

## *From Here to Jupiter*

### Chapter One

There's a new tag on the block this morning. It wasn't there yesterday; I'd know if it was. I walk past this part of my block everyday with Neil, my dog. This new tag is a nickname, *dounut*, spelled incorrectly, of course, and then crossed through with a line that has star shape at the end. Despite the fact it's been crossed out, this tag isn't a mistake. Nothing on this estate is a mistake. As with everything that happens here, this tag is a deliberate signal to someone or something. That's just how things go on the Leighton Estate: careful, calculated, intimidating.

But whatever. This tag isn't newsworthy. Whether it's the Dirty Boys playing a prank or one of the visiting gangs composing a threatening message - whatever it is, it'll be gone by tomorrow, replaced by something else. The main door of my block was tagged last week, and Axel's mum's living room window was tagged the weekend before that. Wash it off and move on. That's the general mantra held by the everyone here: get on with it.

Neil and I walk past the tag, continuing our morning route through the estate. There's Axel and Annie, sitting arms-length apart, in the community garden, just ahead of me. Axel is almost falling off the bench because he's worried about getting too close to Annie. Not much has changed since we went into lockdown, except that what was once reserved for weekend mornings (the mugs of tea in the community garden) are now part of the daily routine. The children still play in the playground and the middle-class parents still stand about gossiping, clutching takeaway coffees with steam curling up from holes in the plastic lids, most likely carried over from the fancy coffee shop on the heath. Happily, the playground is in between

the other two blocks so the sounds of screaming babies is largely muffled by the scattered shrubbery and makeshift washing lines that clad the balconies. But, for the most part, everyone on the estate has continued to hang out in their own flats or in the car park. Sometimes a family or a dog walker will venture over the main road and walk through the heath, for a change of scene. But the *general* routine hasn't changed too much.

Axel spots me as we head up the cracked concrete path, his woolly hat slightly out of place in this unexpectedly sweltering April weather. Axel is never without his hat. Sometimes he switches the woolly beanie out for a blue baseball cap, but Deryn Peters, one of the Dirty Boys, nicked it and threw it under a moving lorry last week. The hat was unsalvageable, and Axel was quite upset. I've been saving up the pocket money Grandma gives me every Friday with the aim of buying him a new hat, but the shops have been closed for a month now and we don't know when they will re-open. So, that's where you'll find us: sitting in our little community garden, wearing winter clothes in spring weather and talking about all sorts of things that are far too grown up for a pair of sixteen-year-olds and a middle-aged homeless woman.

Axel waves at me, nearly falling off the bench. I laugh, my hand instinctively shooting up to cover my mouth. He jumps up onto the seat, clutching onto Annie's shoulder. "Jonie!" He shouts, still waving and grinning, displaying all his teeth. His boyish blonde curls poke out from under the beanie and his almost-black eyes are scrunched up like tossed-out paper. The pair of them beam at me as I enter the community garden. The weeds around the fence have grown up so high they're almost a second fence, boxing us in even further, cutting us off from the imposing concrete towers either side.

"Morning," I smile, mouth closed, careful not to show my crooked teeth.

“I have reserved this lovely li’le patch jus’ for you, my princess,” Axel jokes, springing from the bench. He lands on the concrete raiser and fans his arms low over a dirt patch in front of him.

“Cheers,” I smirk, rolling my eyes. Axel is always making out I’m posh or somehow higher up in society than him. I untie my hoodie from around my waist, lay it on the dirt patch and sit down, legs crossed.

“Alrigh’, hit me with some good news, I’m sick o’ the government tellin’ us our business, innit,” Axel singsongs, picking at a scab on the back of his hand. Annie slams her mug down at the word ‘government’, tutting loudly, and looks disdainfully towards the main road. “Sorry, Annie, I didn’t mean to vex ya.” Axel grins, knowing full well how irritating she finds him.

“I dunno, is there any good news right now? Wouldn’t you rather take the piss out of Deryn Peters or another Dirty Boy?”

“Nah, Jone, I need some uplifting news, give me summin’! How’s Grandma Bab?”

“Babi?” I ask, hesitant because he rarely discusses family matters, preferring, instead, to joke around.

“Yeah, how’s me ole babushka? I miss her!” He’s joking. He must be. Axel has hardly ever interacted with my grandma. When he has spoken to her it’s either been general stilted one-way small talk or a series of misunderstandings through broken English (her side) and broken Polish (his side). If you hadn’t already clocked it, Babi hardly speaks English. When Mum left, I had to learn all of Babi’s Polish phrases and slang terms as well as actually learning the Polish language because I hadn’t been exposed to much of it before then. Thank God for Google Translate.

“Babi’s fine, same as usual I s’pose,” I mutter. “Why are you asking, Ax?”

“Well, truth be told, I saw one of them Dirty Boys harassin’ her the other day as she was waitin’ for the lift,” he says, nonchalantly.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me!”

“I din’t wanna worry ya.”

“But you just said a gang member from the estate was harassing her! This is serious, Ax, you know she can’t handle those boys, she can hardly speak regular English, let alone their shitty version of English.”

“Well, was she okay when she got home?” Axel asks, brow furrowed.

“What day?” I ask.

“Saturday.”

“I don’t think anything was the matter. But that’s not the point, Ax, she’s never been vocal about problems like that, you know she’s just glad for the roof over her head.” I breathe out the words, exasperated.

“Sorry, Jone, I thought you knew. Anyway, I assume she’s fine if you ‘ain’t seen a change.”

“Yeah, she’s fine - please don’t worry me like that, Axel!” I’m so angry, I can’t believe he’s let my grandma deal with someone like Deryn Peters alone without texting or phoning me about it.

I look away from Axel and over at Annie. The whole time we’ve been talking she’s been staring at her hands, fidgeting her thumbs and twisting them over her fingers in an attempt to escape from our angry argument. “Sorry, Annie,” I say, “I just worry about my babi, you know that.”

“Yes, my dear,” Annie says, elegantly. “I hope she’s still going strong, especially with all of this nonsense.” Annie lifts up a hand and waves it about in the air indicating the general state of the country.

“Anyway, let’s move on, shall we? Apart from Grandma, no I haven’t got any news, Ax,” I say, sighing away the irritation.

“Fantastic!” Axel grins, covering over his obvious annoyance at my irritation and pretending that things are hunky-dory, when in fact they never are on this estate. Someone somewhere is always in danger or about to get into danger, and if it isn’t my babi in danger then it will be someone else.

“Anyway! You’re all on your Jack Jones! Where’s my boy, Neil, this mornin’, princess? In’t he usually about?” Axel half-sings, clapping his hands together, the air bursting between his palms with a satisfying pop.

“Yes?” My sentence ends as a question, my eyes search his face for an answer. But then I look around the community garden. Neil is usually close-by eating the weeds or sunbathing by the flowerbeds, but maybe he’s gone a bit further away to explore today. “Can you see him?” I ask, panic setting in. Axel helps me get to my feet and we stand side by side, making visors out of our hands to shield our eyes, looking around for any sign of Neil. Annie stands on the bench, looks over the tops of the weeds and shakes her head. Nope. Nothing. Where is he?

“He has to be here somewhere,” I say, sweeping my arm in a semi-circle, a gesture that indicates Neil *has* to be within the tower blocks, children’s playground, or at least inside the barrier of the A-road cutting us off from the heath. Neil is a big dog. Well, not huge like a Great Dane, but big enough to see from a distance, like a Labrador - manageable. But the problem is his black fur, he becomes invisible when he passes through any shadow or when the sun sets.

“Okay, where is he? I’m gonna go this way, maybe he found something to eat,” I say, reasoning with myself more than with anyone else. Axel’s eyes change from concern to deep worry as he looks over to me.

“I dunno, Jone, summin feels off. He never leaves you, ever. Like *ever*.”

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Fiction for Young Readers: Young Adult Narratives CRW020L433S

Dr Amy Waite

“Okay, well, let’s just look everywhere first before we jump to conclusions.” Panic rising. Trying to push it back down I look over at Annie, seeking comfort in her lovely motherly features. But her eyes are darting all around, “I’m not sure he’s here, pet,” she looks worried.

My vision is blurry, where’s Neil? The estate looks greyer than it did half an hour ago. The buildings are taller, the weeds are thicker, and the children are louder. He has to be here; he just has to be. I look the other way and see Axel leaving the community garden, “he’s got to have gone somewhere else. Jonie, come with me! Annie, you stay ‘ere in case he comes back!” I follow Axel as he leaves the community garden, his wallet chain swishing and smacking against his jeans as he navigates the churned-up bits of tarmac littering the edge of the car park. “Stay with me, two pairs o’ minces are better than one.” He grabs for my hand, but my sweaty palms linger down by my side. Nerves jolt through my fingers, fizzing and popping. Where is Neil?

Chapter Two

It's been half an hour. Still no sign of Neil.

I'm up on my fifth-floor balcony looking out towards the rich people's houses. Axel and I decided to part ways in the end, figuring that covering a larger area was better for the search. Maybe Neil fancied a walk on the heath, or he smelled something delicious coming from a café or a kitchen somewhere. Maybe he's just bored of me and went off to find some other sixteen-year-old girl to take him on walks and give him the free bones Ted the butcher leaves outside his shop at the end of each day.

I can't see him from here. I'll have to try somewhere else. I walk through the propped-open PVC door into the living room where Grandma is sat on the sofa crocheting a blanket. "Babi, I can't find Neil," I say. Grandma looks up, a smile creasing the corners of her crinkled mouth.

"Co jest nie tak?" *What's wrong?* I point to a framed photograph of Neil on the mantelpiece and repeat myself. Babi shakes her head, concern washing over her small features. "Sorry." Her English word is small but mighty, giving me strength to continue the search.

"Thanks, Babi. I'll be back for lunch!" I shout, leaving the living room door ajar as I exit.

"Pozegnanie!" *Goodbye!* Grandma shouts after me.

Slamming the front door, I check the dodgy handle to make sure the latch is caught properly – we really need the council to have another look at this door. I flip open my phone, find Axel's phone number and call him.

"Alright? Any news?" I say down the phone.

"Nah, no signs here, cus," Axel swaggers, "meet back in the yard?"

"Yeah, okay, I'll see you there."

Walking down the beige linoleum corridor I spot a poster hanging loosely from a blob of Blu-Tac on the wall.

MISSING

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DOG?

There's a grainy black and white photocopied picture of a light-coloured small scruffy dog with bright eyes and a telephone number. There's another missing dog? Why is this poster tacked up on the fifth floor of my block? I take the poster down, fold it and place it in my dungarees front pocket. I'll show Axel when I see him.

Rushing down the stairs, taking two steps at a time, I swing round the rubber-clad bannister and crash straight into someone coming the other way. Oh my goodness, is this person made of steel? My face is ablaze, the heat is unbearable.

"Watch out!" I try to focus on the blur in front of me, "You should look where you're going!" With my eyes finally focussing, I see a massive guy, like, huge, standing a couple of metres away.

"Shit, sorry. I didn't think anyone was around at this time of day," I say meekly, looking in any direction but his.

"Well, be careful next time." He sighs and shoves his way past me. As he heads up the stairs, I stand stock still on the landing, taking in his cheerful whistle and clanging footsteps.

That was Snatch Smith, a notorious Leighton Estate gang member. But he doesn't live in this block? What's he doing in my stairwell?

There's no time to waste thinking about that now, I have to find Neil! I continue down the stairs and am nearly at the bottom when my phone buzzes. A text:

**Fink ive seen him! Get to th yard now!**

It's from Axel. I run down the remaining stairs, crashing through the swing doors and rush out into the blazing sun.



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Axel is waving at me frantically from the community garden, the overgrown weeds wave in time with him. I race over, minding the lumpy tarmac and cracked paving slabs, wrench open the metal gate and fly to his side.

“I saw him! I saw him!” Axel pants, out of breath from the frantic waving.

“Where? Is he here?” I gabble with glee. Axel shakes his head and looks down at his feet.

“I followed him, I did, I really did, Jone. But I lost ‘im.”

“Shit! Where did you follow him to?”

“The heath!” Axel flings his skinny arm out towards the vast, endless heathland over the main road.

“Ah, shit.” I exclaim.

I know swearing is technically bad, but all bets are off when Neil is missing. If all the swear words in the world brought Neil back to me right now, I’d blaspheme from here to Jupiter, no matter how many *Zdrowaś Maryjos Babi* would make me chant.

That’s something my mum used to say a lot: *from here to Jupiter*. It basically means *until the cows come home* but it’s her neat little change-up. She did that all the time, change phrases and sayings to suit her. Maybe it’s the Polish in her. No, that doesn’t make sense. I think she just liked to make stuff up.