

CHAPTER

1



I shield my eyes from the sun and look up at the tree. The cat is well and truly stuck. I saw next door's dog chase it up there and now it can't get back down. I can hear it meowing and moaning. Ugh. I'm going to have to get it down, aren't I?

I don't want to. I'm not that keen on cats and I'm definitely not keen on heights. But I kind of have no choice. It's complicated.

I take one last look around the cul-de-sac to see if anyone else is coming to help, but it's deserted. After a lifetime in the city, the quiet is eerie. We've been living here in Pondstead for about six months. Mum reckons the air is cleaner. I don't know, maybe it is. And it's nice and calm, and there's a field behind our house where people ride horses, but Pondstead is also kind of dull.

I dry my forehead with the back of my hand.

It's hot today. Occasionally, a cool breeze drifts across the field, but the effect is cancelled out by the fact that it's wafting horse poo.

I get a foothold and hoist myself onto the first branch. Man, this tree is huge, easily as tall as our house. I squint through the blinding light and plot my route up. I've never been much of a tree climber. Ross, my best mate, back in the city, was really good at tree climbing. If he was here, the cat would be down in no time.

I shakily stand and pull myself onto the next branch. 'Here, kitty,' I say. 'Come on down, eh? Do your old mate Jordan a favour.'

The cat looks down at me like I'm coming to strangle it. Nevertheless, I have to keep going. I shuffle along to the trunk and reach across to the other side to get to the next branch. I'm pretty high up now. I can see into my bedroom. When I look down, my stomach lurches.

Slowly, I make my way upwards, until I'm sitting on the branch on the other side of the trunk to the cat. I've seen it around before. The other day, I scared it off when I saw it about to pounce on a blackbird. I reach across to try and pet it.

RRAAAOOWW!

Ow! The horrible thing has just scratched my hand. I'm bleeding!

'What's the matter with you? I'm trying to help!'

The cat glowers at me like it's going to go for my throat next.

'Look,' I say, trying to use my most calming voice. 'I know you're scared. I am, too. But if you let me help you, I'll get you down safely and you can murder as many birds as you like.'

Hmm. Maybe that worked. Its back isn't all arched like it was before. Time to make another attempt. I'll act quick so it doesn't have time to take another chunk of my flesh. One . . . two . . . I pounce and grip the cat, swinging it over to me. It thrashes wildly like a fish being heaved into a boat. I hold it as tight as I can but, AARGH! I almost lose my balance and fall off, only stopping myself by whacking my head on the trunk.

Eventually, the cat calms down. I've got it. Relief washes over me. I'm kind of proud of myself, too. A year ago, there's no way I'd be able to climb a tree like this. I wouldn't have even been able to walk up to it. I take a moment to give myself a little pat on the back. Not literally. If I take so much as a finger off this cat it might chew my face off.

‘Right,’ I say. ‘Let’s try and get down without killing ourselves, OK?’

I begin to gently lower myself onto the branch below when—

‘JORDAN MICHAEL TURNER, WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THAT TREE?’

Oh. No. Nooooo.

‘GET DOWN FROM THERE,’ Mum shrieks. ‘Wait, don’t. I’m calling the fire brigade.’

‘Please don’t!’ I yell. ‘I can get down myself.’

‘Like fiddlesticks you can!’ she says. ‘Don’t go anywhere. I’ll get the ladder.’

How could she only have been at the shop for five minutes? Does she do everything at three million miles an hour?

Mum disappears around the side of the house and then comes back with a ladder and sets it up against the tree. ‘OK, climb down, but for the love of all that is holy, BE CAREFUL.’

I’m about halfway down when she notices the cat I have wedged under one arm. Thankfully, it seems to be paralyzed with fear.

‘Put that thing down this instant!’ she cries, but I ignore her. I know cats are supposed to have nine lives, but I’m still not dropping it from this height.

When I get to the bottom, she grabs the cat and puts it down and it instantly sprints away. Before I can move, she's grabbed my wounded hand.

'Did that animal do that? Oh my God, why would you help a vicious thing like that?'

I would tell her about the promise I made the best part of a year ago, but she wouldn't understand. She doesn't understand anything.

'I've a right mind to have a word with next door about their dog,' Mum says later as we pull off down the drive, headed for the hospital. I'm strapped into my child seat. Yeah, that's right. *A child seat.* I'm thirteen years old and my mum makes me sit in a child seat, like some kind of overgrown toddler. And yes, that includes when she drops me off at school. Fitting in at a new place where you don't know anyone is bad enough without turning up looking like you still go number two in your Huggies.

The hospital is an hour's drive away. It used to be just down the road, but since we relocated to Pondstead, it's a real mission. This is the first time I've been back since the move. It's actually my first check since I went into remission. I have to come

back every six months to make sure . . . to make sure everything's OK.

The entire way there, Mum constantly sucks on mints, unwrapping them one-handed with trembling fingers. She always does that when she's nervous.

Mum doesn't have the radio on, so I put my earphones in and listen to my favourite playlist. I know every word to every song. I must have dropped off at some point, because the next thing I know, we're there. Mum pops the last mint in her mouth and turns around.

'Ready?'

'What if I say no?'

Mum tuts. 'Come on. While you're in there, I'll get them to check you haven't caught cat rabies.'

I don't have to go down to the children's ward, which is a relief. Instead, I'm in an outpatient clinic on the fifth floor. We're sitting in a boring waiting room, where classical music drips out of the speakers like treacle. There's a pile of magazines on a table and a few babies' toys in the corner. Nothing for me to do, in other words.

I think about what lessons I'm missing today. Science, Maths, History, PE. Pretty good going. If I'm going to miss lessons, might as well make it the

worst ones. I don't even have to do PE, either. I just stand there and occasionally help Miss Stack put cones out. It beats having to play rugby but does nothing to get rid of my label as the weird new kid.

'Jordan Turner?' A nurse I don't know sticks her head around a door.

Mum and I get up and follow her. This next bit is routine. First, she measures and weighs me. Then she puts this tight, inflatable band around my upper arm and sticks a needle in the fat vein on the underside of my elbow. Some people get freaked out by needles, but I'm used to it. At this point, I'm like some kind of voodoo doll.

Once the nurse has a little vial of blood, she puts a plaster on me and sends us back out to the waiting room to do more waiting. Now, there's another thing I'm used to. Waiting. Waiting for doctors, waiting for visitors. Wait, wait, wait.

Mum fidgets with a magazine. I can tell she wishes she'd brought more mints. Meanwhile, I get the urge to wander the corridors, find my way back down to the children's ward. Would Kate remember me? They get so many kids in there they must all blend into one. But I know it wouldn't be the same if I went back. It couldn't be. But . . . I don't know.

Being back here spins me out.

I close my eyes and try to stop imagining the lab people examining my blood and seeing the numbers shoot back up. I picture more chemo, more throwing up, my hair thinning again. It's a familiar dark alley that my mind takes itself down again and again, and I'm powerless to do anything to stop it.

When the doctor calls us in, I try to steady myself and ignore the heavy, aching bowling ball of dread in my stomach. Mum squeezes my hand to try and reassure me, but I keep looking ahead.

I know the doctor. He was my consultant when I was on the ward. His name is Dr Kanelos. He's a nice, jolly man with lots of grey hair and a neat beard. As we sit down in his office, he fixes us with a thin smile. Not a full smile, but one where his lips are drawn in a little. What could that mean? It could be that it's good news. Then again, it could be a smile of sympathy.

I grip the edge of my seat. It's hard plastic, all bobbly. It might be the most uncomfortable chair I've ever sat in.

'So, Jordan,' says Dr Kanelos. 'Nice to see you again.'

I nod, too nervous to be able to respond properly.

‘How are you feeling, in general?’ he asks, but before I can do anything, Mum jumps in.

‘He was running a fever of forty point eight before we came,’ she says, her words coming as fast and frantic as an escaped Jack Russell. ‘Then again, that’s probably because he was up a tree, playing with a wild animal.’

‘I wasn’t playing with it,’ I manage to croak. ‘And it was a cat. A cat’s not a wild animal.’

‘Well, it spends its life outside. Sounds pretty wild to me.’

‘It belongs to the old couple over the road,’ I say.

‘Well, look at what it did to his hand?’ She grabs my wrist and holds it up for the doctor to see. ‘Would a tame animal do something like this? What do you think, Doctor?’

Dr Kanelos shifts in his seat. ‘Well, it’s not really my area of expertise,’ he says, then moves the conversation on. ‘Besides the temperature, how are you feeling, Jordan?’

‘He has headaches a lot,’ says Mum. ‘He’s irritable all the time, too.’

Dr Kanelos nods. ‘That’s normal. Going back into the real world after such a long stay in hospital can be a tough transition. Headaches and mood swings can

be symptoms of stress.'

Mum chuckles under her breath. I know what she's really thinking. Whenever me or my older sister Abi so much as think about the word 'stress', Mum appears as if from nowhere and yells, 'STRESS? YOU DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD!' It's like her superpower.

'I'd recommend plenty of exercise,' says Dr Kanelos. 'Get out on your bike, play sport, things like that.'

'But I've been keeping him off PE at school because I didn't think he'd be up to it,' says Mum.

'There's no need,' says Dr Kanelos, still smiling. 'Exercise is the best way to build your strength back up. Of course, Jordan, if it gets too much, stop. But there's no harm in easing yourself in.'

'Hang on,' I say. 'So, like, I'm OK?'

Dr Kanelos laughs, his eyes twinkling. 'Yes, I probably should have mentioned that sooner. Your bloods are absolutely fine. You're doing great.'

My body fills up with relief like warm water flooding into a bath. But then, something else overtakes it. A sour feeling in my stomach, radiating up to the back of my throat. Before I can stop myself,

I'm crying. Oh my God, this is so embarrassing.

Dr Kanelos slides a box of tissues over to me and I take one. Mum puts her arm around me, and I can tell without looking at her that she's crying, too.

'I know, it can be overwhelming,' says Dr Kanelos.

I suppose to look at me, you'd think I was crying tears of happiness. But I'm not. They're tears of guilt.