. The curved glass walls stretch all the way down to the edge of some very high cliffs – only grass and mud for miles around, with rocks and sea below. The cliffs are in the north of the Island, in the middle of the Quarantine Zone – far away from the city and my home.

The name of this building is Spectrum Hall.

Or in full: Spectrum Hall Academy for Challenging Children.

It's just like a big school mainly. Only the most boring school in the world, that you can never, ever leave.

And as for what I can see out of the window?

I know that what is really there is sea and sky and rocks, but the light in the ceiling bounces off the glass into my eyes. So when I look out into the dark sky all I can actually see is my reflection. That and the hairy grey varmint flapping about in the corner. A 'moth' is what they call this kind – with antennae and spotted grey wings. I shoo him away, only to send him circling round the light above.

I try to ignore the flittering noise above me and carry on with my practice. 'Bed', 'chair' (one, screwed to the

floor), 'window', 'my watch' – loads of words to practise with. You see, I know what the words mean. I know how to write them. I just can't say them. No more than the moth can.

Not since Mum died.

I look at my watch again. The chunky green digital one she gave me. The last present I ever got from her. My favourite present I ever got from her. Even Dad nicked it once, because he thought it was 'nifty', and I had to hassle him to give it back.

I'm lucky to still have it – we aren't meant to keep anything personal at the Hall, but I kicked and bit so they couldn't take it. I flick the picture on to the screen.

It's a summer afternoon in our garden, behind our house in the city. You can just see the sun shining on the River Ams, gleaming beyond the top of the back wall, and far away on the other side, the skyline of tall glass towers.

Premium.

City of the south, and capital city of the Island. When the rest of the world grew too hot, and cracked open in the sun, everyone came to live on this cold grey rock – the Island – in their hundreds and thousands. If only it was hot *here* sometimes. The weather is never good. But for me this picture has just always been where our home is, where Dad is – and where, one day, I know I'll return.

Right now though, I'm more interested in the person in the garden.

It's my mum, Laura, before she got sick. She has

long curly hair the colour of shiny new coins, and she's laughing, at something Dad or I have said.

I used to be able to talk normal, you see, like everyone. Mum and I talked a lot. Dad and I talked a bit. Now though, it's like trying to learn the hardest language in the world. I know I can inside; it's just when I try to speak – nothing happens. The more I try, the harder it gets.

They want to make me talk again here – Doctor Fredericks with his tests – but it's not working. People still stare at you funny as you go red in the face, or sometimes they laugh and make up what they think you were going to say.

I'd rather try and talk to a varmint, thanks. There's enough of them – that's for sure. Flapping moths that circle round lights, like the one in my room right now, and spiders lurking in corners, or cockroaches scuttling around by the bins. All the useless insects and pests that the red-eye left behind. We don't even bother with their real names half the time. Varmints is all they are.

And I have practised talking at them, as it happens. Not that you're meant to go near them – even though everyone knows they're the only thing that can't get the virus. So I haven't reported this flapping one in my room. Because I like practising with him there buzzing around. He won't talk back. But at least he doesn't laugh or stare – I can almost pretend he's listening.

I do that a lot.