





Talking about these things made school and Hawthorne Road and all of Bootle feel temporary and little, as though we were just passing through on our way to some indescribable adventure.

I kept that feeling all the way home, through the front door and into the kitchen, where Mum looked up from the washing machine and said, "What the hell do you think you're wearing?!"

"It was Own Clothes Day."

"And those are not your own clothes."

"They're Nergui's – we swapped."

"Julie, I'm not being held responsible for someone else's coat. You take it round to theirs right now."

"But I don't know where they live."

It took Mum two phone calls to find out what I'd been burning to know for weeks – where did Chingis and Nergui live? Where was Xanadu? Turns out it was up on the tenth floor of Roberts Tower – the tower block nearest the flyover.

"And we're going over there right now," she said.

She packed the coat into a big plastic bag and drove me over to the Tower. When we got there, though, she decided she didn't like the look of the place – there was a pile of rubble in the middle of the car park, like a lookout tower, with two kids perched on top of it.

"I'm not leaving the car here with no one in it. They'd have it ransacked by the time we called the lift."

"That's all right. You stay with the car. I'll go in."

"I'm not letting you walk into that place on your own, either."

"So what are you going to do? Drive the car into the lift?"

"Maybe leave it till the morning after all."

"No. No, I'm happy to go in." I didn't wait for her answer. I was running into Xanadu.

The lift was working but smelly. As it clanked up to the tenth floor, I pulled the coat out of the bag and put it on. I walked up to the door, thinking, This is it. Their mum will see me in it and ask me in. "Come in and lounge about on the silks while the samovar is bubbling," she'll say. "Father, give us a tune on your horse-head fiddle."

I rang the bell. I heard it ringing somewhere inside the flat. There were some voices. A door opened. Or maybe closed. Then it all went quiet.

I waited.

Nothing.

Maybe some whispering.

I knew it wasn't polite to ring twice but I wasn't going to walk away. I'd been searching for this place for weeks.

I'd been longing for it for weeks. I rang the bell again.

Silence.

A tense, holding-your-breath type of silence.

Again.

Nothing.

A deep, rasping growl behind me made me jump. For some reason, I was thinking of their demon. But it was the lift. The doors opened and Mum stepped out.

I said, "I thought you were waiting in the car?"

"Of course I'm not waiting in the car. As if I'm going to leave my own daughter to her fate just so I can look after the car. Did you smell that lift? Dear me. Have you rung the doorbell?"

"Yes."

"Didn't they answer?"

"Not yet."

"So they're not in. So let's get back to the car."

"Shush. Listen." We could hear hushed voices arguing and water running from a tap.

"So they're in but they don't want to answer the door. They're probably having their dinner. Leave it till tomorrow."

She'd already pressed the button for the lift to come back. I said, "Maybe the bell is broken," and I hammered on the door.

The voices stopped. The tap stopped. I hammered again.

Mum grabbed my hand. "Don't do that," she hissed.
"It's rude."

But there were footsteps in the hallway now and someone pulled the door open. A woman...

She was not wearing the traditional jewelled Mongolian headdress. She was not wrapped in silk. She was not happy to see me. She didn't see me at all to start with.

She looked at Mum.

Mum said, "I'm Julie's mother. A friend of your Chingis. This is his coat." The woman didn't answer. She just stared at Mum and then at me. As if she was trying to work out the answer to a puzzle. I knew she wasn't going to ask us in. She stood and watched me as I struggled out of the coat. I got a glimpse of the flat – the long, empty corridor, the bare light bulb at the far end and, near the door, a line of bags and suitcases, bulging and fastened, as if the family were about to leave.

I tried to hand back the coat but she didn't take it. Instead, she covered her eyes with her hands and I realized she was crying. I stood there holding the coat while she held her face. Then a door opened at the far end of the corridor and suddenly Chingis was striding towards me. He didn't say anything. He didn't look at me. He just took the coat, threw it over his shoulder

with one hand and took hold of his mother's elbow with the other. He steered her back into the flat, then slammed the door in my face.

I thought Mum would go on about how rude they were, or how she was sure the car had been stolen. But she didn't say a word all the way down in the lift and all the way home in the car. It was only when we were safely parked in William Morris Road that she said, "Well, what was that all about?"

I knew exactly what it was all about. I didn't know the details or the reasons. But I knew it was all about fear.

I didn't know why. But I knew that everyone in that house was afraid.