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Chapter 1

He came in the early morning, at about half past two. His feet padded along the balcony, slinking silently past the closed doors of the other flats. No one glimpsed his shadow flickering across the curtain or noticed the uneven rhythm of his steps.

But he woke Cassy. She lay in her bed under the window and listened as the footsteps stopped outside. There were two quick, light taps on the front door. Then a pause and then two more taps, like a signal.

Cassy sat up slowly. She heard the door of the back room open and Nan come hurrying out. Not running (*nurses never run, except for fire or haemorrhage*), but crossing the tiny hall in two quick strides.

The front door handle clicked, but no one spoke and no light from the hall showed under Cassy's door. He came in quickly, in silence, in the dark, and the door closed behind him at once.

He and Nan crept into the back room and for a split second Cassy caught the sound of his voice, but she couldn't make out any words. Then the door swung shut

and both voices merged into a steady, muffled drone, matching the drone of traffic that floated into Cassy's other ear, from the West Way.

She lay down again and closed her eyes, wiping her mind clean and willing the questions away. *Mind your own business,* Nan always said, *and you won't get your nose caught in my mousetrap.*

No questions. No thinking at all. The blankness came easily, from long practice, and she floated into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke up again it was morning. Nan was standing at the foot of the bed, beside the chest of drawers. On top of the chest, level with Nan's face, was the big, framed photograph of Cassy's father as a little boy. Both of them stood very straight, shining clean, but not smiling. Mother and son.

Nan was staring straight at Cassy, but the boy's eyes were gazing into the distance, fixed on something beyond the picture. For a second, floating up out of sleep, Cassy wondered what it was.

Then she saw the old brown suitcase in Nan's right hand.

She sat up and frowned, trying to ignore it. 'Why are you still here? I thought you had an early.'

'I was sick,' Nan said. She looked Cassy straight in the eye. 'In the night. They don't want me at work like that.'

Cassy looked straight back, still avoiding the suitcase. 'I'll go and phone Sister for you.'

'No need,' said Nan. 'I'll get Mrs Ramage to phone later on. There's other things for you to do.' She knelt down, laying the suitcase flat on the floor in front of the chest of drawers. 'You'll be better off at your mother's, until I'm over this.'

'Oh, Nan!'

Don't you want me to stay and look after you? Cassy was supposed to say that next. Then Nan would smile and shake her head, lifting the neat piles of clothes into the case. Step by step, word by word, they would go through the same pattern as last time—and all the times before. And at the end of the pattern Cassy would be leaning out of Goldie's window, waving goodbye to Nan. With the brown suitcase lying on the floor behind her.

When she was three—or four?—she had jumped on to the suitcase and banged on the window with her fists. 'Don't leave me here! I want to go with you, Nan!' Even now, the memory brought a ghost of that panic. The miserable terror she had felt as she stood at the window, with Goldie trying to cuddle her, while Nan disappeared round the corner. She never shouted like that again. Better to wave and smile, and pretend it was all right.

But why did it have to happen?

'Why *now*?' The words burst out, even though Nan frowned at her. 'We have to choose our options tomorrow,

and I'll never get what I want if I'm not there. Why have I got to go *now*?'

'You don't need a reason to visit your own mother,' Nan said sharply. She opened the catches of the case with a hard, metallic click. 'It must be six months since you saw her.'

'But my options are *important.* You said they were. You said I had to choose very, very carefully.'

'That's as may be,' Nan said. Her voice was cold, and she didn't look at Cassy. 'But there's more to life than school. Now get up and get yourself washed.'

Briskly she opened the first drawer and began to take out Cassy's clothes. Three vests, worn thin but washed white. Six pairs of knickers. Two good jumpers and one with a darned elbow.

But Cassy wasn't ready to give up yet. She stared stubbornly down at the half-packed suitcase.

'I want to know what this is all for. *Why* have I got to go so suddenly?'

'There's no time to spare for chattering,' Nan said. She folded a navy-blue school skirt into three, precisely, without looking at Cassy. 'Stop asking questions and get yourself washed.'

Cassy pushed her feet into her slippers and padded towards the bedroom door. As she stepped into the hall, she glanced quickly at the door of the back room. It was shut. Of course. She had never said anything to Nan, or tried to work out the connection in her own mind. But

she knew that the strangeness of the closed door went with the strangeness of the suitcase.

She couldn't remember when she had first noticed, but it was always like that. Usually, Nan insisted on keeping the back room door open, to air the room. It was her bedroom as well as the sitting room, and she hated it to smell of sleep. Even though it faced the front door, it was always wide open.

Except when the brown suitcase appeared. Then, suddenly, the back room door would be closed and Cassy knew that she must leave it alone. The only time that Nan had ever smacked her was when she had touched the handle once, to see what would happen.

Today, because she was angry, she stood and stared at it. The back of her neck tingled. She wanted to march across to that door and fling it wide open, to let in the fresh air.

But, out of the corner of her eye, she could see Nan watching her. She was sitting back on her heels with her hands in her lap, looking at Cassy with narrowed eyes. Waiting for her to turn away from the back room and go into the bathroom.

Cassy shut the bathroom door tight and glared at her reflection in the mirror. Sensible brown eyes. Sensible short brown hair. You only had to look at that face to know she wouldn't do anything wild. *If everyone was like you,* Nan said, *the world would be a simpler, sweeter place.* Sometimes Cassy wished being sensible wasn't so important.

She washed twice as fast as usual, but even so Nan was calling before she had finished. 'What are you doing in there, child? Your breakfast's ready.'

'Coming.' Cassy folded her towel and hung it on the rail. Then she walked out of the bathroom. 'What shall I do with my pyjamas?'

'Put them in the wash,' Nan said, from the kitchen. 'I've packed some clean ones. Then get dressed and come to have your porridge.'

By the time Cassy walked into the kitchen, her porridge was out and her tea was poured. Before she had even sat down, Nan was pushing the milk and sugar at her and talking about the next thing.

'I've put up a bag of food for you to take. Will you manage that as well as your suitcase?'

Cassy stopped, with a spoonful of sugar in mid air. 'Why have I got to carry them both? Aren't you going to come with me?'

'And why would you need me to hold your hand? You may not be very big, but you're almost fourteen.' Nan turned away quickly and began to run water into the porridge saucepan. 'I don't want to be running around on trains. Not in my state of health.'

'But you *always* take me.'

'Maybe it's time you were growing up, then,' Nan said. But she spoke in a strange, offhand way. She was thinking of something else.

Cassy sprinkled the sugar and poured the milk. The

porridge stuck in her throat like cotton wool, but she ate it just the same, watching Nan unzip her battered old purse and count out the train fare on to the table.

As the last ten pence went on the top of the pile, Nan hesitated for a moment, her fingers hovering. Then she pulled out a crumpled note and laid it down beside the coins.

'You can take that, too. Just in case. But don't spend it unless you have to. And don't let your mother know you've got it.'

Twenty pounds? But that was a huge amont of money. Cassy put her spoon down and stared at it. Nan had never given her that much before.

'Why on earth—?'

But there was no chance to ask. Nan went straight on talking, in her briskest voice. 'Put it away now, before you lose it.' She pushed the money across the table to Cassy. 'And there's a letter for your mother, too.'

The envelope was sealed and Nan had written *Goldie* on the outside in her small, cramped writing. Cassy picked it up and zipped it into the pocket of her skirt, with the money. As she tucked the twenty-pound note away, she took a deep breath, and spoke very fast, before Nan could interrupt.

'I am coming back? Aren't I?'

For one terrifying second, Nan hesitated. Cassy grabbed the edge of the table and gripped it hard.

'I haven't got to go and live with her for ever?'

'Don't talk nonsense!' Nan snapped. 'You live here, with me. Always have, and always will. You're just going to your mother's until—until I'm better.'

'But can't you say how long it's going to be?'

'I'll write. And you must write to me.'

Nan stood up and went to the drawer by the window where she kept her bits and pieces. She found a packet of plain white postcards and counted out twelve stamps to go with them.

'There you are. I want to hear from you twice a week, now. No need to write an essay, just a note about how you're going on. And keep writing, mind, even if—if I've got no time to write back.'

Cassy took the postcards and turned them over in her hand. They were comforting, in a way, because they meant that Nan wanted to hear from her. But there were a lot of them. Twelve. If she used two a week, they would last her for six weeks. She couldn't magine what it would be like to live with Goldie for six weeks.

'I'll put them in my case,' she said.

'That's right,' Nan nodded. 'Best to get going now. No point in hanging about when you've a journey to make.'

Moving was better than thinking. Cassy stood up, holding the postcards and the stamps, and walked out into the hall. She did not even glance at the closed door of the back room. It was none of her business. All she had to do was finish packing.

When she flicked the suitcase open, the heaps of

clothes looked back bleakly at her. Plain practical clothes, well cared for, but wearing a little thin. Sensible, unobtrusive things that would never stand out in a crowd.

As she laid the postcards on top, she realized that she had nothing to write with. It was no use relying on Goldie to have a pen, so she turned to take her school pencil-case, from the top of the chest of drawers.

It was lying next to the picture, and the solemn little boy caught Cassy's eye. She picked up the photograph and tilted it to the light, wondering, for the thousandth time, where he was now. Were his eyes still fixed on something that no one else could see? What did he look like?

Mick Phelan.

She shaped the words with her lips, making no sound. Knowing, as she had always known, that they must not be spoken out loud.

'Cassy!' Nan called from the kitchen. 'What are you at? It's time you were on your way.'

Guiltily, Cassy grabbed the pencil-case and, barely realizing what she was doing, crammed photograph and pencil-case, both together, in on top of the postcards. Then she slammed the top and flicked the catches shut.

'Just coming!'

She put on her school mac, pulling the belt tight, and carried the suitcase out into the hall. Nan was waiting by the front door, with the old shopping bag in her hand. She held it out.

'There's a few bits of food for you. Goldie won't have

anything in, if I know her, and you'll need a square meal tonight.'

Cassy took the bag. 'What have you put in here? It weighs a ton.'

'It's good solid food for a growing girl,' Nan said. There were two bright pink patches on her cheeks and she was talking faster than usual. 'Take care of it, mind. Don't go handing it over to Goldie. Keep it all in a good, safe place. Be sure—'

But she did not go on. Instead, she put a firm hand in the middle of Cassy's back and pushed her gently towards the door. 'Don't dally around now. Go straight there. You must know the way well enough.'

'Oh yes. I take the Tube to—'

'Well, there's no need to spell it all out.'

Cassy blinked at the sharp edge to the words. Then she leaned forward to kiss Nan's rough, squashy cheek. 'Don't worry about me. I'll be sensible. And if she's moved, I'll track her down. Bye.'

'You're a good girl.' Nan laid the back of her hand softly against Cassy's cheek. 'Be patient,' she said in a low voice. 'Things will work out.'

The gentleness startled Cassy into silence. Before she could work out what it meant, Nan had taken her hand away, stepped back inside and shut the door.

For a second Cassy stood staring at it, but all she could see was her own reflection in the little glass pane. There was no point in waiting.

She had more sense than to knock on the door again. A couple of years ago, she had quarrelled with Goldie and run away home. When Nan saw her standing on the doorstep, she had sent her straight back, even though it was getting dark. Without a meal or a cup of tea to warm her up. Without even letting her through the front door.

Pulling up the hood of her school mac, Cassy buttoned it firmly under her chin. Then she picked up the heavy suitcase and the shopping bag and set off, a short, determined figure with her head held high.