5 Hilltop Villas

1939

She woke up, suddenly aware of how uncomfortable the mattress on her bed was. Whichever way she turned the springs found new and determined ways to dig into her side. "Oh, will you stop doing that!" she said. "You've never done that before."

"Oh yes they have," said an answering voice. "Every night for the last week. Ever since I came here. They get you right in the ribs!"

To her great surprise there was a girl sitting on the edge of her bed, hand cupped under her chin, staring at her. "Hello," said the girl politely, as though they'd just met at school. "How are you? Do you know you snuffle when you sleep? Not really a snore. More like an animal rooting through autumn leaves. It's quite attractive in its own way. Very distracting if you're trying to go to sleep yourself. But then, I can’t. Because someone's in my bed." She stared at Madeleine. "That someone would

be you," she added. "Which is strange, because I only got up to get a drink of water, and when I came back, not two minutes later, there you were. In my bed. Snuffling away. I'd call that interesting. Wouldn't you? So come on. Let's hear what you've got to say. Speak up, Mystery Girl, and tell me your name!"

But she couldn't speak. Not one word. She looked about her. It was her room, it definitely was. But everything was wrong. Her desk, chair and wardrobe were gone. The carpet, too. It had been replaced with a rug to cover some of the floorboards. A tea light burned low in a jam jar and revealed the walls with their rose pattern wallpaper. All wrong! She shook her head, and as she did so she saw on the floor, just beneath the tiny, cast-iron fire grate on the chimney breast, a small suitcase. It was her case - the one she'd bought that very morning. But, even by the feeble light of the tea light, she could see it looked different. In fact, it looked quite new! And yet, not twelve hours before, it had been far from that ...

She had spent that morning at a car boot sale in a damp field. And the ten pound note that had been burning a hole in her pocket had nearly remained

unspent. She had just about given up on buying something ‘weird, wonderful and interesting’ – the task she had set herself – when, quite suddenly, she had spied what she thought might be just the thing she was after : a small, old suitcase that seemed all the more remarkable when she looked closely at the lid. Never mind that the brown leather was scuffed and cracked. Never mind that there were lots of sports bags on other pitches. She wanted this suitcase, tiny and old though it was, because there on the lid, neatly in the top corner in faded blue ink, was her address, 5 Hilltop Villas, Manningtree. Her address! She wanted it. The urge to possess the item which had once been part of the life of her house was overwhelming. She bought it - a tiny suitcase with just one blemished clasp to hold it shut. She couldn't help herself. ‘Weird, wonderful and interesting’ it most certainly was.

The old lady was thrilled when she took it. "Well it’s only right it’s going back home. Fancy that! Now, there's just one tiny problem, my dear : it's locked shut. Not just a bit rusty, mind. Properly locked. Belonged to an evacuee, I should think. That's a good seventy years ago, now. You know, left the big city when the war started and came out to the safety of the countryside. I expect

there’ll be some surprises in there. And you’re just the girl to find them out!”

As soon as she’d got back she'd known just what she had to do. She took the bunch of keys from the ‘everything’ drawer in the kitchen. They’d been found at the very back of what had once been a larder under the stairs when the house was first built in the 1930s. They'd been rusting gently over many long years, gradually losing their silver sheen but becoming ever more fascinating. She was sure the case would respond to one of them. And it did. The lock began to move as the second key she tried proved to be lucky. She pressed the catch back and the clasp sprang up to give a tarnished, miniature salute. She took a deep breath, a moment like this had to be savoured. Slowly she lifted the lid of the case, both hands trembling gently, betraying the anxiety of the new owner.

She gazed at the contents. It was so carefully packed. Not an inch of space was wasted. She removed the items gently, one at a time. You could never be too careful with history. Each was placed on her bed for further examination. The case contained a summer dress of a delicate blue with tiny red flecks - she approved. There were some spare white socks and

underwear, a woollen hat - quite stylish, and a woollen cardigan - home knitted and done very well. Lastly she removed white sandals and a diary - quite empty, she checked straight away. Empty that is except for a name, Victoria S. It was a start. And tucked inside it, an opened letter - short and sweet.

Dear Em,

Look after her, will you? She's not much trouble. When she's not reading, she's writing! I've put £2 in to help out. I'll send more each week as I can. I can only hope all this is over soon. Please to God we'll all be a family again. Could be nearer Christmas before I make it over. It's not so long ago you could barely find a job, now it's tough to even get five minutes to yourself.

Yours,
Patty.

P.S. She always loved being with you and Harry.

So that was it! Mum must be Patty, and her daughter was Victoria. And she was probably staying with a