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Opening extract from

Poppy's Hero

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POPPY'S HERO

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PART ONE

Heathrow Airport. London.

A big man with red curly hair is coming through the Customs Hall. He walks past the duty officers with a swagger. He even smiles a little. One of the officers beckons him over, crooking his forefinger.

The man freezes for a moment, then looks round as if he hopes they want someone else behind him.

The officer takes a step towards him. Two more officers appear from behind a screen. One is armed.

The man looks down at the large black suitcase he is pulling. There's another smaller case on top. He seems to have lost several inches in height and his smile has gone for good.

The three men close round him.

'Would you mind coming this way, sir.' It isn't a question.

Arriving passengers edge quickly past the little group, as if whatever the man has, might be catching.

The light in the hall is silver green and perhaps that is why the man's face has turned from ruddy pink to sickly grey. Or perhaps the light has nothing to do with it.

Chapter One

Poppy woke with flashing lights whirling round her head.

'Don't, Dad. I'm awake.' She opened her eyes to prove it and saw, first, the red and green lights in the glass globe, and then her mother's grey staring eyes, magnified by the glass.

'Where's Dad?' It was Dad – Big Frank – who had had the idea of holding the globe above her head to wake her up. He was like that. That's why she called him Big Frank. He was larger than life. Always having fun, trying to surprise. It felt silly when Poppy's mum tried to play games. Maybe being Polish meant she had a different sense of humour.

'Where's Big Frank?' Poppy knew her mum didn't like her using the nickname but she could never resist it.

'You know he's away.' Eyes and lights disappeared abruptly. 'Time to get up.'

Poppy's dad had been away for ages. It was only

being asleep that made her forget. She called, 'When will he be back?' But her mum was out of the door.

Poppy pulled on her track-suit because it was gym day at school and rolled the rest of her uniform into a bag. Then she tinkled a bit on the piano, which was in her bedroom because there was nowhere else for it and Irena (that was her mother's name – not Irene like in English) was a piano teacher so it had to be somewhere.

'Stop it, Poppy!' her mum shrieked from downstairs. She was easy to wind up, particularly first thing, particularly if someone messed with her beloved piano.

'Sorry.' Poppy knew she was being annoying because she missed Big Frank, which wasn't her mum's fault. At least she supposed it wasn't her fault.

After this bad start, the day went on as usual. Poppy and her mum walked to school together and Poppy carried her bag without complaining and gave her mum a hug when she said goodbye.

Irena might be a bit different from other mothers, being Polish *and* musical, but she tried her best to do good. That's what Big Frank had said when Irena baked a cake for his birthday that looked and tasted like a cow pat.

'Your ma may not be a five star chef, but she's always trying to do good.' He'd raised Irena's arm in a victory salute, 'Your mother is that rare species, a GOOD WOMAN!' which Poppy thought well over the top. But that was her dad: pushing things to the limit.

'What are you smiling about?' Poppy's best friend, Jude, met her as they went into the locker room. Jude was short for Judith, which she didn't like because Judith had cut off the head of a man called Holofernes. In a story, of course. Privately, Poppy thought Jude was well capable of doing damage to an enemy, although she might think removing a head too messy. Jude was very neat.

'Nothing.' Poppy side-stepped Wimpy Will, who was as usual looking as if he might vomit. He was supposed to have some rare illness but no one was convinced. Jude had christened him Wimpy Will.

'I bet I can guess,' Jude persisted, her round brown eyes staring knowingly.

'Guess what?' asked Poppy, although she knew perfectly well.

'Why you're smiling.' Jude flicked her shiny pony-tail.

'How much?' asked Poppy.

'How much what?'

'How much do you bet?'

'A tube of wine-gums.'

'I don't like wine-gums.'

'Fruitellas?'

'I hate Fruitellas.'

'Rollos?'

'OK. So why was I smiling?'

'Because you were thinking of your dad!' Jude gave a honking laugh of triumph, then turned to go into assembly. Her springy, confident walk made her pony-tail swing.

Poppy followed. Thing was, everyone recognised her dad and he *did* make people smile – even Jude. Poppy and he shared the same red curly hair which made her proud, even though the hair itself was a nuisance. However much she brushed, it always escaped into wild tangles.

Her dad had been picking her up most days this summer and he always had some joke. One time, he'd been wearing hologram glasses which gave him goggly protruding eyes and made everyone scream with horrified laughter. Another time, he'd lined up all Poppy's friends, told them to open their mouths and tried to throw in chocolate peanuts. Miss Docherty had stopped that.

'You win Jude,' said Poppy. 'Thinking about my dad did make me smile. But you'll have to wait for your money. I'm broke.'



Poppy and Jude were occasionally allowed to walk home together with no adult, and this was one of the days. Jude's parents both worked and Irena was sometimes teaching. Jude had two older brothers, Ben and Rico, who were in the senior school and quite often they linked up, although the girls pretended not to like it.

'Boys are *so* loud!' Jude liked to say, pursing her mouth, although Poppy knew she thought her brothers were wonderful. Ben was nearly six foot and he was only fifteen.

On this afternoon the boys caught them up and Ben shouted, 'You're like two snails crawling along.'

'And I suppose you're Gerard and Rooney,' called back Poppy.

There was no hurry, she thought, the sun was warm and it was nice to walk slowly, chatting about Ulrika's new disgusting spiky hair and the awful Will who lived nearby so there was always a danger of

meeting him. 'Smelling of sick,' said Jude with relish.

It was a bit disappointing when Jude went home with her brothers but then, she always did just what she wanted. Her house had four floors and a garden and a huge trampoline.

That was the thing about being an only child: you had to make a plan if you wanted someone to do things with.

Poppy let herself into her house – they had just the ground and first floor – feeling a little sorry for herself.

'Poppy! Is that you? Poppy!'

It was a surprise to find her mother in the kitchen – quite frazzled too, by the sound of it. Who else would it be but her? Unless it was Big Frank. Now, that would be better news.

'It's me, Mum.'

Irena stood in the kitchen holding a cup of tea. She usually looked pretty with her slim figure, big eyes and shiny chestnut hair. Just now she looked dreadful. Her eyes were red like a ghoul and her face like puff pastry.

'What's the matter? asked Poppy. Not that she really wanted to know. Grown-ups always had something the matter and it was best to steer clear.

Jude said her mum had once thrown a plate at her dad which had missed him and made a dent in the wall behind. So then she'd circled the hole in red and written, 'There are limits.'

Jude said it was a clever way of getting the living-room redecorated and her dad was Italian so he liked shouting, but her mum was the one who threw the plate because she was an activist. Poppy's parents never argued; the worst that happened was Irena getting at Big Frank, her Polish accent growing stronger and stronger. But Poppy only heard it at night through her bedroom wall.

'You're home early,' Poppy pulled her homework out of her bag on to the kitchen table and tried to avoid looking at her mum. She could sense her standing watching, not even drinking her tea.

Suddenly, her mum said in a strange loud whisper. 'He's not coming back.'

There was no way Poppy could avoid hearing this. 'What do you mean? Mum, what are you saying?' She felt her voice rising. She hadn't even asked *who* was not coming back. It was horribly obvious.

'Your dad.' Irena spoke in a dull voice now, then she sat down at the table wearily. 'Dad's not coming back.'

For a moment Poppy couldn't say a word. But the silence was terrifying. Poppy went over to the hunched figure of her mum and began to shout, 'Why don't you explain? Do you mean he's never coming back? Do you mean you're splitting up? You're *divorcing*?' She could only say the word because she knew it was impossible. It had to be impossible.

'No. No! Of course I don't mean that.' Irena's voice was louder now, and she looked at Poppy – which was better than sitting with her head bowed. 'He's just not coming back soon.'

'But how long? What does "soon" mean?' Although Poppy was still shouting, she felt tears at the back of her eyes.

'I don't know how long. I really don't.' Her mum was back to that strange loud whisper. Tears were trickling from her eyes, which for some reason made Poppy even crosser.

'I bet it's your fault!' she yelled. 'He's going because he wants to get away …' She never finished the sentence because her mother took a step towards her, and slapped her face. Hard.

Poppy, completely shocked, stood holding her hand to her cheek.

Irena stared at her, horror-struck. 'I'm sorry! Oh,

everything is bad. But never, never say he not wants me.'

Sobbing, she ran from the room and up the stairs to her bedroom.



Poppy sat down and put her head in her hands. Her cheek was still hurting. Probably it was bright red. She thought vaguely that she was a little girl and that her mum loved her and her dad loved her – so what had happened?

She replayed their voices in her head, hers angry, her mum's miserable – until she'd lost her temper and flown at her. Her mother never lost her temper.

Poppy didn't *understand*. Everything was horrible and she couldn't even ring Jude because, although she was her best friend, she could never ever tell her what her mum had done. Her mum *loved* her. They *loved* each other. Oh, why was everything so bad? Bad. BAD. And where was her father?

Too shocked to cry or to do her homework, even though she had an essay to write on a subject she really enjoyed, Poppy shut her eyes and did absolutely nothing.