

Nine

I saw Mina again later that evening. I was in the little front garden with Dad. We stood there in the thistles and dandelions. He was telling me as usual how wonderful it would be – flowers here and a tree there and a bench under the front window. I saw her further along the street. She was in a tree in another front garden on the same side of the street as us. She was sitting on a fat branch. She had a book and a pencil in her hand. She kept sticking the pencil in her mouth and staring up into the tree.

‘Wonder who that is.’

‘She’s called Mina.’

‘Ah.’

She must have seen us looking at her but she didn’t move.

Dad went in to check the cement in the dining room.

I went out the gate and along the street and looked up at Mina in the tree.

‘What you doing up there?’ I said.

She clicked her tongue.

‘Silly you,’ she said. ‘You’ve scared it away. Typical.’

‘Scared what away?’

‘The blackbird.’

She put the book and the pencil in her mouth. She swung over the branch and dropped into the garden. She stood looking at me. She was little and she had hair as black as coal and the kind of eyes you think can see right through you.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘It’ll come again.’

She pointed up to the rooftop. The blackbird was up there, tipping its tail back and forward, and squawking.

‘That’s its warning call,’ she said. ‘It’s telling its family there’s danger near. Danger. That’s you.’

She pointed up into the tree.

‘If you climb up where I was and look along that branch there you’ll see its nest. There’s three tiny ones. But don’t you dare go any nearer.’

She sat on the garden wall and faced me.

‘This is where I live,’ she said. ‘Number Seven. You’ve got a baby sister.’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘We haven’t decided yet.’

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes towards the sky.

She opened her book.

‘Look at this,’ she said.

It was full of birds. Pencil drawings, lots of them coloured in blues and greens and reds.

‘This is the blackbird,’ she said. ‘They’re common, but nevertheless very beautiful. A sparrow. These are tits. And

lovely chaffinches. And look, this is the goldfinch that visited last Thursday.'

She showed me the goldfinch, the greens and reds and bright yellows in it.

'My favourite,' she said.

She slapped the book shut.

'Do you like birds?' she said, and she looked at me as if something I'd done had made her cross.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Typical. Do you like drawing?'

'Sometimes.'

'Drawing makes you look at the world more closely. It helps you to see what you're looking at more clearly. Did you know that?'

I said nothing.

'What colour's a blackbird?' she said.

'Black.'

'Typical!'

She swung round into the garden.

'I'm going in,' she said. 'I look forward to seeing you again. I'd also like to see your baby sister if that can be arranged.'

Ten

I tried to stay awake that night, but it was hopeless. I was dreaming straight away. I dreamed that the baby was in the blackbird's nest in Mina's garden. The blackbird fed her on flies and spiders and she got stronger and stronger until she flew out of the tree and over the rooftops and on to the garage roof. Mina sat on the back wall drawing her. When I went closer, Mina whispered, 'Stay away. You're danger!'

Then the baby was bawling in the room next door and I woke up.

I lay listening to Mum cooing and comforting and the baby squeaking and hissing. The birds were singing outside. When the feed was over and I was sure everyone was asleep, I crept out of bed, got my torch, pulled some clothes on and tiptoed past their room. I took a jar of aspirin from the bathroom. I went downstairs, opened the back door and tiptoed into the wilderness.

The takeaway trays were down under newspapers and a heap of weeds. They'd tilted over and lots of the sauce had run out. When I looked inside the char sui was all gluey and red

