

First Frost

Amy, Billie and Sophie were so excited. Tonight was their first night in their new house: a crooked Edwardian mid-terrace in Walthamstow, East London. When the traffic stopped, you could hear the frenzied barking of the dogs at the nearby track. The girls had moved south from North Shields near Newcastle. They were school friends and they'd always wanted to live together. It was 2020 and the world was a brilliant place.

The three of them spent the afternoon browsing the long market: a mile of colour and culture from all over the world. Street cooks tossed fresh fish high and caught them in huge hot pans whilst bright-eyed traders told happy lies to the grinning crowd. Glistening trains zipped by regularly on the Victoria line, ferrying the masses into a city centre that was dominated by the Shuttle Tower – which at over a kilometre tall was the highest structure in Europe.

Things from every corner of the world gathered in London.

The girls breathlessly arrived at their front door; it was blistered, the paint was peeling and the knocker was tarnished and spotted with rust. But it was theirs and that meant more than anything. They fiddled with the lock and pushed their way in. They hadn't had time to unpack so their suitcases were still open in their bedrooms, cascading bright dresses and several of the hats that were so fashionable these days. The girls' parents laughed at their style, they were striped in different colours and the backs trailed like pony tails towards the waist. But what have parents ever known about fashion?

'Wifi's on!' called Amy from the kitchen. She'd switched the autotuner on her wrist and her Minitabs was already busy updating her apps and applying them to the house. 'Heating's on and the film channel's showing *Paranormal Infinity* tonight,' she continued as her device fed information through the tiny jewelled implant in her ear. 'Shall I order Pizza for the first night; I can't be bothered to cook?'

There was no reply so Amy tried again: 'What're you doing, Billie?' she called up the stairs. Still no reply. 'Sophie?' Neither of Amy's two friends were saying anything. Amy thought they must be playing a trick or maybe they were plugged into their Minitabs and listening to some B-Rap. No wonder they couldn't hear.

Amy climbed the stairs; each one creaked through the thin carpet. She reached the landing and shivered; the heating should be working quicker than this, surely. She knocked on Billie's door but there was no sound at all within. So Amy turned the old handle and pushed it open: 'What are you do...i..n? She stopped, unable to comprehend what she could see.

The window was wide open, too wide, and an ivory spiderweb of ice and snow stretched from the sill and onto the statuesque figure of her friend who seemed to be mid in the act of stretching towards the unearthly substance. The frost had gathered and climbed up Billie's jeans and past her waist. Amy could see it crawling beneath her sleeves. 'Billie, Billie,' Amy cried. But Billie's voice was frozen.

And the fingers of frost were questing across the wooden floor towards Amy.

She turned and slammed the door, racing into Sophie's room. But Sophie's window was wide open too, and in the far corner, Sophie crouched. She was entirely covered, from head to toe in the horrific ice which seemed already to be forming stalagmites from her hair and shoulders, reaching up towards the ceiling.

But already curving towards Amy. Like knives.

Amy swallowed hard. 'Sophie, Sophie,' she screamed. But she knew that Sophie wouldn't reply. Her voice was frozen.

Amy turned; she had to get out. The door behind her was moving, swinging slowly shut; it stopped and a strange crackling noise whispered up from behind it. Until that frost edged through the keyhole and down the door, like a raindrop on glass.

The door was blocked, the window was blocked and Amy's two best friends were frozen, seemingly being eaten from within by this foul white frost. And from all angles, at ground level and now at neck level, the hungry frost reached for Amy.

But Amy isn't anything's dinner. She wrenched the dial of the autotuner on her wrist and thumbed into the heating app, flicking every dial high. The boiler roared into life downstairs and the radiators in the room snorted and grunted as hot water bubbled into them. The ice fingers stopped, uncertain, and one drooped and dripped limply to the floor. All of a sudden the frost seemed more jelly than jagged ice.

'Go to Hell,' Amy yelled, grabbing Sophie's tennis racket and smashing it hard into the thin pipes connecting the heating system to the heavy radiators. Two hard whacks released the pressure and a hiss of hot water sprayed out and onto the living cold that lurked in this house. It recoiled, like it was hurt, and it slid backwards out of the room. Amy smashed the pipe again and this time the spray was more powerful, soaking her and, more importantly, soaking Sophie behind her. Sophie's eyes moved and her mouth opened in a silent scream.

Her tongue was bone white.

But the hot water drenched her icy coat and it fell away; her tongue pinkened and she sank to her knees and cried. But Amy wasn't done; she had to finish the job. She dashed into the bathroom and turned on all of the taps. Steam rose as the hot water struck the enamel. She grabbed the shower and turned it to full blast, power style. Holding it like a machine gun, she advanced back into the hall, attacking every trace of cold. She kicked open Billie's door and soaked her, from her boots to her blonde hair, driving the demons away. Both rooms were soaking and smoking; wallpaper was already peeling off the walls and the hall carpet squelched.

The windows slammed shut. The first frost of Winter had been banished. Sophie staggered in, dripping wet. She threw her arms around Amy and then Billie collapsed tearfully into them both.

And the trio of school friends, far from North Shields, drew strength from each other before descending the stairs and getting back into that warm kitchen to dry off and try to make sense of what had just happened. 'We're not staying here,' said Amy and Billie and Sophie nodded firmly. 'But we're not going home,' Amy continued. 'We'll call the landlord; tell him the pipes have burst

and he'll have to find us somewhere new. We're definitely not leaving. It takes more than frost to stop lasses from North Shields! Now, who wants a brew?'

That drew a smile. The girls were already nearly dry; the heating worked a treat. The kettle boiled and three hot cups of chocolate were soon on the table. North Shields one. London nil.