

opening extract from

permanent rose

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Chapter One

David tramped along the road to the Casson house trying not to think too far ahead. In his pocket was a packet of banana-flavoured chews. He had started his journey with three packets (watermelon, lime and banana) but now only banana were left. Every few steps he unwrapped a fresh sweet and bundled it into his mouth. He did the unwrapping in his pocket, and the bundling in one quick furtive movement that looked like a yawn.

It was the last week of the school summer holidays, late August, and smotheringly hot. David was on his way to visit Indigo Casson, something he had been meaning to do all summer. The nearer he got to Indigo's house the harder he chewed.

Chomp, chomp, chomp, went David, and then accidentally gulped and swallowed before he had the next sweet unwrapped. For the first time since he had

started out his mouth was empty. Chewing had been David's way of stopping himself thinking very hard. Now (and without any encouragement at all from David), his brain lurched into action.

What if Indigo's dad opens the door?

Please not him! prayed David as he fumbled with a particularly tight chew wrapper.

Indigo's father was an artist: Bill Casson. Artist.

It was hard to believe. He looked like someone from a TV advert for something very expensive. Sports cars. Or first class train travel. He did not look as if he had ever been near anything as messy as paint.

Two things about Indigo's father had alarmed David when they met. The first was this inhuman cleanness. The second was the way he had glanced at David. As if David was someone he intended (for obvious reasons) to have nothing at all to do with. David, always aware of his lifetime's collection of guilty secrets struggling to escape, had been shocked at being rumbled so quickly.

But Indigo's dad will be in London, David told himself, as he finally got the chew wrapper free at last. *He nearly always is in London.* David bit down comfortingly into a new sweet. *Good.*

Banana-flavoured chews were the best. Watermelon were a little too exotic, and lime slightly sour. Banana were perfect. Except for being much too small. In a

David-perfect world they would have been the size and shape of a smallish egg. And not wrapped.

I hope I don't see Indigo's mum either, thought David, swallowing a chew whole to see if it hurt.

David did not actually know Indigo's mother; he did not know anyone's mother except his own. However, he assumed all mothers were more or less the same and when he had stopped choking (it hurt) he loaded in a fresh new chew and made a plan.

If Indigo's mum answers the door, I'll run off!

The packet of sweets was no longer a packet. It was a stump submerged in wrappers. David absent-mindedly scooped them out of his pocket as he trudged along and then suddenly turned back and began to scrabble them up again. Very recently (that day in fact), he had stopped being the sort of person who drops rubbish in the street. Now he was the sort of person who picked it up, and he was surprised how different that felt. Extraordinarily noble, and embarrassingly grubby at the same time.

He kept a wary eye on Indigo's house as he collected his papers. An awful lot of girls lived there.

'How many sisters have you got?' he had once asked Indigo.

'Three,' Indigo had replied, and then, reconsidering, 'No, two really.'

'Don't you know?'

Indigo said of course he knew, and he listed his sisters for David.

'Caddy. She's at university in London, but she's home for the summer.'

'She's grown up then,' pronounced David. He did not like grown-ups. 'Grown up!' he repeated disconsolately.

Indigo said he supposed so. Caddy, scatty, golden-haired, last seen tearfully designing a gravestone for her most recent dead hamster, did not seem particularly grown-up.

'Caddy's the eldest,' Indigo told David. 'Then there's Saffron, but she's not really my sister, she's my cousin. She came to live with us ages ago when she was little, when her mother died. Her mother was my mother's sister, so we adopted her. Anyway, you know Saffron!'

David winced at the thought of Saffron, whom he knew only too well. She was fifteen, more than a year older than him and Indigo, clever, gorgeous and ruthless. She and her best friend had once invaded the boys' washroom, and attacked the leader of the most vicious gang in the school. Her friend had guarded the door to stop anyone escaping while Saffron had nearly pulled off the gang leader's head. Not one of

his henchmen, including David, had dared raise a finger to stop her.

What if Saffron opened the door?

David unwrapped the whole of the rest of the packet of chews and pushed them into his mouth all together. They fitted easily. Only two tiny yellow triangles of dribble at the corners of his lips showed that they were there at all.

Saffron'll have forgotten about me by now, thought David, who was a hopeful person.

The last of Indigo's sisters was very young, not quite nine, dark-haired and white-faced, completely different from Caddy and Saffron. Nothing about her was alarmingly good-looking, or grown up or tough. Her name was Rose. Permanent Rose.

'Permanent Rose!' said people, whenever they heard Rose's name for the first time. 'What kind of name is Permanent Rose?'

'It's my kind of name,' said Rose.

'Is it a joke?'

That was the question everyone asked.

Everyone.

Even Rose's own father had asked it once.

Rose could just remember the huge indignant fuss he had made when she was four years old and her

father had finally discovered that her amusing pet name was not, as he had always supposed, an amusing pet name at all.

'Permanent Rose!' he had repeated, over and over again. '*Permanent Rose!* No!'

He had been filling in a form for a new passport, putting on all the children's names, so that they could travel with him. 'Just in case,' said Bill, who always did things just in case. Caddy, Saffron and Indigo were already safely listed, and then he came to Rose. She was hanging around, watching every move he made, the way she always did when he was home.

'Your turn, Rosy Pose!' he had said, smiling down at her.

Then he picked up Rose's birth certificate which he had never happened to see before. And there it was.

Permanent Rose.

'Eve, *darling!*' said Bill (Eve was Rose's mother). '*Darling!*' repeated Bill (very indignant and far from amused). 'What *were* you thinking of?'

Eve, who was also an artist, had been thinking of the colour that painters use: Permanent Rose. A clear, warm colour that glows with its own lively brightness, no matter how thinly spread. A colour that does not fade.

There had been a Permanent Rose-coloured sky on the morning that Rose was born.

Rose had arrived into the world a lot earlier than anyone had expected her to, and from the absolute beginning she had seemed very unthrilled about the prospect of having to stay. She had been like a visitor hovering on a doorstep, wondering if it is worth the bother of actually coming in. People had sent flowers to Eve, but not baby toys or little clothes. It did not seem that Rose intended to be around long enough to need such things.

Eve knew quite well why she only got flowers. That was why one afternoon she had slipped out of the hospital and gone all by herself across the town to register the latest Casson's defiant name. Permanent Rose.

'Permanent Rose,' said Tom, 'is the coolest name on the planet!'

That had been back in the spring, when Tom had first arrived into Rose's life. He was an American boy, the same age as Indigo, who had spent the summer term at Indigo's school. Tom and Indigo and Rose had become best friends. It had not seemed to matter that Rose was only eight years old.

'More than eight,' said Rose. 'Nearly nine.'

'Darling Rose, even nearly nine-year-olds don't fall in love,' said forgetful Caddy.

Caddy tried very hard to comfort Rose when Tom went away. It was not an easy job. It was like trying to comfort a small, unhappy tiger.

'Who said anything about falling in love!' growled Rose, crossly. 'Falling! Falling is by accident! I didn't fall in anything!'

'Oh. Right. Sorry, Rose.'

'And I am *definitely* not in love!'

'No. OK, Rosy Pose. Sorry about that too.'

Rose, who was sitting on Caddy's bed, hunched her knees up under her chin, turned her back and sighed. Caddy sighed too. The room became very quiet until Rose asked suddenly, 'What is the name for it when you are trying to paint a picture and you haven't any red? Or blue? Or yellow? When you finish a jigsaw and a piece is not there? When Indigo's guitar loses a string and a whole lot of notes are suddenly missing?'

'Oh, Rose!'

'Is there a name for it?'

'Incomplete.' Caddy reached across and rubbed her little sister's drooping shoulders. 'You would call it incomplete.'

'Would you?'

'I think so. Is that how you felt when Tom went away?'

'Not at first,' said Rose.

'The *coolest* name on the planet!'

Tom had said it again, the very last time that Rose had seen him. '*Permanent Rose!* Oh yes! So what am I going to do without you, Permanent Rose?'

'You don't have to do without me.'

'I have to go back to America.'

'I'll still be here.'

Indigo leaned over and scuffled Rose's hair with a music magazine he was holding. Tom did not reply at all, just grinned and bent a little lower over his guitar. There was a good feeling in the air, the way that happens in a place when all the people there are friends with each other. If Rose could have stopped time right then she would have done, but she couldn't. Time went on, and Tom went away.

This was how it had happened, that for Indigo and Rose, the summer began with an ending. Tom was gone. He had gone home to America because his baby sister was seriously ill. Earlier in the year he had fled to England to escape her. Now, it seemed, she might escape him instead.

Ever since the night he had left, Indigo and Rose had waited for news.