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Opening extract from

At the World's End

Written by

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Chapter 1
Window

It was forbidden, but Caz had been working on it for weeks now.

And today she would do it.

She'd look out of a window.

It had been very hard to find one. All the walls in Murphy's Department Store were grey and smooth, but in places they were covered with big metal grids that were impossible to move. Caz knew that the windows were behind those grids.

The grid she had chosen was tiny. It was right at the top of the building, in the Toy department. It was in the wall of a small white room and Caz had told everyone that it was her new bedroom. The room had shelves and the door even had a lock that worked. Caz had

dragged a bed up here and a dressing-table and all sorts of pictures and mirrors and stuff from the House and Home department. She had propped the pictures and mirrors on the shelves and in bright rows along the floor. Then she'd chosen a new duvet and purple pillows from Bedding.

Every night Caz had worked on the window.

Now she climbed up on a stool and looked at what she had done.

There was a gap in one corner of the window frame where the grey metal grid wasn't fixed well to the wall. Two small rivets held it, and one of those was broken now. It had taken Caz a lot of effort with a screwdriver stolen from the DIY department to do that. Now she attacked the second rivet. She leaned hard into it with the screwdriver, forced it down and swore. Nothing shifted. Caz wiped the sweat from her hands and went at it again. Snap! It broke. She tugged at the grid, bent it back and saw a small corner of dirty glass.

'Look out,' Caz told herself. 'Just look out of the window.'

She was scared.

If Marky found out, he would cut Caz's food ration again. But Caz had spent nine long years locked inside Murphy's Department Store with Marky controlling everything she did. The time had come for her to find out what had happened to the world outside.

She jumped down and checked the door. Safe. She came back and leaned her hands on the wall and put her eye to the window.

Caz looked down. Below her, she saw a street.

At least, it used to be a street. It used to be a high street with shops and banks and tidy buildings and a park with swings and slides. Caz could remember all that.

Now it was a frozen world. Ice covered everything. Street lamps rose from the frost, their bulbs broken and hanging with icicles. Doors and windows were sealed and silent. The park was a spooky tangle of dead trees. Their white branches moved in a fierce wind.

A car lay tipped up on its side. It was frozen deep within the ice and its windows were a web of cracks.

Caz stared in shock. She had expected it to be bad, but not like this. No one could live out there. Then she looked up and saw the sky.

It was blue.

Huge clouds moved across it.

Caz took a breath of wonder. Clouds! She had forgotten how huge and fast clouds were. And the wind! What would it be like to feel the wind on her face? Not to be trapped in the Store with its grey walls and dead air?

Spots of water pattered on the glass.

Rain.

Real rain!

Caz had been five the day the Blue Star had come to Earth. She had been out at the shops, hanging onto Mum's hand in the crowded street. Then the strange icy flakes had flashed down like burning snow, bright and cold and bitter to taste. Caz had laughed and said "Look!" and danced in the strange storm until she had seen how the people around her had started to cough and gasp – choke and die.

Then someone had grabbed her and dragged her into the Store.

And the Store had sealed itself shut.

Why hadn't Caz dragged Mum into the Store with her? Where had Mum gone in that storm of burning snow? Had she survived? These questions kept Caz awake night after night, but she knew the answer. No one on the street could have survived. But Dad had been far off at work in his office down by the river. What about Dad?

The thought of Dad haunted her.

Caz looked back at the frozen street.

She had been afraid that she would see bodies when she looked out. Skulls and bones lying there, bodies gone to rot, clothes worn away to rags.

But if there were bodies they were buried in the ice, lost for ever in this frozen world.

No bodies, no movement.

No birds.

No insects.

And no Blue Star.

The only things to be seen were a few dead leaves gusting in the wind. And as Caz listened to the moan of the wind she realised this was the first sound in nine years that she had heard outside the Store.

Then, just above the icy trees, she saw something. It was far off, tiny. Caz could just hear a metallic humming sound coming from it. It shot across the sky on silver wings. A faint smoky trail spread out behind it and a tiny red light flickered.

Caz was sure she had seen it.

Then it flew behind a far-off building and was gone.

Caz drew back from the window in amazement, then looked again.

The sky was empty.

Could she really have seen that?

A bang on the door made her jump.

"Caz! *Caz!* Are you in there?" a voice called.

Caz almost fell off the stool. Her heart pounded as she turned.

"Caz, didn't you hear the bell? Marky's called another meeting. Everyone's waiting! Come on!" It was Will. His voice was jumpy with fear.

Caz pushed back her hair and unlocked the door. She hoped she didn't look as shocked as she felt.

Will was wearing a white shirt and a pair of dark green trousers from one of the high-end ranges the Store used to sell. He had new leather shoes on too. What's more, Caz could see that they fitted him.

"Where did you get those!" she said, with a sting of envy.

"Found a few things my size in a box in Menswear," Will said. "Maxwell must have been hiding them."

Caz frowned. "You're so lucky!"

"Ah come on, you look all right," he muttered.

She pushed past him, annoyed, because that wasn't true. She had on a mish-mash of stuff – green tights, a purple party dress that she'd been wearing for weeks now, and an old coat belted over it all to keep warm. The coat was stiff with dirt and soon it would be useless. When it was

too filthy she'd take it to Fiona in Womenswear and swap it for something new, but all the clothes Caz's size had been used up ages ago. What was left was as frumpy as hell and made for old women twice her size. It was so stupid that in a store full of clothes finding things to wear was such a problem.

If only the washing machines worked!

Will raced off towards the stairs. As Caz raced after him she wanted to tell him to stop, to tell him what she'd done. "Will," she'd say. "Listen! I looked outside. I saw something flying in the sky."

Instead she snapped at him. "Slow down! What's the big rush anyway?"

Will ran down the steps of the still escalator, to Furnishings and its musty heaps of soft, rotting carpets.

At the bottom he turned and looked up at her. "Marky wants another Sacrifice."

"What!" Caz stopped and stared at him. "But Rose ..."

"Rose was a month ago. Things are worse now."

Caz was quiet for a moment, then the sudden clang of the alarm bell made her jump as it burst out.

"That's two already," she whispered. "How many more will he kill?"

Will turned, his face pale. "Maybe all of us, in the end."