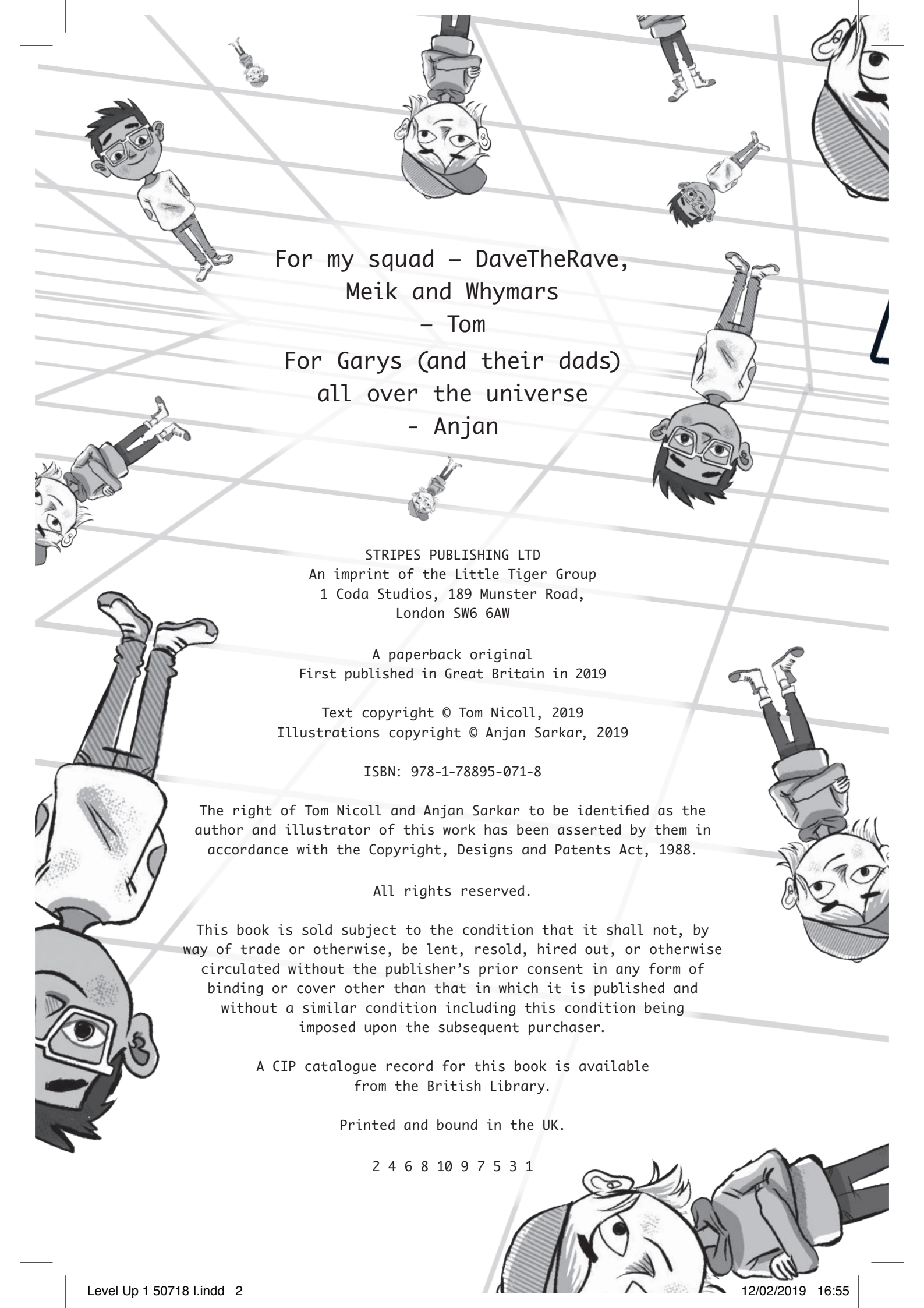




**LEVEL
UP!**



For my squad – DaveTheRave,
Meik and Whymars

– Tom

For Garys (and their dads)
all over the universe

– Anjan

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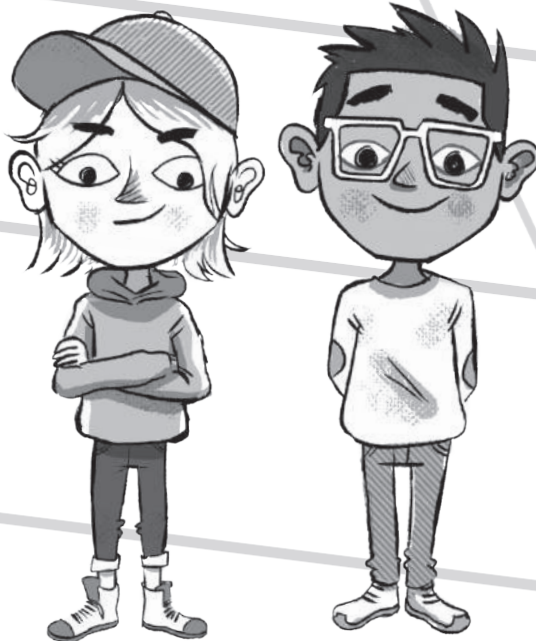
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TOM NICOLL

LEVEL UP!

ILLUSTRATED BY
ANJAN SARKAR




stripes





LEVEL 1

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” whispered Max as we tiptoed into my mum’s workshop. The place was littered with all kinds of junk – broken electronics, piles of circuit boards and brightly coloured wires snaking all over the place. We had to take great care not to trip over Mum’s half-finished projects.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, stepping over the remains of a toaster. “Why?”

“It’s just that we’re talking really quietly and tiptoeing about,” he said. “Which doesn’t usually

mean that we're allowed to do something. Also, there's a cardboard sign over there that says *Don't even think about it, Flo.*"

"There is not..." I said, before spotting the sign myself. It was propped up against a bulky metal device, with what looked like part of an eyepiece peeking out from behind it. I gave Max a reassuring laugh. "Oh, that's just Mum's sense of humour. You know what scientists are like. She's always leaving daft signs around. *Don't leave the fridge door open, Flo* or *Don't forget to wash your hands after going to the toilet, Flo*. Honestly, you shouldn't take her seriously."

Max frowned. "You don't wash your hands?"

"Of course I do," I said, rolling my eyes. "But she wants me to do it *every* time. I'm not the blinking Queen, am I?"

“Well ... no...” admitted Max. “But...”

“Exactly. Besides, have I ever led you astray?”

“All the time,” he said, nodding vigorously. “Pretty much every day of my life.”

“*Every day?*” I repeated doubtfully.

“Fine, not every day,” he conceded. “You did go on holiday for a week last year, so...”

“Ugh, you’re such an exaggerator. Let’s just take a look at this machine and then we can go,” I said, grabbing the sign and flinging it away. But behind it was another piece of card that read, *I’m serious, Flo. Under no circumstances should you touch this device until I tell you it’s ready.*

“What a joker,” I said, flinging that one away too. There were another couple of signs after that, but I didn’t even bother reading those. “What have we got, then?”

It was a metal box about the size of my head. Sticking out of the top was a pair of black goggles, with what looked like a chin rest underneath them. A cable at the back of the box was connected to my mum's computer, which was currently powered down.



“Looks like one of those machines opticians use,” I said. “The ones that blow air into your eyes to test if you can keep them open when it’s windy.”

“That’s to test for glaucoma,” Max pointed out, pushing his specs up his nose.

“This machine *definitely* doesn’t do that,” I said. “Hardly anyone I know has got one. Only that puffed-up poser Rhett Hodges.”

Max nodded. “Great,” he said, without much enthusiasm. “Sounds good.”

“You have no idea what it is, do you?” I said.

“None whatsoever,” he admitted.

I let out a groan. “You know Hodges, right? The older kid from school?”

“Yeah,” sighed Max. “You never stop going on about him. He’s like the biggest game streamer in the country or something. And he always beats

you at video games.”

I could feel my face go bright red. “He does not always beat me!” I snapped.

“Shhh!” said Max. “Your mum might hear us.”

“Fine, but he doesn’t *always* beat me at video games,” I said. “Besides, he only ever plays *Star Smasher*. Well, used to play it anyway. He stopped streaming after I finally beat him. Though conveniently his stream cut out right before anyone could see it happen.”

“Yeah, that was convenient...” said Max, letting the thought trail off.

“Are you saying I’m making it up?” I put my hands on my hips.

Max fell silent.

“People thought he was great because he was able to buy amazing equipment with all the money

he got from streaming,” I said. “If Mum would just let me start my own stream then maybe I’d be able to buy a DIS too.”

Max scratched his chin. “A DIS?”

“A Digital Imprint Scanner,” I said. “They’ve just come out and they’re amazing. Basically they scan your DNA and turn it into computer code.”

Max continued to scratch his chin. “I see. What for, exactly?”

Max didn’t really get computers and games the way I did. Sometimes things that seemed perfectly obvious to me, he just didn’t have a clue about. It was like talking to most grown-ups.

“Imagine being able to see yourself in any video game ever made,” I said. “That’s what the device does. Some games come with editors that let you change how your avatar looks, so maybe after a

few hours of changing gazillions of body parts, you finally end up with someone who kind of looks like you if you squint really hard. But this thing does all the work for you. For *any* game. Even ones that wouldn't normally let you change your character. It's amazing. But it's also super expensive."

Max looked at the device sitting on the table. "Your mum bought you one?"

I shook my head. "Mum's a scientist for the government, remember," I said. "She can't afford to buy me one. But when I told her about it, she got pretty excited. She figured she could build one herself. The problem is she won't let me use it until it's ready."

"That's probably sensible, isn't it?" asked Max.

Not only did he not get video games, Max didn't get my mum. "No," I said firmly. "You don't

understand. I mean, don't get me wrong, Mum is a genius. But the problem is she never finishes anything. Look around you. She starts building all these cool things, but she never completes them. She just keeps tinkering with them until she has a new idea, then switches to that. I'll be waiting forever for her to finish this."

Max didn't look convinced. "I don't know, Flo, I think you should probably hold off..."

Ignoring him, I switched on Mum's computer, which was lightning-fast. She'd fitted it with loads of upgrades – tons of memory, a cutting-edge graphics card and a solid-state hard drive. It was great for playing games on.

It only took a few seconds to fire up. When it did, instead of the usual login screen, I was presented with a text prompt:

>BOOT UP FLO-SCAN OS V0.01? Y/N

“Flo-scan?” I said, smiling. “She named it after me. Cool!” I pressed the Y key and watched as a bunch of ones and zeros scrolled up the screen. After a few moments, a green light flickered on the front of the device that was connected to the computer, accompanied by a strange whirring noise. On screen, the numbers disappeared, replaced by another prompt:

>WHEN READY, PLEASE PLACE CHIN
ON THE REST AND LOOK DIRECTLY
INTO THE LENS

“Right, here goes,” I said. Pressing my chin against the plastic, I looked right into the eyepiece and...

Nothing.

“Why’s it not doing anything?” I asked.

“That’s odd. It’s like it’s not finished,” said Max sarcastically.

I raised my head and looked at the screen again.

“It looks pretty cool, though,” said Max, clearly trying to make me feel better. He placed his own chin on the rest. “I’m sure it’ll be great when it’s ready.”

“Maybe you need to do something else,” I muttered to myself, looking down at the keyboard. I pushed the *Enter* key.



>INITIATING SCAN...
>>SCAN COMPLETE

I stared at the monitor. “Is that it?”

I turned to Max.

Or rather, I turned to where Max had been.

He was no longer there.

“Max?” I said, looking around. But there was no sign of him. “Very funny. Knock it off! Seriously. Where are you?”

I had a sinking feeling. Max wasn’t the type of person to play practical jokes. In fact, Max hated pranks of all kinds. He told me as much every time I pulled one on him. Which, to be fair, was quite often.

I looked curiously at the device.

Mum had told me it wasn’t ready. But had she meant it wasn’t ready like when she hadn’t finished

cooking my dinner, or did she mean it wasn't ready like when she hadn't finished ironing my school clothes. Because food poisoning isn't fun, but I could happily live with creases in my uniform.

There was only one way to find out. I looked into the eyepiece and pressed the *Enter* key.



I was on the Moon. Or at the very least I was on a moon. The ground was grey and hard and there were craters everywhere. Instead of a roof or even a sky, above me was just the blackness of outer space, dotted with countless shimmering stars.

Max was here too. At least, it looked like him. He had on the same blue jeans and green hoodie but they looked fuzzier somehow. In fact, nothing about him was as sharp as before. I looked down at my

arms and those didn't seem right either. My red dress was flat and rigid, as if it was made from cardboard instead of cloth.

“Flo!” Max cried. “What’s going on? Where are we?”

Before I could even respond, a laser bolt struck Max in the chest, and he vanished.



