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Chapter One

For the first time in his life Indigo Casson had been properly ill. He had flu, and instead of getting better it got worse and turned into glandular fever.

'Glandular fever?' asked his disbelieving classmates. 'Or scared stiff?'

Somewhere, at the back of his head, Indigo wondered the same thing. However, it really was glandular fever. He grew very ill indeed, quite quickly. Even at the worst of his illness though, a part of Indigo sighed with relief. A part of him thought, Phew!

At first it was quite exciting for his family, having Indigo so ill. Anyone who asked any of the Cassons, 'How's Indigo?' received a very long answer. A much too long answer, with lots of details most people would rather not know about.

Luckily, this stage did not last very long. Indigo's illness stopped being news, and became a fact of life.

When people said, 'How's Indigo?' his family answered, 'Fine,' and talked of more interesting things. This was not because they did not care about him, but just that there was nothing new to say. Anyway, compared to how he had been, Indigo was fine. He could walk up and down the stairs again. He could eat. He didn't keep fainting. He was fine.

Meanwhile, Indigo missed a whole term of school and grew extremely tall and thin. He spent a great deal of time by himself. The house was very quiet during the day. Caddy, his elder sister, was away at University. Eight-year-old Rose, and Saffron (his adopted sister) were at school. His father and mother, both artists, were busy with their work, his father in London, and his mother in her shed at the end of the garden. It was a peaceful time, but it gave Indigo an odd feeling sometimes. As if, when he was alone, he became invisible. Once he looked in the mirror and grinned at himself and said, 'Still there!'

Some days Saffron brought him work home from school. Other times Indigo read books, or watched TV. Even so, he had hours and hours, especially at the start of getting better, when all he did was lie stretched out on his bed, dreamily watching the sky. He especially liked the clear days, when aeroplanes travelled across the blue, unfurling white banners of jet trails behind

them. Indigo imagined them, full of people he did not know, journeying to places he had never seen. Even when the planes were too high to see, the jet trail banners listed their journeys across the sky.

Indigo thought that until he became ill he had been on a journey of his own. Not a plane journey, but still a journey. He had been a traveller through the days and weeks and years of time.

Towards the end, Indigo's journey had become rather an unpleasant trip.

Indigo's time of peaceful invisibility was brought to an end by Rose. Rose had a habit of pouncing on the phone at the first ring. One day she pounced, and it was her father, Bill Casson, calling from London. Far away, in his immaculate studio, Bill Casson heard a series of bumps. Bump, bump, bump, and then a thud.

'What on earth is that I can hear?' he asked, and Rose replied, 'Indigo.'

'Whatever was happening to him? Has he hurt himself?'

'He was just jumping down the stairs.'

'Jumping down the stairs?'

'Yes.'

'Jumping?'

'Yes.'

'Then he must be better,' said Bill.

Later on, when Rose reported this conversation, everyone looked at Indigo. It was true. He was better. Without anyone noticing, without noticing himself, he had got well again. His journey through the days and weeks and years of time was about to start once more. Indigo could hardly remember where he had been going in those far off, before illness, six-inch-shorter days.

Eve, Indigo's mother, said happily, 'You *are* better, Indigo darling! You will be able to go back to school!'

'Yes,' said Indigo, and Rose wailed, 'He still looks terrible to me!' and everyone laughed.

Only Rose in the whole family knew what going back to school must mean to Indigo. Saffron guessed a little, but Rose knew it all, or thought she did. There was a boy in her class who had a brother in Indigo's school. A long time ago this boy had told Rose what it was like for Indigo at school.

Just before he became ill, Rose had confronted Indigo with her information. Indigo had said angrily, 'None of that is true! You shouldn't go listening to such lies!'

Rose was very hurt. Indigo had never been angry with her before. He had never lied to her either, and

she knew he was lying now. She never mentioned it again, but she thought about it often.

Now she said remorsefully to Indigo, 'You wouldn't have to go back if I hadn't told Daddy about you jumping down the stairs.'

Indigo laughed and said, 'Try your glasses on, Rose!' to make her think of something else. It was Sunday evening, and Rose's family had been attempting to get her to try her glasses on all weekend. Now, because she felt so guilty about Indigo going back to school, she went and fetched them. She put them on in front of everyone; Caddy (who was home for a weekend visit) Indigo, Saffron, and Sarah, Saffron's best friend, who spent so much time at the Casson house she was really one of the family.

'What do I look like, then?' asked Rose.

'You look fine,' said Indigo.

'I only asked. I don't care.'

'You look really cool,' Caddy told her.

'And older,' said Saffron.

'You look just right,' added Sarah, doing her bit to help. 'Cute!'

'Cute!' repeated Rose in disgust. 'Me!'

Rose was wearing glasses for the first time ever, and because she was not used to them they began to do terrible things to her. She took a step forward and fell

over a chunk of air. She stood still and the whole world came rushing towards her. When she put up her arms to protect herself she hit Sarah in the face.

'All right! I'm sorry I said you looked cute!' exclaimed Sarah, reversing her wheelchair as Rose began to grope her way across the kitchen. 'I meant gorgeous! Amazing! Clever! Bright . . . Open your *eyes*, Rose!'

'It's awful with my eyes open!'

'You don't need glasses,' said Saffron. 'You need radar!'

'It's Daddy's fault!' said Rose crossly. It was Rose's father who had discovered that Rose needed glasses, and on his last visit home he had taken her to the optician's and ordered them himself. He had chosen them too, with no help from Rose, who had been sulking at the time.

'I can see *too much*!' she complained, pulling the glasses off. 'They must have gone wrong! That's better!'

'They just need getting accustomed to,' said Sarah. 'Like when I got my new wheelchair. I used to crash into people all the time.'

'You still do,' said Saffron, Caddy and Indigo, all together.

'Hardly ever. Only when I have to.'

'Come over here,' said Caddy to Rose, and steered her across the room. 'Put them on again! There! Look!'

Rose looked and found she could see a very plain child watching her through a small bright window that had suddenly appeared in the kitchen wall.

'See,' said Caddy. 'I told you they looked cool!'

Then Rose's mind did a somersault, like a slow loop-the-loop in the sky, and the child in the window resolved itself into her own face reflected in the kitchen mirror.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, outraged, 'Horrible, *horrible*, Daddy!'

Indigo said quickly, 'You don't look like that in real life!'

'I must!'

'You don't. No one looks like they really are, in mirrors. I'll show you . . .' Indigo came and stood beside her so that he too was reflected. 'There! Does that look like me?'

'Yes.'

'It doesn't!'

'It does.'

'Come into the garden and try them there,' said Indigo.

Rose cheered up as she followed Indigo outside. It was night time. There was a cold spring wind blowing, and windy weather always made her a little light-headed.

Also it was reassuring to see that even with her new glasses on, the garden looked much as it usually did, empty and shabby and lumpy with neglected grass. She gave a sigh of relief.

'It's a very starry night tonight,' commented Indigo.

Indigo had perfect eyesight. He was nearly thirteen years old, and he had known the stars for years, but even he had to say, 'Gosh! I've never seen so many!'

Rose had the sort of eyes that manage perfectly well with things close by, but entirely blur out things far away. Because of this even the brightest stars had only appeared as silvery smudges in the darkness. In all her life Rose had never properly seen a star.

Tonight, there was a sky full.

Rose looked up, and it was like walking into a dark room and someone switching on the universe.

The stars flung themselves at her with the impact of a gale of wind. She swayed under the shock, and for a time she was speechless, blown away by stars.

After a while Indigo fetched out the hearth rug for her so she could lie flat on the grass. Later on Caddy brought blankets. Saffron, who had walked Sarah home, came out to the garden when she returned and said, 'But you've seen pictures of stars, Rose! You must have always known they were there!'

'I didn't,' said Rose.

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More time passed.

'They're in patterns, aren't they?'

'Yes,' said Indigo.

'Some of them move.'

'Those are aeroplanes, crossing the sky.'

Later still Rose said, 'There's us. And then stars. Nothing in between. Except space.'

'Yes.'

'Indy?'

'Mmmm?'

'Aren't you scared of having to go back to school tomorrow?'

Rose and Indigo were the two youngest of the Casson family. Saffron was fourteen, and Caddy, the eldest, was nineteen. Caddy was home for the weekend, partly for Indigo's sake, because of going back to school, and partly in honour of Rose's new glasses. Caddy often came home, but the children's father did not. He preferred his studio in London, where he lived the life of a respectable artist, unburdened by family.

'He comes home at weekends,' said Rose's mother.

'He doesn't,' said Rose.

'Nearly every weekend, when he can fit it in.'

'Only once since Christmas.'

'Well, Daddy has to work very hard, Rose darling.'

'So do you.'

'Daddy is a proper artist,' said Eve, which was how she had always explained the difference between herself and Bill to the children. 'A proper artist. He needs peace and quiet . . . Anyway . . .'

'Anyway, what?'

Eve gave Rose a painty hug and said she had forgotten what she was trying to say.

Eve did not have a studio, but she did not mind. She was perfectly happy in the garden shed, with the old pink sofa, and a kitchen table someone had given her, and various lamps and heaters that shot out frightening blue flames. Here she painted pictures of anything that would sell. She was very good at pets and children. People would give her photographs, and from them Eve would create astonishing portraits. Angelic glowing pictures of pets that looked human and intelligent (like children), and children who looked wistful and beguiling (like pets). Some families were beginning to collect whole sets.

'They are not exactly Art, Eve darling, are they?' Bill had commented reprovingly on his last visit home. He was looking at a particularly radiant picture,

labelled *Pontus, Adam and Katie*. 'What do you think, Rose?'

Rose, who was an artist herself, and had her own private opinion of her mother's portraits (Megagross, especially Pontus, Adam and Katie, who appeared to be floating through pastel-coloured clouds), said that she thought her mother's paintings were brilliant, much better than his rotten pictures.

Rose's father hated scenes. So he smiled and said, 'Of course they are much better than my rotten pictures! Aren't you fierce, Rosy Pose?' and tickled Rose's neck and pretended not to notice when he almost got his hand bitten.

Rose was not fierce at all the night she and Indigo lay in the windy garden looking at the stars. She said, 'Perhaps everything will be different this term. Better.'

'Yes. It will be fine.'

'At my school no one bullies anyone. If you're mad with someone you just put their coats on the wrong peg. Or say, "Ner, ner, ner! Bugs in your hair!" if you are really, really angry.'

'Has anyone ever said that to you?'

'No. If they did, I'd just cross my fingers. Bounces back if you cross your fingers. So they get the bugs.'

'Mmm?'

'Not everyone knows that.'

Indigo laughed.

A shooting star fell like a dropped splinter of crystal, scratching a curve of silver across the sky.

'Make a wish!' said Indigo.

Rose made a wish, and then asked, 'Why?'

'That's what I always do. Wish on the moving ones.'

'Does it matter how fast they move?'

'I don't think so.'

'Can you wish on aeroplanes, too?'

'Oh yes.'

Rose wished on aeroplanes until she almost fell asleep and then their mother was at the door calling, 'Come in, Rose and Indigo, before you freeze!' and then it was bedtime, and then it was morning.