

Chapter Twenty-two

Michael's mum came round a couple of days after our school shut and told me to pack up my things.

She marched into Mum's bedroom and started shouting at her to get up. To save her son. To save herself. Mum looked right through Michael's mum as if she hadn't just been screamed at, and turned over on her side to go back to sleep.

Michael's mum grabbed my wrist then and started half yelling at me. She said that I would go with them, that I would be safe then. She told me to pack some of my clothes, that she'd be back soon.

I closed the door behind her and locked it with the big key that we hardly ever use. I put the chain on as well. Then I pushed my chest of drawers in front of the door. It was too heavy for

me to lift, so I had to move one side forward and then the other. It took me a while to move it like this, in little zigzags, but I got it there in the end. Just before Michael's mum came back.

She really started yelling when she realized I wasn't going to open the door. Even louder than she did at Mum. *Ade, Ade, Ade*. She kept saying my name over and over. I even heard Michael's sister shouting my name. But it didn't last for ever. And then I heard their footsteps fade away. They had left too.

I went out to buy some food from the shops after that. I knew it was dangerous but we were running out again and we had to eat.

I walked out of my tower, but before I turned towards the shops, I looked down the road to where Gaia's block was standing. Was she still in there? I counted the windows up until I found the seventeenth floor and tried to see through the dark panes.

Maybe she was looking at me at this very same moment that I was looking towards her?

Just in case she was, I put my hand up and waved a little bit. Then I started to feel silly, so I stopped and started running down the road to the shop.

The one closest to us was closed, with the grey shutters pulled right down, so I had to go to a mini supermarket that was down the road.

There was no one else in the supermarket when I went round filling my basket and there were lots of things missing from the shelves. I decided to buy some chocolate biscuits as a treat, the type that are filled with white marshmallow, and remembered to get some toilet roll for us too.

The man who served me was very tall and looked quite nervous. He kept looking around us as if he thought that someone was going to jump out from behind the shelves at any minute. I filled up a couple of plastic bags and their handles dug into my hands, cutting bright pink lines into my skin. I'd only gone a few steps down the road when I saw that the sign on the door had been changed to CLOSED.

I'd only just got there in time.

The street was deserted, and all of a sudden I felt very alone. There weren't many cars or buses on the roads either, which is very odd because usually the main road has a big traffic jam on it. People around here say it is the only thing you can really depend upon. You never know if the

sun is going to shine or if the day is going to go your way but you know there'll be a traffic jam, bumper to bumper, on the main road.

I didn't like the empty-looking street.

I didn't realize how much I liked the busyness of everything and how, without it, I felt more lonely. The bags of shopping were too heavy for me to be able to run, and walking felt slow and tiring. It made me play a secret game which I have never told anyone about, not even Gaia.

I imagine that I see an animal wandering behind me on the street.

Maybe it is hiding behind a dustbin or creeping round the corner. It could be any animal. I've had elephants, giraffes, horses and even rabbits in the past, although usually it is a dog or a cat. Sometimes the same one comes up, without me even thinking about it. There's a black-and-white dog that often turns up, and a small tabby kitten that I've seen a few times.

I imagine that the animal is following me home, so every time I look round, I can see it there behind me. By the time I get back to my block, it comes up right next to me so it's by my side, and then we walk up the stairs together to my flat. I always take the stairs on those days

because it's fun to imagine them running up in front of me and then waiting for me to catch up with them. Or balancing on the banister and then leaping down in front of me.

And I don't think animals like the lift. It makes them feel like they are trapped.

Then, when we get back to my flat, I feed them their favourite food. I make this part up too, of course. I don't put down real food or anything like that. Then I make them a bed for the night and that's it.

I guess they are imaginary friends of sorts and that's why I don't tell anyone about them, because I don't want people to think I am weird. I don't talk to them or anything, other than in the normal way you might talk to any animal, like, 'Here boy!' or, 'It's OK, don't be scared,' or, 'I won't hurt you,' but actually I do all the talking in my head, otherwise Mum might hear me and I'd wake her. The animals don't really have names either.

And the other thing is that they are always gone in the morning. The first time it happened, I spent a long time looking for the creature everywhere, even under the bed and in the kitchen cupboards, just in case it got trapped or

was lost somewhere, but it was nowhere to be found. I still spend a while looking for them in the morning each time, just in case. Perhaps one day, it'll still be there when I wake up and I won't feel that stab of sadness that I'm alone again.

That day, it was the black-and-white dog who strolled towards me, and because he knows me now, he gave my hand a lick and looked at me in that loving way dogs do. I was glad to see him. I gently stroked him from his eyes right to the back of his head, just the way he likes. As we walked together, he stuck close to me and I put my shopping bags into one hand and kept my other hand by my side, so I could feel his soft fur as we made our way back to the tower.

We didn't meet anyone else on the way. At one point, he sniffed the air as if he could smell something, but then he carried on walking and soon enough we were back at my tower. We climbed the stairs to my flat, the dog bounding a few steps ahead of me all the way and then turning every once in a while to see where I was.

He slept at the bottom of my bed that night. I fell asleep more easily than I had done in a while with him there, and when I woke in the early morning, when it was still dark outside, he

was still there, sleeping in the tight circle his body made.

But when I woke in the morning, with the sun streaming through my curtains, he'd gone. I thought I could see the indent his body had made in my duvet, which felt warm to touch, so maybe he'd only just left.

I didn't spend as long looking for him this time. I knew in my heart that I was alone once more.