

## Thirteen

'You're unhappy,' she said.

I stood there looking up at her.

'The baby's back in hospital,' I said.

She sighed. She gazed at a bird that was wheeling high above.

'It looks like she's going to bloody die,' I said.

She sighed again.

'Would you like me to take you somewhere?' she said.

'Somewhere?'

'Somewhere secret. Somewhere nobody knows about.'

I looked back at the house and saw Dad through the dining-room window. I looked at Mina and her eyes went right through me.

'Five minutes,' she said. 'He won't even know you're gone.'

I crossed my fingers.

'Come on,' she whispered, and I opened the gate and slipped out into the lane.

'Quickly,' she whispered, and she bent low and started to run.

At the end of the street she turned into another back lane. The houses behind the walls here were bigger and higher and older. The back gardens were longer and had tall trees in them. It was Crow Road.

She stopped outside a dark-green gate. She took a key from somewhere, unlocked it, slipped inside. I followed her in. Something brushed against my leg. I looked down and saw a cat that had come in through the gate with us.

'Whisper!' said Mina, and she grinned.

'What?'

'The cat's called Whisper. You'll see him everywhere.'

The house was blackened stone. The windows were boarded up. Mina ran to the door and opened it. There was a painted red sign over the door: DANGER.

'Take no notice,' she said. 'It's just to keep the vandals out.'

She stepped inside.

'Come on,' she whispered. 'Quickly!'

I went in, and Whisper entered at my side.

It was pitch black in there. I could see nothing. Mina took my hand.

'Don't stop,' she said, and she led me forward.

She led me up some wide stairs. As my eyes got used to the gloom I made out the shapes of the boarded windows, of dark doorways and broad landings. We ascended three stairways, passed three landings. Then the stairs narrowed and we came to a final narrow doorway.

'The attic,' she whispered. 'Stay very still in there. They

might not want you to be there. They might attack you!

'What might?'

'How brave are you? They know me and they know Whisper but they don't know you. How brave are you? As brave as me?'

I stared at her. How could I know?

'You are,' she said. 'You have to be.'

She turned the handle. She held her breath. She took my hand again, led me inside, closed the door behind us. She hunched down on the floor. She pulled me down as well. The cat lay quietly at our side.

'Stay very still,' she whispered. 'Stay very quiet. Just watch.'

We were right inside the roof. It was a wide room with a sloping ceiling. The floorboards were split and uneven. Plaster had fallen from the walls. Light came in through an arched window that jutted out through the roof. Glass was scattered on the floor below the window. You could see the rooftops and steeples of the town through it, and the clouds, turning red as the day began to close.

I held my breath.

The room darkened and reddened as the sun went down.

'What will happen?' I whispered.

'Shh. Just watch. Wait and watch.'

Then she trembled.

'Look! Look!'

A pale bird rose from some corner of the room and flew silently to the window. It stood there, looking out. Then another came, wheeling once around the room, its wings

beating within inches of our faces before it, too, settled before the window.

I didn't breathe. Mina gripped my hand. I watched the birds, the way their broad round faces turned to each other, the way their claws gripped the window frame. Then they went, flying silently out into the red dusk.

'Owls,' whispered Mina. 'Tawny owls!'

And she looked right into me again and laughed.

'Sometimes they'll attack intruders. But they saw you were with me. They knew you were OK.'

She pointed to the back wall, a gaping hole where some plaster and bricks had fallen in.

'That's the nest,' she said. 'There's chicks in there. Don't go near. They'll defend them to the death.'

She laughed at my stunned silence.

'Come on,' she whispered. 'Be quick!'

And we left the attic and ran down the broad stairs and out of the house and into the garden. She locked the door and the garden gate and we ran through the lanes to our wilderness.

'Tell nobody,' she whispered.

'No,' I said.

'Hope to die,' she said.

'What?'

'Cross your heart and hope to die.'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'Good,' she said, and she ran away with Whisper at her heels.

I stepped back through our gate and there was Dad, beyond the dining-room window, stretching up to paint the walls.

## *Fourteen*

I didn't go to school next day.

I was having breakfast with Dad when I started trembling for no reason. He put his arm around me.

'What about working with me today?' he asked.

I nodded.

'We'll get it all done for them, eh?' he said. 'You and me together.'

I heard him on the phone in the hall, talking to school.

'His sister ...' I heard him say. 'Yes, so much all at once ... State of distress ... Yes, yes.'

I put some old jeans on. I stirred the green paint he was going to use on the dining-room walls. I laid old sheets on the floor.

'What should I do?' I asked, as he stepped up on to the stepladders.

He shrugged. He looked out through the window.

'How about getting some of that jungle cleared,' he said. He laughed. 'Get covered up first, though. And watch out for the tigers.'