

## A New Deal

I see Amira through the grubby window of the hut. 'Come on, Livvy,' I say, reaching down to take her hand. 'Let's go and see the nice lady.'

Livvy hasn't spoken a word since Mum died, but she follows willingly enough, her other hand cradling One-Arm Ted as we cross the sanded yard. The sea-wind tugs at Amira's hajib; a stray wisp of dark hair caresses her cheek. She looks me in the eyes. 'It is time,' she says. 'Everything is ready.'

I swallow. I don't know what to say.

'It is good that we fight together,' she says, watching my face.

'But I *can't* fight. There's Livvy,' I say, looking down. 'I can't lose her too.'

She shakes her head. 'No, I mean that you British ones, you fight, how you say, beside us. Beside the lost, beside the refugees. We are together.'

It starts to rain, and we glance up at the sky. I pick Livvy up.

'Be ready,' Amira says.

Is it only six months since Livvy and me were at home, watching Michael Barrage's first interview as Prime Minister? A New Deal, he said, the New Deal we were elected to deliver. Those were his very words. The British people, he said, have called for an end to homelessness, an end to the sight of people on low income queueing for handouts. A safety net, he said. From now on, for anyone whose personal value rating falls below the threshold, there'll be free food, and free accommodation in brand new health camps. Their food will be healthy and all their fitness needs will be met, he said.

We didn't realise what he meant at the time. Dad thought it was great, it was what Britain had been crying out for. Stands to reason, he said, looking up from his *Daily Mail*. Mum wasn't convinced.

Amira didn't have to tell me to be ready. I've had a rucksack packed since breakfast: a little bit of the rotten fruit they serve us here, a flask of clean water from the standpipe, Livvy's blanket from her old cot, and a compass. When the fighting begins, when they break the fence down, that's when it'll be time for us to run. I sit Livvy on my lap and feel her cheek pressing against mine, and try to remember a story from one of her picture-books.

It was a few weeks later that we got first-hand experience of Barrage's New Deal. I'd dumped Stace, a girl in my class, for being a vindictive bitch (not to me, to someone else), so she trolled me on YouFace and Chatter and Instapic, the lot, and my personal value rating went

right down. Which would've been okay if Dad hadn't lost his delivery job with Amayzin that very day. Downturn, they said, recession, austerity; but his PV went down too and with Mum being clinically overweight already, our all-family rating dropped below Barrage's threshold.

I can't remember any more of Livvy's story. I'm staring, silent, and she pulls at my arm. But now through the window I can see people moving, moving, all drifting towards the fence on the south side of the compound. I see makeshift weapons in their hands: chair-legs, bits of drainpipe, stones.

It's near. I hold Livvy close and smell her skin.

It took nearly a month before Securgo turned up, in force. Half a dozen of them, armed. A van, and twenty minutes to pack. 'You're off to health camp,' said the biggest one, with a grin like a split melon. I made them wait while Livvy found One-Arm Ted, but that earned me a whack on the head. Then it was a four-hour drive, no stops. Mum tried phoning her sister but they'd suspended all our network accounts. By the time we got here Livvy had wet herself. Dad swore all the way.

I go to the window and look for Amira, but I can't see her. Then I realise she'll be at the front with her brother Farid, one of the biggest lads in the camp. Both their parents are dead too.

When we eventually arrived we saw this sign: *Health Camp Deal*, it said, sponsored by BigBurger. I wondered what the deal was, till I realised that's where they'd taken us. Kent, the seaside; smells of old fried onions and seagull droppings. Another sign read *Securgo – Keeping Britain Safe*. Later Amira told me it'd been a Securgo boat that ran them down a mile from the shore.

Barrage was right about the food, it was free. If you queued for an hour you got a burger. It was burgers for breakfast, burgers for lunch and burgers for tea and you were lucky to get that. And there was stuff that they called coffee, plus the rotten fruit. We also had daily exercise – hundreds of us tramping around a muddy field for hours. To keep us healthy, they said. They didn't mention the lack of cleaning, the overused loos, the mozzies, the fleas or the rats.

After a week they took Mum away for 'filleting'. Your weight's unhealthy, they told her, you'll feel much better, the pounds'll just fall off you. She was away ten days, all of us worried, Dad frantic, and when she came back she looked like a currant, wrinkled, like they'd physically squeezed the fat out of her. They'd done it with drugs, she said. She was asthmatic after that, and then Dad had a cardio. We knew it was a cardio 'cause there was a doctor in there with us. She saved Dad's life. 'I'm here 'cause I'm black,' she told us, 'and a woman.'

Livvy knows something's up. She keeps looking out of the window. Her hearing must be better than mine, because it's another minute before I hear the shouts too. I slip the backpack on and we sit on the bed, holding hands.

Dad was just getting back on his feet when they brought in the refugees. Boat people, they said, temporarily housed, they said. We'll move 'em on soon. This is for their health.

We watched as they were marched past us to a new part of the camp. That's when I saw Amira, and I couldn't take my eyes off her face. She saw me looking, and nodded. They're just like us, I thought.

Dad thought different. 'Why're they bringin' them here?' he said. 'We left Europe so this sort of thing would stop, didn't we? We don't want their kind here, send 'em home. This is British soil!'

I looked down at the mud, the British mud. And I realised that Barrage was right, there was no more homelessness, 'cause we were all here; and nobody saw poor people in food queues any more, 'cause likewise, all the queues were here. There was no healthcare, 'cause it was supposed to be a health camp, of course. We were garbage, we were trash, and we'd been thrown out.

There were fights, refugees versus Brit trash. Even Farid had to fight sometimes. It was usually a draw, black eyes and broken teeth. Then we all got dysentery, so nobody fought anyone for a while. Mum died and Dad had another cardio, and this time the doctor couldn't save him 'cause she was dying with malaria at the time. After the dysentery there were still a few fights, and life but mostly death went on.

But then I overheard two of the Securgo guards taking bets on who was gonna win one of the fights. They were betting on our misery. I told the Brits, and then I took Livvy and One-Arm Ted and went over to the refugees' side of the camp. I figured they might not beat me up if I had Livvy with me. Amira saw me coming, and I think she recognised me from the day she arrived, so she came over to me. I told her what I'd seen, and she went and got Farid, and he got two other guys and I came away with a message that we should talk, refugees and Brits. Amira smiled and thanked me.

It must be time by now. 'I don't like it here, Livvy,' I say. 'Do you?' She shakes her head and gives a little whimper. It's the first thing she's said. She holds up One-Arm Ted, and I say, 'What about Ted? Does he like it here?' And she makes him shake his head. 'Let's go away, then,' I say. 'Hold on to me.' I pick her up and she clings to my chest.

We reach the back of the crowd, and over their heads I can see that the wire fence is nearly down. There's a crash and three of us have got through the fence before the first

Securgo guard arrives. They whack him one, and he goes down. Two more guards come, and I see they've got guns, and I know we're all gonna be killed. I drop to my knees and I shield Livvy while she whimpers again. But then the rest of fence collapses, so the guards simply turn and leg it.

There are a few shouts, but not many 'cause we don't want to bring more guards. The rain's made the ground slippery and people are stumbling as they surge out through the gap, but hands are offered and they pull each other up, Brit and refugee, refugee and Brit. Then we're out, we're free and I know I've got to look after Livvy. But I spot Amira. We run up and I and grab her hand. She jumps, but then she sees it's me. 'Stay with us,' I say. 'Stay with – with me.' And while the whole campful of misfits and desperates stream past us in the rain, she stares at me. I could fall far into those eyes.

Then Livvy frowns at One-Arm and says, 'Teddy get wet.' She's spoken! I hold back a tear; Amira smiles.

We don't know what the future holds. But at least now we know who the enemy is.