BIRDIE

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Deirdre Sullivan

BIRDIE

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1

FITZWILLIAM'S CHILDREN'S HOME, 1952

Bending down, Birdie took the key out of the bathroom door and pushed her eye against the large, black metal keyhole. The cool steel pressed on her cheek, and she blinked, feeling her lashes scratch against the old wooden door.

In truth, Birdie couldn't see much apart from the large tea stain on the front of Mrs Dudley's tired green apron. But then she jumped as Mrs Dudley's blue eye suddenly appeared, looking right back at her from the other side. 'Birdie! Just open the door!'

'I'm not going! I've already told you: I'm not leaving thee!'

'Birdie, please, just let me in, lass? We need to get to the train station.' Mrs Dudley rattled the door handle gently. '*Please,* sweetheart, just open up, so we can talk.'

'*No,* because you'll only send me away.'

'Oh, Birdie. Come on, love, it's not like that. This is what you wanted, wasn't it? A family of your very own? Your great-aunt's so looking forward to meeting you. She said as much in her letter.'

'I told thee already: I'm not going anywhere. I'm stopping

here, so you might as well go and have your tea, Mrs Dudley.' And with those words, Birdie put the key firmly back in the lock. She sat on the cold, faded red stone tiles with her back against the door, watching the ladybirds she'd collected from the garden crawling about in their matchbox.

'Birdie, I'm getting cross now. It's no good missing that train. They're expecting you. Think how disappointed they'll be if you don't show up.'

Birdie wiped her tears, which had been falling on and off all morning.

It was true what Mrs Dudley was saying, she *had* been looking forward to having a family of her own, but now the time had come, it all felt very different. Being here in the children's home, well, that was the only life she'd ever known. The idea she'd have to leave everything familiar behind, including Mrs Dudley, made her feel rotten all over.

'Well, maybe,' Birdie said, crossing her arms, 'I'll just write back and tell her, thanks all the same, but I can't go nowhere now, cos I've changed me mind.'

She heard Mrs Dudley sigh, and it occurred to Birdie that she did that a lot when she didn't know quite what to say, and it was always followed by a loud clearing of her throat, as if her words were stuck down there.

'Birdie, I know you're probably frightened, lass, but once you're there and settled in, you won't feel like this. You'll see . . . And we can stay in touch, can't we? I'll write to thee and find out how you're getting on.'

'Will you?'

'Of course, I will . . . Now come along, the train won't wait, even for you, Birdie Bagshaw.'

Like Mrs Dudley, Birdie sighed. She put the matchbox of ladybirds back in her pocket, twisted around and kneeled up onto her knees. She leaned her head against the door, squeezing her eyes closed for a moment, before standing and glancing at herself in the mirror. Her crown of raven-black corkscrew curls were high and wide, dancing and twirling across her shoulders, and her rich golden-brown skin, freckled from the autumn sun, was now blotched from crying. Even the end of her nose was rosy.

Clutching hold of the sink, Birdie tried to will her legs to stop trembling, then she placed her hand on her chest, feeling her heart thumping so hard, she actually wondered if it might just wear out and stop. It was true, she *did* feel scared. More than scared, but she didn't know a word for that.

She took a deep breath and tried to reach for the door, but it was as though her fear were gluing her to the spot. But then she took a deep breath, and slowly, *very* slowly, she turned the lock, and opened the door.

Mrs Dudley smiled warmly whilst Birdie wiped her tears away on the sleeve of her old grey coat.

'I . . . I think I'm ready now.'

'There's a good lass.' Mrs Dudley took her hand. 'Now, you better say all your goodbyes, everyone's waiting for thee.'

She led Birdie through to the large, cold hallway, where all the other children from the home were waiting for her.

'We're going to miss you, Birdie, aren't we, Gordon?'

Birdie's friend Margaret was a fountain of tears as she turned to the boy standing next to her. He nodded, hanging his head, giving Birdie only a view of the top of his thick, coarse curly hair.

Birdie looked around. Each and every one of the other children was her friend. They'd all been together for as far back as Birdie could remember, placed here as babies, tucked away in the small children's home that Mrs Dudley ran on the outskirts of Leeds.

Birdie had always hoped, wanted, *wished* her mam might one day come back to get her, but that was impossible now. Mrs Dudley had told her several years ago that they'd received news that her mam had died. And even though she'd never known her, Birdie had cried every day for a long time. So long, the leaves on the old sycamore tree in the garden had turned from green to brown to being stripped bare by the winter winds. But now her great-aunt had informed Mrs Dudley that she wanted her . . . *her,* Birdie. Somebody wanted her! That part was smashing, it *were reet grand* that she was finally going to get a family of her own, but she just wished she didn't need to leave everyone in order to have it.

'. . . I'm going to miss all of you too.' Birdie ran up to everyone, throwing her arms around Margaret, who burst into fresh tears. With a heavy heart, feeling like a stone was sitting in her chest, Birdie breathed in the moment, holding onto it for as long as she could. She knew this was her final goodbye, her new life was about to begin, whether she wanted it to or not . . .

2

'So, Mrs Winterbottom, your great-aunt, will meet you at the other end, lovie,' said Mrs Dudley as they stood on platform eleven of Leeds station.

It wasn't hot, but Mrs Dudley's round cheeks were flushed and the wrinkles on her face were deep, reminding Birdie of last summer, when the earth was lined and cracked from the heat of the sun. Her greying hair was tightly set in small pink rollers, poking out from beneath her headscarf, and she wore a thick pair of brown stockings with her swollen feet squeezed into a pair of shoes that matched her woollen blue coat.

She grabbed Birdie, pulling her into her arms, and Birdie rested her head against Mrs Dudley, who smelled of soap and Mr Dudley's pipe smoke.

'You better get onboard, lass.'

Panic rushed through Birdie. It felt like she was chasing her breath and she gulped in large mouthfuls of air. 'Will . . . will I see you again?'

Lines appeared on Mrs Dudley's forehead and Birdie's eyes couldn't hold the weight of her tears.

'Of course you will, love.' Mrs Dudley's voice began to break. 'Ee, you'll have the best time. The Yorkshire Dales are a beautiful place to be, you're a lucky girl that your aunt wrote and wanted you. You'll soon forget about us, once you're settled with your family.'

Birdie shook her head furiously. 'No, no, never! I'll never forget you.' She stared at Mrs Dudley. Her whole life, it'd always been Mrs Dudley who'd looked after her, tucking her up in bed at night and waking her up first thing in the morning. That's all she'd ever known, and quickly Birdie went into her pocket, pulling the matchbox out.

'Here, Mrs Dudley, will you keep that for me?'

Mrs Dudley's eyebrows snapped together. 'Matches?'

Birdie opened the box. 'No, they're me ladybirds. I reckon they'd prefer to be here with you. Even if I took them, they'd end up flying away home to here. It'll save them the bother.'

Mrs Dudley held Birdie with her kind, blue watery eyes. 'Thank you, love. I'll keep them safe. Now, come on, let's get you onboard.'

'. . . Mrs Dudley?' Birdie stopped mid-stride. 'Do you think they'll like me? Do you think it'll be all right?'

'Aye ,lass, I do . . . But . . .' Mrs Dudley looked around, gazing at nothing in particular. '. . . But, Birdie, it'll be different. You know, the children . . . they . . .' She appeared to be struggling to get her words out again and Birdie waited patiently. '. . . Well, it won't be the same as it is now, Birdie . . . Because folk can be . . .' She stopped again.

'. . . Can be what?'

Mrs Dudley cleared her throat, but it didn't shift the worry Birdie could hear in Mrs Dudley's tone. '. . . Well, how can I put it . . . you'll be mixing with folk who . . . who might not think of themselves as the same as you and your friends. They might think of you as different to them, and that may take some getting used to.'

'Oh, I'll be fine, Mrs Dudley.'

Mrs Dudley played with her hands. '. . . Oh, I dare say, Birdie, but I don't mean *you*. I mean *them*. It might take *them* some time. They might not find it easy.'

The whistle blew. *'All aboard,'* a conductor shouted from the end of the platform.

'What do you mean?' Birdie was now more confused than ever. 'What might they not find easy?'

Mrs Dudley shook her head. 'Never mind, lass.' She smiled. 'You know, I don't even have the right words to tell you how much I love thee, Birdie Bagshaw. I couldn't love thee more than I do if thou were my own flesh and blood.'

She helped Birdie board the train, passing Birdie her small, battered suitcase.

Birdie pulled the door shut and leaned out of the window.

'Just keep your eyes peeled for Barrington Dale, Birdie.' Mrs Dudley raised her voice over the noisy train. Smoke and steam surrounded them like a thick fog. 'If you're unsure, ask the conductor. You understand, pet?'

Birdie began to panic again. She was really going. Really leaving.

'And you promise, you promise, you won't forget me? Mrs Dudley, *promise* you won't!'

'How could I ever forget you, lass? And any road, like I say, I'll be writing to thee, won't I?' Mrs Dudley dabbed her eyes with a cream handkerchief whilst the station noise continued to rise up around like a flood. 'And I'll still be here under the same moon as you. So, if ever you're feeling a bit sad, or a little bit homesick, look up, and you'll know I'm looking up too. I'll always be here, and nowt – not distance, not time – will ever change the way I feel about thee, lass.'

All of a sudden, Birdie stumbled backwards, the train setting off with a jolt; juddering and shaking as it picked up speed; hissing and whistling, singing out its song.

Birdie stuck her head out of the window again. 'Mrs Dudley! Mrs Dudley! *Mrs Dudley*, I don't want to go! Mrs Dudley, can you meet me at the other end? MRS DUDLEY!'

But Mrs Dudley couldn't hear, and Birdie watched as she stood on the platform waving her goodbyes. Within seconds, she had turned into a tiny dot in the distance, until eventually she faded to nothing at all.

3

'*Barrington Dale! Barrington Dale! Anyone for Barrington Dale?*' The conductor marched down the empty carriage with great purpose, shouting above the noise of the train screeching to a halt.

Birdie looked out: it was beginning to get dark, and the rain was battering against the window, whilst the white sign of the small country station swung in the wind.

'This is my stop, mister.' Birdie sounded much more confident than she felt.

The conductor's wiry grey eyebrows knitted together, and he stared at Birdie from over his black-rimmed glasses. 'Well, hurry up then, love, otherwise you might find yourself in Scotland, and if you think it's cold here, try up there.' He chortled and pulled her suitcase off the luggage rack. 'First time away on your own, petal?'

'Aye, but I think I've changed my mind about coming.'

'What's your name?'

'Birdie. Me name's Birdie Bagshaw.'

He smiled warmly. '*Birdie Bagshaw*. That's a cracker of a name. Where does anyone find a name like that?'

'Between the turnips.'

He bellowed with laughter. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Me mam left me in church on the day of the harvest festival. I was only a baby, and she pinned a letter to the bib I was wearing, asking if someone could please look after me. She said that me name was Birdie Bagshaw.' Birdie frowned. 'She also left a photo of herself, but what with the leak from the church roof, and the juice which seeped out from the beetroot, it got wet, and it were ruined. Any road, that's how I came to be in the children's home, but my Great-aunt Mabel tracked us down.'

The conductor shook his head and his eyes twinkled. 'Has anyone ever told you, you talk a lot?'

Birdie was serious. 'Most people.'

Smiling, he glanced at his pocket watch. 'Come on, lass, let's get you off.'

Birdie stood and walked to the train door, stepping out onto the platform. An icy wind welcomed her. It seemed harsher than it had in Leeds, and it bit painfully at Birdie's ears.

The conductor handed her the case and closed the door with a final bang.

Then the train pulled away. It disappeared into the distance. She'd watched a lot of leaving today, but what hadn't left her was the feeling of sadness which flapped around in her stomach like Mr Dudley's pigeons.

She spun on her heel, looking along the train track in the direction of where she'd come from. There was no going back

now, though, and Birdie couldn't imagine what might be waiting for her. She'd never even spoken to her great-aunt, nor had she ever seen a picture of her. They were complete and utter strangers.

Patiently, with the pigeons still flapping in her stomach, Birdie glanced around.

A few people wandered by, and she watched a middle-aged woman with a stern expression etched on her face hurrying down the platform like a whirlwind. She rushed past Birdie, and went into the ticket office, and once again, Birdie found herself very much alone, far from home.