

Truestory

Chapter 1

I watched my jailor, Sam, all four foot five of him, straining with effort and concentration, his tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth as he drew a map of our world.

I gripped my coffee cup. I wanted to smack it off the table; hear it crack and smash and see coffee splatter all over the kitchen but I couldn't because loud noises and sudden movements were NOT ALLOWED.

Lots of stuff was NOT ALLOWED in our tiny world, including wrapped presents, wasps, flies, cloth hankies, the colour yellow, nettles, plug holes, uncovered ears, boiled eggs, balloons and a never-ending, ever-growing list of other random craziness.

On his *Map of the World* Sam drew Backwoods Farm, the farmyard, the barn, the workshop and The World of the Jungle at the Bottom of the Orchard. From the farmyard he drew a lane wending away between Big Hill and The Wildwood and past Wayside Cottage with its row of little gravestones. When the lane reached the edge of the paper he drew a skull and cross bones and wrote in red letters: DANGER: HELL FIRE PASS.

I forced a smile.

He'd eaten the omelette I'd given him for lunch after he'd smeared it with tomato sauce to make it red – icing it slowly, meticulously, like a precious cake, squinting at its yellowness through his sunglasses to stop his eyes from burning. Then he'd smoothed out a big piece of paper on the table, running his hand over it looking for

lumps, bumps and creases. God forbid there should be any lumps, bumps or creases. Especially creases.

I closed my eyes. I didn't need to watch him draw the confines of our tiny world – I'd seen him do it a thousand times and I knew it inch by inch.

I left the house at 2 o' clock and not a minute before. That was the deal; I was allowed out for a couple of hours at two o' clock on a Tuesday. I pulled the door to and Bess shot out the barn, zigzagging on her chain and barking so hard her front feet left the ground.

'Go to bed, Bessie!'

The racket she made jarred even though Sam wouldn't hear it because by now he'd be lying under his quilt, tucked in on all sides, his ear phones on and his bobble hat stuffed with cotton wool and pulled right down over his face.

There used to be all hell to pay when I went out on a Tuesday. For years he'd beg me not to go, he'd start crying, pleading; the lot.

It wasn't that I was leaving him on his own - his dad did jobs round the farmyard on a Tuesday afternoon to be near and keep an eye on him.

That might have been half the trouble.

Sometimes I wouldn't go. I'd say nothing and put the car keys back on the hook and feel the walls close in another few feet. Or I'd tell him: 'I can't be here *all*

the time.' I'd try to keep calm; not to let the anger and the resentment and the frustration spring out of every pore. 'I've got to get away some time.'

'*Why* can't you be here all the time?' He'd say. '*I* am.'

But the last time he asked me not to go I flung down my carrier bags and kicked them across the kitchen, where they sent a pile of Farmers Weeklies slithering under the armchair, and I yelled: 'For God's sake, you're going to kill me you are. You're going to drive me into the Royal Bloody Albert,' and then I started crying – big snotty tears, like a kid.