

Chapter Seventeen

I went to find Gaia as soon as I got to school the next morning. She was sitting underneath the sunflowers. We had just a little time before they would blow the whistle to line up.

She looked tired, like she hadn't been to sleep much the night before.

'Gaia, did you see the news?' I said. 'Did you see what happened to those two men we saw?'

'Yes, I saw it,' she said, but she didn't say anything more.

'Why do you think they died?'

Gaia didn't say anything.

'Do you think . . . do you think that when we walked past again and didn't see them, they were . . . ' My voice trailed off.

Fat tears rolled down Gaia's face. Her eyes looked large and glassy.

'What's wrong, Gaia?' I said. 'Are you upset about the men we saw? Don't worry.'

But whatever I said, she couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her face. They ran all the way down her cheeks and down her chin, making wet lines on her face until she pulled down her sleeve and wiped them away.

'It's OK, Gaia, it's OK.'

The whistle went and Gaia sniffed and wiped her face with her sleeve again.

'We shouldn't have gone out last night,' she said. 'It could have been us.' She slowly stood up and we walked into line.

We filed into school and sat down at our desks but there was no work on our tables to do. Usually we start the day answering maths questions but the board was blank and our books weren't out. Miss Farraway sat down on her chair and looked at us blankly, as if she couldn't remember why she was here, or why we were there either, for that matter.

'Miss Farraway,' said Paul. 'We haven't got our maths books.'

'Oh, yes,' said Miss Farraway. 'Maths books.'

'And there aren't any questions on the board,' Paul continued.

'Well,' said Miss Farraway, and it seemed like she was going to say something else after that, but she didn't. And she didn't make a move to get our books either.

'Miss Farraway, are you all right?' asked Olu, who's the kind of person who always looks after people who fall over in the playground and takes them upstairs for a plaster or an ice pack.

'Yes,' said Miss Farraway, but her eyes filled with tears.

'Miss Farraway!' said Olu and jumped out of her chair to comfort her.

'Thank you, Olu. I'm OK. Thank you. Sit down, lovely.'

But then she really started sobbing. No one knew what to do or what to say. This never happened. Teachers don't cry. Or if they do, they never do in front of us kids.

Olu stood paralysed halfway between Miss Farraway and her chair. Some of the girls started to cry a little bit themselves, although I wondered if they knew why.

I looked over to Gaia, who was looking down at her table, concentrating on a tiny spot on her desk.

Miss Farraway left the room in the end. She

just walked straight out. Miss Arnold, the deputy head, came in a few minutes later and found us some maths questions to do but we were all too stunned to do any of them.

'Is Miss Farraway OK, Miss Arnold?' Olu asked.

'She's very upset, as you have all seen. It's been a very upsetting time for lots of people at the moment. How are you all feeling with what's been going on?'

'I'm scared,' said someone straight away. I turned round and I saw the voice had come from Michael.

'Me too,' a few people agreed.

'I worry every night that our block will collapse,' said Paul. 'I can't sleep because of it.'

'I'm frightened about being outside,' said Olu.

'I'm scared something will happen to my little sister and my mum when they're at home during the day,' said Martha. 'What if I come home from school and our building's collapsed? What would I do?'

We went round and round, talking about our fears and worries. Miss Arnold never said that we shouldn't worry or that we'd be OK or anything

like that. She just smiled sadly as someone else started speaking.

Gaia and I didn't say anything.

I listened to the sound of everyone's voices. They sounded high and coiled, as though they'd been wound up tighter and tighter until they were taut and could break any moment. I didn't want to hear their words any longer. I could feel my chest folding in on itself, smaller and smaller, as though it was trying to fit into a small square box, and my breaths came quickly and shallow. I felt like I couldn't breathe.

I heard someone say my name, and when I looked up Miss Arnold was standing over me and she'd put her hand on my shoulder.

'Are you all right, Ade?' she said.

I nodded, but she didn't stop looking away from me with the same worried eyes and I wished I could have told her the truth, right then. I wished I could have cried like some of the others and have Miss Arnold pat my back comfortingly. I wished I could have told her that I was scared.

Just like everyone else.