HOPE AGAINST HOPE

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# Chapter 1

FLORA GALBRAITH was in our shop! Buying undies! At least her mother was buying; Flora was eyeing the shelves of old-lady nighties and boxes of men's handkerchiefs (*Ideal Gift!)* and sighing.

Daddy was showing Flora's mother McCabe's best 'Junior Miss' range.

'Of course you'll appreciate the quality, Mrs Galbraith,' he said, unfolding a flannel petticoat and running his hands down it. 'See how sturdy the seams are?'

I got the giggles seeing Daddy's big hands on a girl's petticoat. I was meant to be seen-and-not-heard behind the counter writing labels – *Ideal Gift!*; *Baby's Layette*; *Chil-Prufe Vests On Special Offer!* I normally hated our shop, it was the most boring place in Mullankeen – which is saying quite a lot – but my brother Leo was having one of what Daddy called his 'spells'. Catherine, my cousin, lived next door, but for some reason Auntie May didn't want me there today, so Daddy had dragged me to the shop out of the way. I'd protested loudly that I was fifteen, not a baby, but I was secretly relieved. When Leo had one of his

spells he was scary, shouting and roaring, which was bad, or crying, which was worse.

I caught Flora's eye and grinned, hoping I wasn't blushing. We didn't exactly know the Galbraiths – they were posh and Protestant and lived in Lismore, a big stone house on the Armagh Road – but I had had a secret kinship with Flora since I was twelve. So secret that she didn't know about it. Three years ago, at the Christmas fête in the Church of Ireland, I had bought ten books – school stories by Angela Brazil – and they were all marked neatly inside with her name. They had titles like *The Luckiest Girl in the School* and *A Popular Schoolgirl*.

I fell in love with the stories. Even the pictures were intoxicating: fine, detailed line drawings, all of girls. All the girls were pretty and all the girls were having fun. Girls in classrooms, girls on ponies, girls laughing with their arms round each other, girls running after a ball with what looked like hurling sticks but I soon found out were hockey sticks, girls girls girls. A world of girls. A world away from Mullankeen and the shop and Leo, and me having to do everything at home, and people talking all the time about the border and partition and what would become of us all.

Lucky Flora looked like the girls in the stories – all pout and profile and, very daring for Mullankeen in 1921, her dark hair neatly bobbed. Last time I saw her she'd had two plaits flying out behind her when she cantered along the lanes on her grey pony, Moonshine.

'I like your hair,' I said shyly now.

Flora tossed her head and the dark bob swung round

and fell neatly back into place. I sighed with envy. My hair looked like a very angry ginger mop. It hadn't always; Mammy used to help me keep it nice.

'It's for school,' she said.

'*Boarding* school?' I could hardly keep the envy out of my voice.

She nodded gloomily. 'Next week. Some ghastly seminary for young ladies called Ellis House. I keep hoping there'll be some terrible riot or something up in Belfast to scare my parents off, but it's depressingly civilised around Ellis House, apparently.' She even *sounded* like the girls in the books.

'I'd love to go to boarding school.' I considered saying that I had read all her cast-off stories, but didn't want to sound babyish.

Flora's mother and Daddy looked up. As usual I must have been too loud. I was always getting told off for it.

'Polly,' Daddy said in a warning voice, 'I hope you aren't annoying Miss Galbraith.'

'Not at all,' Flora's mother said, as if Flora couldn't answer for herself. 'It sounds as if your daughter has a most sensible attitude.' She beamed at me. I wasn't used to being called sensible. 'Flora's being very silly about leaving home,' Mrs Galbraith went on.

Flora looked mulish. 'You shouldn't have dismissed McMahon,' she muttered. 'I can't trust anyone else to look after Moonshine.'

Jamie McMahon was the groom and general outdoor servant up at Lismore. He was sweet on Catherine; I'd seen him looking at her at Mass.

'Why was Jamie –?' I started to ask.

'Polly.' Daddy's warning voice again. 'Don't interrupt, and hurry up with those labels. I want to change the window display this afternoon for Easter. Now, Mrs Galbraith, a dozen pairs of navy?'

Mrs Galbraith frowned at the list in her hand. 'Yes, please,' she said. 'Such a relief that you have them – we ordered them from the school uniform supplier, but they've let us down and I can't send her off to school with no – er – underthings.'

'Well, now you know where we are, you can always get what you need here in McCabe's.' This was Daddy's sneaky way of saying that the Galbraiths had never darkened our door before: the shop was in Main Street in Mullankeen so they *can't* not have known where it was. 'You'll be anxious about her, up in the city.' Daddy wrapped the navy knickers in tissue paper and rummaged under the counter for brown paper to make a parcel.

'Yes. She was to go in September but she had measles, and then we were worried about the political situation. But the part where the school is is very quiet,' Mrs Galbraith said. 'Well away from any nonsense,' she went on, as if the riots and murders we read about in the newspaper were a playground scuffle between silly boys. She lowered her voice, though there was nobody else in the shop. 'As a matter of fact, I worry more about things round here. So many young hotheads around. And then this partition business puts us in such an awkward position – literally. Since my husband bought some more fields last year

Lismore straddles the county boundary, and now our land's in two different *countries*. Ridiculous.'

'Desperate indeed.' Daddy always agreed with customers. 'But sure it will all be sorted out in time. That border can't last.'

I squirmed inside as I always did when the conversation turned to politics, but, imprisoned by the counter, I couldn't escape. Flora had moved to the door and was waiting for her mother in ostentatious boredom, one hand on the handle.

'My niece Catherine is heading to Belfast soon too,' Daddy said.

I knew better than to exclaim aloud. But – Catherine? Belfast? I listened with fascinated horror, my pen poised over the next label.

'She's going to commercial college,' Daddy went on, 'to learn shorthand and typing.'

'Mother, please hurry,' Flora said from the doorway, hanging on the door handle. 'You promised me tea in the Singing Kettle and I'm going to expire with starvation.'

Mrs Galbraith shook her head. 'Girls!' she said. 'Always such drama. All right, darling, I'm coming.'

As soon as they had gone I turned to Daddy.

'What do you mean about Catherine?' I demanded. 'She can't go to Belfast! She'll be terrified. And she's never mentioned shorthand and typing. She'll be hopeless – she can hardly write, let alone type.' I wasn't being unkind, only truthful: Catherine got her letters back to front and jumbled up. But as well as bewildered I felt hurt.

Catherine was my best friend as well as my cousin. How could she be going to Belfast without telling me? Was this why Auntie May hadn't let me go to her house today?

And why wasn't *I* getting the chance to go to Belfast? Why was every other girl in the world luckier than me?

Daddy sighed. 'Shorthand and typing are useful,' he said. 'And Auntie May thinks she'd benefit from a change of scene. A change of company.'

'But where will she live?'

We had no relatives in Belfast, and I couldn't imagine Catherine living in lodgings. She was sixteen but she got tongue-tied in shops and stammered when she had to speak to strangers. 'The wee backward one', the gossipy women who hung around after Mass used to say, which Catherine hated, but they also called her 'the wee pretty one', which *I* hated. Mammy and Catherine's mother had been twins, and Catherine and I had both inherited their red curls, but Catherine's hair was silky and bouncy, whereas mine was always in what Mammy used to call a bee's wisp. Catherine had wide blue eyes like a kitten; mine were mud-coloured; Catherine had pale creamy skin; mine was freckled like a speckled egg. I had 'spirit', but people in Mullankeen didn't like spirit, except the holy sort.

'She's going to live in a girls' hostel,' Daddy said. 'Now that's enough about it, Polly. Finish those labels and be careful. You've blotted that one – you'll have to do it again. You're so careless. No wonder…' He sighed and sucked his moustache as if he didn't trust himself not to say something unpleasant.

Something like *No wonder Auntie May wants to send Catherine away from your bad influence*.

Since Mammy died I'd often felt a spiky black bud of anger inside me. Now it bloomed into a fierce flower. I threw the labels and pen on to the floor. Ink splattered everywhere.

'Polly!' Daddy cried, but I was already pushing up the folding bit of the counter and storming out of the shop.