

closer it came. Closer and closer. The thudding changed to a pounding. Lydia looked in the direction of the noise. Through the dark sheet of rain she saw something making for her at great speed. Lydia opened her mouth to scream. The next moment a moor pony crashed into her as it galloped by in a panic. The force of the collision spun Lydia violently around and the ground came up rapidly to meet her. Lydia felt herself falling. She felt a sudden, sharp pain as her head hit the ground, but the falling didn't stop. Round and round. Lydia spun like an autumn leaf dancing with the wind. And then she was falling through all the colours in the sky. Lydia's last thought before darkness closed over her mind was that the strange, swirling storm had trapped her. Would it ever let her go?

Ten

A Change In The Weather

Sunlight warmed Lydia's face. Daylight, bright and welcome, seeped past her eyelids. Lydia thought about opening her eyes, then decided against it. If she didn't open her eyes then maybe the relentless pounding in her head would fade. She was wrapped in a cloak of silence and, in spite of her throbbing head, felt strangely relaxed, peaceful. It was an almost forgotten feeling. But then she remembered . . .

With a start, Lydia sat up. Her eyes flew open to their limits. Her right hand flew to her head as the pounding intensified. It all came flooding back. Thief . . . and the accident and running away . . . The storm . . . What had happened to the storm and the rain and the sky full of rainbow colours that had rushed towards her and swallowed her up?

There'd been a moor pony, galloping in a mad panic straight towards her. Lydia looked around, mystified. She must have fainted. No . . . she

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must have been knocked unconscious. But for how long? Long enough for the clouds to disappear and the sun to come out? Lydia put her hands down on the ground to steady herself, her head swimming and spinning again.

Something was wrong.

She filled her hands with earth and let it fall off her palms and trickle between her fingers. It was *dry*. The ground was dry. Lydia wiped her hands on her jacket. Her jacket was wet. It didn't make any sense. How could her jacket be soaking wet from the storm and yet the ground be bone dry? She looked around again. The moors stretched out all round her and the ground was not just dry, but cracked and parched. Lydia looked around for the bus-stop. *It wasn't there.*

She scrambled to her feet, her head turning this way and that. There was nothing – just space and silence. Something was wrong. Something was *different* – but Lydia had no idea what. She wasn't even sure why things felt different. Except for the ground being dry and the disappearance of the bus-stop, everything was the same as before, more or less. *More or less.*

Lydia slowly rubbed her nape. Why was her skin prickling? It was as if every hair on the back of her neck was standing to attention. Just at that moment, Lydia got the terrifying feeling that there was someone – *something* – behind her. Her head whipped around. Far off, above the horizon, the

sky was ablaze with colour. Lydia stared, stunned, afraid. Flaming pink, orange and yellow swirls of colour whirled around and around. Lydia could see lightning crackling between the horizon and the sky, although she couldn't hear a thing. But the mad storm was still there.

What was it?

For a brief moment, she'd thought she'd only dreamt about being caught up in the strange storm. But there it was . . .

And one thing was certain – the storm was once again heading her way. The look of it, the *feel* of it, sent a chill stealing down her spine. Lydia had to get away. Fast.

She turned and started running in the opposite direction. She stopped abruptly. There, in the distance, a figure was running along. Lydia was too far away to see if it was a woman or a man, a girl or a boy, but someone was definitely there.

'HEY! HANG ON!' Lydia shouted. She ran to intercept the person. Halfway towards them, she shouted again.

'STOP! PLEASE STOP!'

Lydia kept running, perspiration trickling down her forehead. The person turned in Lydia's direction, then walked a few steps towards her. Lydia was now close enough to see that it was a girl of about her age, wearing a neck-to-ankle overall, dotted with different-coloured speckles and swirls. Lydia had never seen anything like it before. The

material shimmered like glittery paper. Lydia looked around. Where had the girl come from? There was the road, but where was the bus-stop? And what had happened to the rain? Why was the ground dry? Questions buzzed around Lydia's aching head like angry flies.

'Who are you?' the girl called out suspiciously. 'I don't remember seeing you before.'

'I'm Lydia. When did the storm stop?' she asked, still running.

The girl frowned deeply but said nothing. Lydia was close enough now to see the girl's face. Her eyes flew wide open.

'Frankie? You're OK? Thank God, you're OK! What are you doing here?' Lydia rushed forwards. The girl took a hasty step back.

'My name's Fran, not Frankie,' said the girl. 'Who are you?'

Lydia blinked hard. Now that she'd had a longer look, she could see that it *wasn't* Frankie. This girl's hair was longer and a darker shade of brown and her eyes were dark brown, not green like Frankie's. But in everything else she looked exactly the same . . .

Lydia stared at the girl. 'Are you Frankie's sister?'

No, that didn't make sense. Two sisters would hardly have the same name.

'I don't have a sister. My name is Frances, but I hate Frances so everyone calls me Fran.'

Frankie's real name was Frances too . . .
Lydia's hand flew to her pounding head. She closed her eyes, swaying unsteadily.

'Are you all right?' Fran was immediately concerned.

'I . . . I don't know. I d-don't think so,' Lydia replied faintly.

Fran raced forward, only just managing to catch Lydia in time before she keeled over. Lydia breathed deeply, trying to fight off the feeling of nausea that was tumbling her stomach around like clothes in a washing-machine.

'You'd better come with me,' Fran said. 'We can't stand here chatting all day. We've only got ten minutes before curfew and I don't know about you, but I don't want to get caught by the Night Guards.'

'The Night Guards? Who are they?' Lydia asked.

'Huh? Don't they have Night Guards where you're from?'

'I'm from London. I mean . . . I was, until I moved up here,' Lydia said, confused.

'London! You escaped from London?'

'Pardon?'

'Never mind that now. You can tell me how you escaped later. Right now, we have to get home.' Fran helped Lydia to walk, still supporting her weight.

Lydia noticed the road in detail for the first time.

Before it had been smooth tarmac, but not now. Now it was rucked and the tarmac was broken. Broken blocks of concrete were scattered here, there and everywhere.

'What happened to the road?' Lydia pointed.

'What d'you mean?' Fran frowned.

'Did the storm really do this? Or has there been an earthquake, or something?' Lydia asked, confused.

'It's always been like this.' Fran looked as confused as Lydia felt.

Lydia watched Fran. If Fran was playing a trick on her, then it was a very good trick. Fran even managed to keep a straight face so that she didn't give the game away. And Lydia still couldn't get over just how much Fran looked like Frankie.

I must be dreaming, Lydia thought. I'm probably still lying on the moors and dreaming all this.

That had to be the explanation! So the best thing to do was to go along with the dream until she woke up. She just wished it made a bit more sense.

'I feel a bit better now,' she said. She straightened up and took some more deep breaths.

'Where d'you live?' asked Fran.

'Rosemary Street,' Lydia replied.

'Where?'

'Fourteen, Rosemary Street.'

'Never heard of it. Where's that?' Fran frowned.

Before Lydia could answer, an ear-piercing shriek filled the air. It was so loud that Lydia's hands immediately flew to her ears. Just as abruptly as the noise had started, it stopped. Lydia barely had time to open her mouth before the noise began again. Four more sharp blasts filled the air like the screech of a high-pitched, gigantic whistle. Her fingers in her ears, Lydia waited for yet another blast. None came.

'What on earth was that?' Lydia gingerly removed her fingers from her ears.

'We only have five minutes until curfew.' Fran looked around, worried.

'Curfew?'

'Yeah, at eight o'clock.'

'What?' Lydia looked around. When she'd left home it hadn't even been two o'clock yet. Eight in the evening and it was only just beginning to get dark. In November it got dark before five o'clock . . .

'We'll have to go for it now or we'll never get home in time. Are you up to running?'

'I think so. Where are we going?'

'My house. I don't know where Rosemary Street is and we don't have the time to go looking for it. Come on.'

Fran started racing along the road, jumping over the concrete blocks littering the road like a mountain goat over rocks. Lydia had no choice but to follow her.

This is the strangest dream I've ever had in my life, she thought to herself as she ran.

A couple of minutes passed before Lydia had to stop to unbutton her jacket. She was sweltering. She caught up with Fran and they carried on racing flat out without exchanging a word.

As they approached the town, Lydia was stunned by what she saw. That afternoon on the bus, she had passed shops and houses and neat gardens. They had all disappeared. In their place were several single-storey buildings surrounded by wire fences and barbed wire. The street was covered in mountains of rubbish and mounds of debris and rubble. There was an eerie silence all around and the very air smelt stale and unpleasant. Lydia took a number of short breaths so that she wouldn't have to breathe in too much of the foul smell surrounding her.

The ear-splitting siren sounded again, even louder than before. Except now the shriek was continuous.

'Jump down!' Fran shouted.

'What?' Lydia couldn't hear a word above the noise of the klaxon.

'Jump down!' Fran pointed to the embankment sloping away from the road. At Lydia's puzzled look, Fran grabbed her arm and pulled her off the road. They rolled down the embankment together. Lydia winced as her knee hit something sharp and hard. Fran placed her finger over her lips, then

beckoned to Lydia to follow her. They crouched low and ran but the embankment soon petered away.

Then the siren stopped . . .

'We've got to get out of here. Curfew's started.' Fran ducked low and ran behind the nearest pile of junk and rubbish.

'What's that place?' Lydia pointed to the bungalows.

'The Night Guards' camp, of course,' Fran whispered. 'Surely you've seen one before?'

'Where did all this come from? I don't . . .'

'Shush! Keep your voice down,' Fran hissed. 'Follow me.'

Fran began to crawl along the filthy ground, edging towards the next mound of rubbish. With a frown of distaste, Lydia straightened up and started walking behind Fran.

'What're you doing?' Lydia asked.

'GET DOWN!'

Too late!

Without warning, a white laser blast like a rigid flash of lightning cut across Lydia, only just missing her. Lydia heard a low, distant boom and a second later her upper arm felt as if a fiery poker had been thrust into it. She shrieked with agony, clutching her left arm. The pain was intense, red-hot. A wet, sticky warmth ran down her arm and over the back of her hand down to her fingers. Lydia fell to her knees, the pain was so extreme.

Her arm felt like it was on fire. She stared down at the wide, blood-drenched tear in her left jacket sleeve and her jumper and shirt beneath. She was too stunned to even blink. Her whole body trembled with a coldness, more profound than any she'd ever experienced before.

Fran struggled to pull Lydia to her feet.

'Come on. Hurry.'

Lydia stared at Fran with unseeing eyes.

'Please,' Fran begged, yanking at Lydia's right arm.

Lydia struggled to get to her feet. If only it wasn't so cold . . . When did it get so cold?

'This way. Quick!'

Fran raced for the nearest half-demolished building, dragging Lydia along behind her. They zigzagged as they ran with laser bursts lighting up the twilight and low booms sounding around them. One laser blast missed Fran's head by mere millimetres.

Lydia wasn't cold any more. She was burning up. Her face was bathed in perspiration and she felt so sick. A sudden whirring noise behind them grew louder and louder. Terrified, Lydia looked over her shoulder as she ran. Bewildered seconds passed before Lydia realized exactly what was making the noise. It was a car - a car flying several metres above the ground and speeding towards them. A giant beam like a huge searchlight shone from the car's underside and danced along the

ground after them. And Lydia could hear footsteps pounding behind her, getting closer and closer, but she couldn't see anyone. That almost made the footsteps worse than the car that was rapidly gaining on them. If only her arm would stop throbbing. If only her lungs would stop aching. If only she could stop for just a second . . .

'Come on!' Fran urged.

The pain in Lydia's arm grew worse with each step she took. She clutched her left arm and gulped for air as she ran. They ran through a wrecked house and out into what must have once been a back garden. Except now it was just a mound of earth and dirt and more rubbish. Darting between the obstacles, Fran pointed to what looked like a narrow storm drain, its entrance strewn with bricks and rubble.

'In here!' Fran ordered.

Lydia ducked down and scrambled after Fran into a dark tunnel that led steeply downhill. The tunnel was so low that the top of it pressed down relentlessly on her back. Lydia moved as fast as she could which wasn't fast at all because she was almost bent double.

'Get down,' Fran urged.

With a grimace, Lydia dropped down flat. Only just in time. Another laser beam flashed over their heads. Lydia wanted to freeze all this. She wanted a PAUSE button to press which would stop all this confusion and bring back the real world. She

wanted something, *anything*, that would stop her arm from hurting so much.

'Come on.' Fran started crawling forward on her stomach, with Lydia close behind her. The front of Lydia's jacket immediately felt wet. They were crawling through about three centimetres of water - at least Lydia fervently hoped it was water!

'Turn right,' Fran commanded. Lydia followed Fran to the right, then the left, then the left again as they snaked along. Lydia used her knees and only one hand to push herself forward, her other arm lying useless at her side. The small tunnel was now no more than fifty centimetres high. Lydia's arm throbbed painfully but it was just about bearable.

'We can stand up now,' Fran whispered after a long while.

Lydia looked around but everything was shrouded in pitch blackness. She couldn't even see Fran who was right in front of her.

'How can you tell?' Lydia asked.

'I know these tunnels like I know my own house,' Fran replied. 'Hang on a minute though.'

And then unexpectedly there was light. Fran sprang to her feet and moved her wrist around. The light was coming from the watch she wore. Lydia stood up slowly. They were now standing in what looked like a large, gloomy cave with more tunnels than Lydia could count leading off in all directions. Some of the tunnels were more than

twice Lydia's height, some were so small that a mouse would have had trouble getting through them. A thirty-centimetre ledge circled the cavern but beyond that there was a drop into dark nothingness. Lydia moved forward and peered down warily. She couldn't see to the bottom of the pit. She straightened up and clutched her left arm tighter. Now that they'd stopped moving, her arm was beginning to hurt worse.

'This way.' Fran began to edge her way along the ledge. Lydia looked over the edge again. She didn't like what she saw - not one little bit. And she was tired and the whole left side of her shirt, as well as her jacket sleeve felt horribly cool and sticky.

'Can't we stop now?' Lydia asked.

'No way. It's not safe. They're still after us.'

'Who are they?'

'The Night Guards.'

'But why?' Lydia was totally confused. 'Why're they chasing us?'

Fran turned to face Lydia. 'Why d'you think?' she snapped.

Lydia didn't answer.

'To kill us, of course,' Fran said stonily.