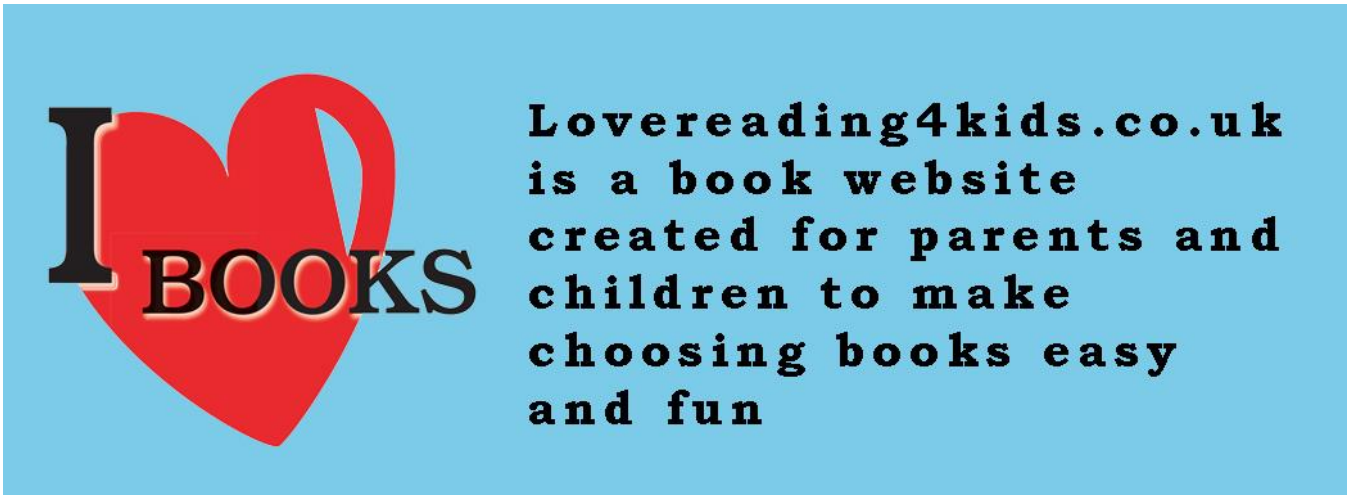


Opening extract from

Maladapted

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1

"1,107 DAYS WITHOUT A SINGLE DELAY," the Metro carriage announced with a smug ping. "*PROUD TO KEEP FOUNDATION CITY MOVING*."

No-one took any notice of the soft electronic voice.

No-one except Cillian, who was disappointed.

Why hadn't he finished his assignment last night? He stared in frustration at the complex tangle of equations on his smartCell. No way would this be ready for the first lecture, and a Metro stuck in the tunnel would've bought him precious time.

Some hope.

He tapped his screen to enlarge the knot of numbers, when suddenly a heart icon pulsed briefly and a message scrolled across the display:

Sorry to interrupt your browsing, but a girl in this carriage has Liked your profile.

Cillian felt a flutter of excitement and glanced up. Everyone in the crowded carriage was silent, absorbed in

the Ultranet: someone was playing a game, someone else was watching a movie, several were frantically catching up with emails. All of them were somewhere else…

His eyes darted from face to face, trying to work out who on this commuter train had pinged him, but no-one was giving anything away.

Cillian glanced at the man sitting next to him and cursed his luck. Why *now*? Why did he have to get pinged on the one morning a week he travelled Riverside with his father?

On the other hand, his dad wasn't really paying much attention. He was studying his touch-pad, enthralled by the latest twists in Foundation City's elections. Cillian had never understood why his father was so interested in politics – all the parties seemed pretty much the same, constantly trying to outdo each other's promises of lower taxes and tighter security.

Cillian looked back to his own screen and decided to go for it. He tapped the smartCell: *Tell me more.*

A profile opened. *Pixel-Girl, 19*. *Image Researcher. Likes clubbing, movies, gaming.* Her photograph was tantalizingly obscured.

Would you like to send a Flirt?

What could he say? Numbers were his thing, not words. He racked his brains…

She'll be leaving at the next stop, Cillian.

Think, think. He'd made a *DigiFlirt* profile after someone in his class circulated the hack codes, and had been tweaking it ever since. His total lack of success meant he hadn't really thought about what to do if someone actually showed an interest.

Cillian felt the Metro decelerate as it approached the station. In a panic he touched the *Flirt For Me* tab.

He had no idea what charming line the app came up with, but a few moments later: *Pixel-Girl has gone visible.*

Cillian tapped *Camera* and discreetly tilted his smartCell up. A live image of the gently rocking carriage played on the screen … then a glowing heart superimposed above one of the passengers.

The girl looked up, caught his eye and gave a half-smile. Pixel-Girl was pretty, but she looked as new to this as he was.

As the Metro slid to a stop, the girl stood up and joined the shuffle towards the doors.

What now? He had about 3 seconds until she was gone.

Think. Think!

But Pixel-Girl was ahead of the game. As she jostled out, she let her smartCell swipe past his just long enough to send a DigiKiss, and then she was gone.

The Metro pulled away and Cillian opened the message: *You look cute when you're nervous!* followed by her email. Maybe she wasn't such a newbie after all.

Then just as he tapped to store her address, he caught his father's eye.

"What?" Cillian swiped his screen back to the equations. "I'm just finishing my assignment."

"Right." Paul nodded. "Nothing like Number Theory to put a smile on your face."

"I guess." Cillian frowned, pretending to be absorbed in his work. "This is really tricky stuff…"

"Does she know you're only 16?"

Cillian felt himself blush. "Dad, half the people on there are underage. Everyone does it."

Paul smiled. "You're the one who's going to have to think fast when she suggests going to a bar."

"Shouldn't you be getting ready for your stop?" Cillian said, trying to sink deeper into his seat.

"Don't worry. I'm gone." But just as Paul started to fold his touch-pad away, a strange shudder pulsed through the carriage.

Cillian looked up, immediately sensing the disruptive patterns of energy ricocheting around the carriage.

"What's wrong?" Paul recognized the eerie sense of deep calm that possessed his son; normally it was when he was focussed intently on something, but now there was fear in its undertow.

"I see it," Cillian whispered.

Paul braced himself, his fists tightened.

Another strange pulse. The smartCells and tablets in everyone's hands scrambled.

A flicker of chaos, then all the screens blacked out.

Dead.

"It's going to be OK." Paul touched his son's arm, trying to reassure him.

"No … it's not." The sickly taste in Cillian's throat told him something terrible was coming.

Suddenly a dreadful screech, metal on metal, tore painfully at the air.

Violent hammering thundered through the floor, loud and urgent, like brakes desperately trying to lock in—

Trying and *failing*.

The carriage doors snapped open and hot air blasted in.

Reinforced walls of the tunnel flashed past.

Alarms wailed as systems collapsed.

The train lurched violently from the tracks and smashed into the tunnel ceiling—

Ploughing into solid concrete—

Blinding flashes seared through the carriage—

Clouds of burning sparks spewed from the ventilation grilles—

And people screamed in terror as they were engulfed by savage chaos.

2

Running the SkyWay was the perfect alibi.

Hundreds of metres above the road grid, rubbing shoulders with the glistening curtain walls of the Financial District, Tess couldn't be further from the Metro.

This jogging track was all about extremes. It was running-with-adrenaline, designed to feel exhilarating and dangerous. You crossed bridges suspended high over steel and glass canyons, then spiralled around the peaks of skyscrapers.

And now was the perfect time: after the hordes of futures traders and tech-hub entrepreneurs had scrambled to their desks, but before the leisure runners started clogging up the SkyWay. It meant Tess would easily be picked out by the host of CCTV cameras, exactly as she'd planned. Right now she looked like just another jogger training for the Snow Marathon.

A perfect alibi.

As she pounded the metal treads, her breath billowing

in the freezing winter air, Tess let her eyes wander across the vista. There was no denying that on the surface Foundation City was an impressive sight, and from up here you could actually see it evolving, reinventing itself with a restless energy, the skyline pushing higher every year.

A beacon of fluid-finance.

A driver of cutting-edge technology.

Better, faster, freer, healthier.

Everything about Foundation was aspirational … but Tess had seen deeper. She knew that the high-gloss covered a profane ugliness that had to be exposed.

She glanced at the lines of cranes far away on the horizon, manically working at the City's margins, tearing down the old with ruthless efficiency. *That* was the truth. Foundation City was a steel and glass cancer, constantly consuming to keep itself alive, destroying anything that stood in its way.

If you really believed in The Faith, if you'd devoted your life to its principles, you couldn't just stand by and watch. It wasn't an option. You had to act.

And now she had.

As the running track passed the terrace of the Eastern Currency Pinnacle, Tess paused at a Workout Station and scanned her smartCell across the Fitness-Post, just to make sure the system knew she was here. The screen congratulated her on *Above average speed for a 17-year-old female* then immediately set her a harder target.

Typical Foundation. Nothing was ever good enough. Success and achievement were always marbled with discontent. That was how the City got its claws into you and drove you harder.

She leapt up and grabbed a steel crossbar to rattle off

30 pull-ups, hard and fast, relishing the little stab of pain with each one.

But at 23 she heard a distinctive mechanical clicking and craned her head around – a small group of Maintenance-Bots had appeared further along the track.

Originally the City authorities had closed the SkyWay when the ice storms hit, but as the winters became longer and more severe they'd had to think again, and the small army of strangely shaped Maintenance-Bots became a permanent feature. Now they spent their entire existence up here, roaming back and forth, diligently clearing snow and de-icing 24/7.

As she got closer, the Lookout-Bot sensed her footfall and swivelled its scanning head around. The bots were programmed to zip into the steel skeleton under the treads as soon as anyone approached, so Tess stopped dead still, trying to fool their pattern recognition software.

The Lookout hesitated, re-scanned with its infrared eyes, noted that the blob of heat was stationary, and turned away.

Tess crept closer … closer … until she could hear the gentle purr of the bots' servos, then suddenly she sprinted hard, hurtling straight for the machines.

The smaller ones scampered for the shadows, but the algorithms of the larger ones knew they wouldn't make it in time, and froze in panic.

"Too slow." Tess laughed as she ran past. "Way too slow."

They'd certainly have her in their database now.

As she ran through the steaming Glasshouse Gardens on the roof of the Central Bank, Tess checked her watch. Shouldn't she have heard something by now?

Her mind flashed back 8 hours, going over everything again: infiltrate the depot as part of a cleaning crew … middle carriage, third row of seats … unscrew the panel … place the device on top of the cabling hub exactly as instructed.

Tess felt a small thrill of satisfaction – this was her first real chance to prove to Revelation that she was an operator who could work alone. She'd shown how tough she was in the squad that pulled off the arson attack on the Venture Capital Exchange. *Great job,* Blackwood had said. *Really great job.* And he wasn't one to lavish praise.

That was why he'd selected her for this. Blackwood could have chosen anyone, but he chose her, and now she would make him proud.

In a few moments Foundation City would get the message: it was a fool's paradise that showed no respect for the sacred.

And not everyone was impressed by its arrogant wealth.