

Chapter 1 - A shadow in the street

It's so hot that even the moon is sweating. Alif is tossing and turning in her bed. The windows are open, the curtains are drawn back and the duvet is on the floor but she's still not sleepy.

She remembers from the telly that it helps to think of cool things. She closes her eyes and almost immediately she's floating in a pool full of strawberry ice cream, with dolphins made of whipped cream swimming around her. It's fun and delicious, but when she steps out of the pool she is sticky from head to toe. Yuck. She imagines the droplets of sweat on her forehead to be tears of ice and feels sad that they're slowly melting away. Hmm, it's useless, she needs to come up with something better.

She's about to travel to the North Pole and cuddle with the polar bears when she hears a sound. It's not the crying of her baby sister wanting a fresh nappy or food. It's also not the sound of her mum or dad going to the loo. No, this sound is coming from outside.

Alif walks slowly towards the window and scans the street. She sees an empty road, dark houses and streetlamps. Nothing special. But then she hears the same sound again! It resembles the jingling of keys. She turns towards the sound, but it's too dark to see anything. The moon has disappeared behind the clouds and the street light just isn't bright enough.

She squints and sees a sudden movement a few houses away – a barely visible shadow in the dark, its eyes darting around in the darkness. Alif feels like running away but she can't keep her eyes off the shadow. A jumble of thoughts race through her mind. She feels increasingly hot. Is it a burglar? A thief who has stolen a keyring? Should she call her parents? Is it a spy? A ghost? A lion that's broken out of the zoo?

Then she hears a grinding sound as if a key is being turned. Before she can blink, the shadow moves away past the houses. It's wearing a dark robe that floats in the night. Even though the shadow avoids the streetlamp, just before it turns the corner Alif catches a glimpse of the shoes it's wearing. Black shoes with silver lightning bolts on them. She knows of only one person with a pair like that.

