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Lemonade Sky
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CHAPTER ONE

As soon as I opened my eyes, I knew that something was wrong. When you live in a basement it is always a bit gloomy, but I could tell from the way the sun was shining through the tops of the windows that it had to be late.

I lay for a moment, watching the dust specks

dancing in the light. Where was Mum? Why hadn't she woken us?

From across the room there came the sound of gentle snoring. Either Tizz or Sammy, whiffling in her sleep. I raised myself on an elbow and gazed across at them. Tizz, in the top bunk, was lying on her back with her arms outside the duvet. Sammy was scrunched in a heap, sucking at her thumb. She was the one that was whiffling. Little snuffly noises, like a piglet.

Somewhere outside, further up the road, a church clock was striking. I sank back down, counting the bongs. Ten o'clock! If Mum was awake, she'd have come crashing in on us hours ago.

"Up, up! Glorious sunshine! Don't waste it! Out you get!"

I strained my ears, listening for some sign of movement. Anything to indicate that Mum was up and about. All I could hear was Sammy, whiffling, and the occasional sound of a car going past.

I pulled the duvet up to my chin. There wasn't any

actual need to get up; it wasn't like it was a school day. Sometimes at weekends, if Mum was in one of her depressed moods, she'd let us go on sleeping cos she'd be sleeping herself. But just lately she'd been on a high. What we called *a big happy*. When Mum was in a big happy she'd be up half the night, chatting on the phone to her friends, rearranging the furniture, even painting the walls a funny colour, which is what she did one time. We woke up to discover she'd painted the living room bright purple while we were asleep! Another time she'd spent the night baking things. The kitchen looked like a hurricane had blown through it. The sink was full of pots and pans, and everything was covered in flour. But Mum was so pleased with herself!

"See?" she said. "I've been cooking. Just like a real mum!"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that the lovely cake she'd made tasted like lumpy porridge. Sammy spat it out, but Tizz and me were brave and forced ourselves to swallow it. After all, Mum had been up

half the night making it for us. It would have hurt her if we hadn't eaten it.

Even at weekends, she still got up at the crack of dawn. When she was in one of her big happies she didn't seem to need very much sleep. We'd hear her, at six o'clock in the morning, dancing round the sitting room, playing music, or just clattering pans in the kitchen.

This morning, there was silence. Nothing but the sound of passing cars, and Sammy, snuffling. That's how I knew that something was wrong.

I slipped out of bed and crept through to Mum's room. I thought the worst would be that I'd find her asleep, which would mean she'd come out of her big happy and slipped into one of her depressions, and then I'd have to decide whether to shake her awake or just leave her. I wasn't ever sure which it was best to do. But Mum's bed was empty. It was difficult to tell whether she'd slept in it or not. The pillow was crumpled, and the duvet was thrown back, but that

wasn't anything to go by. Mum never bothered much with bed-making or housework. Either she was in one of her big happies, which meant she had more exciting things to do; or else she was depressed, in which case she didn't have the energy. There were the odd moments in between, but not very many. Mostly she was either up or down.

I felt the sheet to see if it was warm, but it wasn't. It was quite cold. My stomach did this churning thing. *Where was Mum?* I rushed through to the sitting room, burst into the kitchen, threw open the bathroom door. There wasn't a sign of her. Not anywhere.

I shouted, *"MUM?"*

I don't know why I shouted. All it did was wake up Tizz and Sammy. They appeared at the door together, in their nightdresses, Sammy still sucking her thumb. Tizz said, "What's going on? Where's Mum?"

I shook my head. "I dunno. She's not here."

"So where is she?"

"I said, I don't know!"

"She's prob'ly still asleep."

"She's not," I said. "I've looked."

"*So where is she?*"

I could hear the note of panic in Tizz's voice. I knew that we were both remembering the last time this had happened, when we'd woken up to find Mum gone.

Sammy took her thumb out of her mouth. "Who's going to get breakfast?"

Tizz snapped, "Shut up about breakfast! This is serious."

It wasn't fair to turn on Sammy. She was only little. Not quite six, which was far too young to have anything more than vague memories of that other time. Just a baby, really. Eighteen months, that's all she'd been. I'd been eight, and Tizz had been the age Sammy was now. We could remember all too clearly.

"Maybe–" With a look of fierce determination, Tizz strode across to the door. "Maybe she's gone to see Her Upstairs."

"No! Tizz! Don't!" I yelled at her, and she stopped.

"I'm only going to check whether she's there."

"But s'ppose she isn't?"

Tizz bit her lip. She knew what I was thinking. Her Upstairs was a busybody at the best of times. She'd immediately want to know what was going on and why it was we were looking for Mum.

Tizz turned, reluctantly, and came back into the room. "She could just have gone up the shops."

"She wouldn't go without telling us."

"She might. Let's get dressed and go up there!"

Mum wasn't up the shops. Well, shop, actually. There's only the one she'd go to and that was the newsagent on the corner, where sometimes she'd send us for the odd carton of milk or loaf of bread if we ran out. But she wasn't in there and after what had happened last time we knew better than to ask if anyone had seen her. If Mum had gone missing, we mustn't let on. We left the shop, quickly, before we could draw attention to ourselves.

"She might have wanted something they didn't have and gone on to Tesco" said Tizz.

★ II ☆

"It's Sunday," I said. "Tesco wouldn't have been open yet."

Tizz said, "No, but you know what Mum's like. She doesn't always remember which day it is."

I didn't say anything to that. Tizz was just clutching at straws. She knew Mum hadn't gone to Tesco.

Sammy was growing more and more agitated. She kept tugging at my sleeve and going, "Ruby, ask! *Ask*, Ruby!"

I hesitated. Mr and Mrs Petrides, who own the shop, aren't as nosy as Her Upstairs. Maybe we *could* try asking if Mum had been in.

Tizz said, "No!" She obviously knew what I was thinking. "We don't tell *anybody*."

"Why not?" wailed Sammy. "Why can't we?"

"Because we can't," I said. "Let's just go home."

We trailed back up the road, and down the basement steps. I think both me and Tizz were hoping that Mum might have come back while we were out, but there still wasn't any sign of her. Sammy was starting to

grizzle and complain that she was hungry. I tried to be patient with her cos I realised she was probably getting a bit frightened. Mum hadn't just gone out, she simply wasn't there.

It was Tizz, with her sharp eyes, who noticed the red light blinking on the telephone.

"There's a message!"

She swooped on it. Immediately, Mum's voice came swirling into the room.

"Darlings, darlings! Love you, darlings! Thinking of you! Always thinking of you! Don't worry, my darlings! We'll have lemonade sky! Lemonade sky! I promise you, poppets! That's what we'll have! Lemonade sky! Oh, darlings, such fun! Such fun it will be! Kissy kissy, mwah, mwah! Love you, darlings! Love you to bits! Always, always! Take care, my precious angels! Mummy loves you! Lemonade sky, don't forget!"

My heart sank as I listened. This was how it had been before. Mum talking at a hundred miles an hour, not making any sense. I could remember her taking us

to school, pushing Sammy in her buggy, calling after us as we went through the gates, "Love you, darlings! Love you, love you!" All the other kids had turned to look, and me and Tizz had been embarrassed. Then when school let out that afternoon Mum hadn't been there, and we'd had to make our own way home. We'd found her whirling round the room, with Sammy in her arms, both of them made up with bright red lipstick and green eye shadow. She was whirling so fast that Sammy was growing scared and was starting to cry. We were quite scared, too. We'd begged and begged Mum to stop, but it seemed like she couldn't. In the end she'd let us take Sammy and we'd shut ourselves in our bedroom, not knowing what to do. Hours later, when we'd crept back out, Mum had disappeared. Now it was happening all over again.

Me and Tizz stood, helplessly, looking at each other.

"Was that Mum talking?" said Sammy.

I said, "Yes, that was Mum."

"Why's she sound all funny?"