

SATURDAY, 4 MAY 1996

The evacuation began this morning. No sooner had the bins been collected than the hundreds of residents from the three blocks that make up Morpeth Estate began streaming away in their droves.

Bob the caretaker sat in his cubbyhole on the ground floor, telling anyone who would listen that 'it's only a heat wave if it goes on ten days'. But no one listened, instead they asked when the intercom was getting fixed, if he knew the lifts were out and what he was planning on doing about the woman on the third floor who kept sticking a chair out on the landing. Moan, moan, moan.

Bob stubs out his cigarette and looks up at the grey face of Nightingale Point, smiling at the way the sun illuminates each balcony, every single one a little personal gallery, showcasing lines of washing, surplus furniture, bikes, scooters, and pushchairs. Towards the top a balcony glints with CDs held by pieces of string; a few of the residents have started doing it and Bob doesn't have a clue why. He must ask someone.

Mary is amazed at how well it works. Who would believe that hanging a few CDs on the balcony stops pigeons from shitting on your washing? She had seen the tip on *GMTV* and immediately rushed to the flat next door to ask Tristan for any old discs. His music was no good anyway, all that gangbanging West Coast, East Coast stuff.

Mary wraps a towel around her hair. Her husband could show up any minute and the least she can do for him, after being apart for over a year, is not smell of fried fish. She switches on the TV, but the picture bounces and fuzzes. She doesn't even try to understand technology these days, but heads next door to get Malachi.

Malachi sits behind a pile of overdue library books and tries to think of a thesis statement for his *Design and the Environment* essay that is due next Friday, but instead he thinks about Pamela. If only he could talk to her, explain, apologise, grab her by the hand and run away. No, it's over. He has to stop this.

Distraction, he needs a distraction.

On cue, Tristan walks over with *The Sun* and opens it to Emma, 22, from Bournemouth.

'Your type?' he asks, grinning.

But Malachi's not in the mood to see Bournemouth Emma, or talk to Tristan, or write a thesis. He only wants Pamela.

Tristan sulks back out to the balcony to read his newspaper cover to cover, just as any fifteen-year-old, with a keen interest in current affairs, would. After this he will continue with his mission to help Malachi get over Pamela, and the only way to do it is to get under someone else. Tristan once heard some sixth-former girls describe his brother as 'dark

and brooding', which apparently doesn't just mean that he's black and grumpy, women actually find him *attractive*. So it shouldn't be that hard to get him laid.

There's a smashing sound from the foot of the block and Tristan looks over the balcony.

The jar of chocolate spread has smashed everywhere and Lina doesn't have a clue how to clean up such a thing, so she walks off and hopes no one saw her.

Inside the cool, tiled ground floor of Nightingale Point, the caretaker shakes his head at the mess. 'Don't worry, dear, I'll get that cleaned up. Don't you worry a bit.'

'Thanks,' Lina says. A small blessing in the sea of shit that is her day so far. She hits the call button for the lift but nothing. 'Please tell me they're working?'

The caretaker cups his ear at her. 'What's that, dear?'

'The lifts,' she says.

He fills his travel kettle and shrugs. 'I've logged a call but it's bank holiday, innit.'

Lina pushes on the heavy door to the stairwell and sighs as she looks at the first of ten flights of stairs. 'By the way,' she calls back at the caretaker, 'I think there's kids on the roof again.'

Pamela loves being on the roof, for the solitude, for the freedom, and for the small possibility that she might spot, walking across the field below, Malachi. She has to see him today and they have to talk. Today's the day; it has to be.

At the foot of the block the caretaker tips a kettle of water over a dark splotch on the floor and gets his mop out. Just another mess to clean up at Nightingale Point.

CHAPTER ONE

Elvis

Elvis hates to leave his flat, as it is so full of perfect things. Like the sparkly grey lino in the bathroom, the television, and the laminated pictures tacked up everywhere reminding him how to lock the door securely and use the grill.

‘Elvis?’ Lina calls. ‘You want curried chicken or steak and kidney?’

Elvis does not answer; he is too busy hiding behind the sliding door that separates the kitchen and living room, watching Lina unpack the Weetabix, bread and strawberry jam. She unscrews the jar and puts one of her fingers inside, which is a bad thing to do because of germs, but Elvis understands because strawberry jam can be so tasty.

This is the nineteenth day of Lina being Elvis’s nurse. He knows this as he marked her first day on the calendar with a big smiley face. There are fourteen smiley faces on the calendar and five sad faces because this is when Lina was late.

She puts the jar of jam in the cupboard and returns to the shopping bags, taking out a net of oranges. Elvis hates

oranges; they are sticky and smelly. He had asked for tomatoes but Lina said that tomatoes are an ingredient not a snack and that oranges are full of the kind of vitamins Elvis needed to make his brain work better and stop him from being a pest.

Lina's face disappears behind a cupboard door and Elvis watches as her pink coloured nails rap on the outside. He likes Lina's shiny pink nails, especially when her hair is pink too.

'Elllviiiiis?' she sings.

He puts a big hand over his mouth to muffle the laughter, but then sees Lina has removed the red tin from the shopping bag – the curried chicken pie. He gasps as he realises he wants steak and kidney.

'Bloody hell!' She jumps and raises the tinned pie above her head, as if ready to throw it. 'What the hell you doing? You spying on me?'

'No, no, no.'

'Elvis, why are you wearing a sweatshirt? It's too hot for that.' She slams the tin down on the counter.

'Steak and kidney pie,' he tells her. 'I want steak and kidney pie. It's the blue tin.'

'Yeah, all right, all right.'

'Can I have two?' he tries, knowing his food has been limited. He is unsure why.

'No, Elvis, that's greedy. Now go. Get changed. You're sweating.'

'Get changed into what?' he asks.

'A T-shirt, Elvis. It's bloody baking out; go put on a T-shirt.'

Elvis goes through to his bedroom and removes his sweat-shirt. He stands for a moment and looks over his round belly in the mirror, moisture glistening among the curly ginger hairs

that cover his whole front. When he takes off his glasses his reflection looks watery, like one of his dreams. He then pulls on his favourite new T-shirt, which is bright blue and has a picture of the King on it. It also has the words *The King* in gold swirly writing. He smiles at himself before going to the living room to sit on his new squashy sofa.

Elvis listens carefully to the steps Lina takes to make the pie: the flick of the ignition, the slam of a pot on the gas ring. Then, the sound he likes best, the click of her pearly plastic nails on the worktops. He loves all the flavours the tinned pies come in and he likes the curried chicken pie most days, but today he really does want steak and kidney.

‘Right, master, your pie is on the boil,’ Lina says as she walks into the living room. ‘Nice,’ she says, acknowledging his T-shirt.

‘Are we going to the bank holiday fair?’ He had seen posters for it Sellotaped up on bus shelters and in the windows of off-licences: *Wilson and Sons Fairground on the Heath, 3–6 May. Helter Skelter, Dodgems, Ghost Train!* He really wants to go.

‘Yeah, maybe when it cools down a bit.’ Lina flops on the sofa next to him and picks up the phone. ‘Go.’ She waves him away. ‘Why you sitting so close to me? I *am* entitled to a break.’

But Elvis is comfy on the sofa and he has already sorted the stickers from his *Merlin’s Premier League* sticker book and watered his tomato plants on the windowsills. He has already carefully used his razor to remove the wispy orange hairs from his face as George, his care worker, had taught him, and rubbed the coconut suntan lotion into his skin as

he knows to do on hot days. This morning Elvis has already done everything he was meant to and now he wants to eat his steak and kidney pie and go to the fair.

Lina has his new special phone in her hand. Elvis loves his phone; it is his favourite thing in his new living room, after the television. The phone is so special that you can only make a call when you put money inside and you can only get the money out with a special key that George looks after. Beside the phone sits a laminated sheet with all the numbers Elvis will ever need: a little drawing of a policeman – 999; a photograph of Elvis’s mum wearing the purple hat she reserves for church and having her photograph taken – 018 566 1641; and a photograph of George behind his desk – 018 522 7573. Elvis is trying to learn all the numbers by heart but sometimes when he tries, he gets distracted by the fantastic noise the laminated sheet makes if you wave it in the air fast. Next to the phone is a ceramic dish shaped like a boat that says *Margate* on it. The dish is kept filled with change for when Elvis needs to make a call.

He watches carefully as Lina feeds the phone with his change and starts to dial, her lovely pink nails hitting the dial pad: 018 557.

‘Go and sit somewhere else,’ she snaps.

But there is nowhere else to sit apart from the perfect squashy sofa, so Elvis goes into the kitchen where he can watch and listen to Lina from behind the door. In secret.

‘Hi . . . I’m at work. Elvis is driving me nuts today,’ she says into the phone. ‘He keeps bloody staring at me . . . Yeah I know . . . Tell me about it . . . Ha ha. Yeah, true true . . .’ She slides off her plimsolls and pulls the coffee table closer,

putting her little feet up on it. 'But you know what my mum's like, always busting my arse over something: look after your baby, wash the dishes, get more shifts. I thought the whole point of having a baby was that you didn't have to go work no more . . . Exactly . . . Especially on a day like this. Bloody roasting out.'

Even from behind the door Elvis can see that the nails on Lina's toes are the same colour as those on her fingers, but shorter. The colour looks like the insides of the seashells Elvis collected at Margate last summer. He likes Lina's toes; this is the first time he has ever seen Lina's toes. He likes them but knows he is not allowed to touch them.

'Can I have a biscuit?' Elvis asks as he comes out from behind the door, now peckish and unable to wait for the pie to boil.

'Hang on. What?' Lina rests the phone under her chin like one of the office girls at the Waterside Centre, the place where Elvis used to live before he was clever enough to live by himself in Nightingale Point.

'Can I have a biscuit?' he asks again.

'I'm on the phone, leave me in peace.' She tuts then returns to her call. 'But look, yeah, I'm coming to the fair later. Soon as I'm done with the dumb giant here I'll be down . . . I'll get it; pay me later.' Lina slides the rest of the money from the ceramic boat into her pocket.

Elvis pictures the laminated sheet of Golden Rules that hangs in his bedroom. Rule Number One: Do not let strangers into your flat. Rule Number Two: Do not let anybody touch your private swimming costume parts. Rule Number Three: Do not let anyone take your things. Lina is breaking one

of the Golden Rules. Elvis must call George and report her immediately.

Lina picks up the laminated sheet of phone numbers and uses it to fan herself. It makes her pink fringe flap up and down, and Elvis wants to watch it but he also knows that he must report her rule break. George once told him that if he could not get to the house phone and it was an emergency, he could go outside to the phone box to make a call. The phone box, on the other side of the little field in front of the estate, is the second emergency phone. Elvis must now go there. He leaves the living room and slips on his sandals at the door. *Jesus sandals*, Lina calls them, but Elvis does not think Jesus would have worn such stylish footwear in the olden days. He opens the front door gently, quietly enough that Lina will not hear. Then, and only because he knows he is allowed to leave the flat to use the second phone for when he cannot use the first phone, Elvis steps out of flat thirty-seven and heads into the hallway of the tenth floor.