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Opening extract from

Poppy's Angel

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Published by

Frances Lincoln Children's Books

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For Phin, Raphael, Claudio, Jacob,
Flora and Chloe

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 4 Torriano Mews,
Torriano Avenue, London NW5 2RZ
www.franceslincoln.com

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN:978-1-84780-362-7

Set in Palatino and AvenirLT

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Chapter One

Poppy watched the aeroplane back slowly off its stand. It looked like an elephant taking care not to squash anything smaller. Around it buzzed vans with flashing lights and men with flashing signals. Somewhere inside the plane's great belly sat her mum, on her way to Poland.

Poppy stared at the little round portholes, knowing there was no way she could see her mother's pale and anxious face. She thought: now I'm an orphan.

'You're almost an orphan!' exclaimed Poppy's best friend Jude, who was standing at her side.

Poppy swung round. 'They're not dead, you know.' It was annoying that Jude had guessed her secret thought.

'With your dad in prison and your mum in Poland, they might as well be dead.'

'You're supposed to be my friend!' Poppy felt tears at the back of her eyes ready to pop out at any moment; arguing might hold them back.

'But you're more like a slimy witch.'

'Well, you're like a frizzy red-headed hobgoblin.' They were hissing at each other like fighting cats.

'Whatever's the matter?' Jude's mum, who'd driven them to the airport, stared at them. 'You're not even watching the plane take off, which is the whole point of our being here.'

All three turned round to watch the plane lumber into the sky and then sweep gracefully upwards,

'Sorry,' mumbled Poppy – and burst into tears.

'Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.' Jude flung her arms round her: 'I'm so mean.'

'Three fairy cakes,' Jude's mum opened her paper bag. 'First come, first served.'

Poppy stopped crying, took the biggest, most glittery cake and tried to stop that word 'orphan' repeating in her head.

In the car driving back to London, Poppy, who was sitting in the front, decided that Jude was always at her worst when things were bad. Nothing bad had ever happened to her. Two years earlier, when Poppy's dad had first gone into prison, Jude had been horrible, mocking and cruel. Poppy had thought she'd never forgive her, but she had done, and now she was going to stay with her while Irena

(Poppy's mum) was in Poland. In good times, they had lots of fun together.

'Your mum will be home in a couple of weeks,' said Jude's mother kindly, 'once your granny's back on her feet.'

'She's very ill,' said Poppy doubtfully. 'Mum told me she can't even speak.'

'She's had a heart attack,' announced Jude from the back seat. She was using what Poppy thought of as her 'doom-laden' voice. Of course, it was always used about other people's doom.

'I'm sure she'll soon be better,' said Jude's mother firmly, and Poppy saw her frown at her daughter in the rear-view mirror.

Even without Jude's determination to make the worst of things, Poppy would have found it hard living with her. The house was certainly big enough – she was sleeping in the bedroom belonging to Ben, one of Jude's older brothers who was away at university. She knew the family well; their dad was an Italian chef who owned three restaurants and was hardly ever around. So it was Sally, Jude's mum, she saw most of. She didn't work like all the other mums Poppy knew – Poppy's mother was a piano teacher – so she had plenty of time to bake cakes

and make the house look pretty and lay out their clothes in neat piles.

Poppy knew she was lucky to be staying in such a comfortable, friendly place. There had been a terrible moment when her mum had threatened to take her to Poland, not a good idea since Poppy didn't speak a word of Polish. Poppy should have been happy, but she wasn't. Everything felt just too strange, partly because it had all happened so unexpectedly.

As soon as they got back from the airport, Poppy pretended she had a headache and went upstairs and lay down on her new bed.

Jude stood at the door. 'It's not very girly in here. Wouldn't you rather come in with me?'

It was true – the walls were covered with posters of cricket teams and angry-looking racing cars. 'Your mum thinks we'd keep each other awake all night chatting.'

'It smells, too. My mum says boys start smelling when they're about fourteen and don't stop till they get married.'

'I don't mind,' muttered Poppy, wishing Jude would go. 'Angel and Will don't smell.'

'They're not fourteen, are they?'

Realising she wasn't going to get much from Poppy,

Jude went off. In a few minutes Poppy heard her out in the garden shouting at her other brother, Rico. By the way her voice came in waves, Poppy guessed she was jumping up and down on the big trampoline. It was a good way to spend a Saturday afternoon in the summer and she wished she felt like bouncing too.

Instead, she thought about Will and Angel. They were her two friends who were boys, and very different from each other. Will, although clever and adventurous, was often weak and sickly, while Angel was witty and a natural rule-breaker who seemed to spend more time on the streets than at home. His dad had been in prison with Poppy's dad, Big Frank. They'd met when they'd both been visiting their dads.

Thinking about Angel made Poppy realise she hadn't seen him for weeks. He always made life seem more exciting, if a little scary sometimes. Suddenly restless, Poppy swung her legs off the bed and crept to the edge of the stairs. A delicious smell was coming from the kitchen; Jude's mum had once been a professional cook like her husband.

But she's not *my* mum, thought Poppy, and this isn't *my* home. Slowly she began to creep down the stairs. That's what she'd do: go back to her own home.

It was only two streets away and she wouldn't stay long – just long enough to feel she wasn't an orphan.

The shadows were lengthening as Poppy walked along the street. She looked up at the blue sky and felt free for the first time since saying goodbye to Irena. In a few days' time the summer term would start – typical, just when the weather was turning nice.

Poppy shook her mop of red-gold curls so that they glinted in the sun and began to run as fast as she could. Feeling free made her think of her dad, Big Frank, locked up in prison. He'd been such a free sort of person, always making people laugh with his silly jokes. At first she couldn't believe he was guilty of drug smuggling. This was serious. But then he himself had told her he was guilty. It had been a horrible shock, but in the end she'd managed to forgive him and love him despite everything. That was old news. She could cope with that now.

Poppy arrived panting at the house where she and her mother lived on the bottom two floors. She'd only left that morning, but now she felt like a burglar because her mum had told her to stay away. 'I want you to feel settled with Jude and her family,' she'd said, almost in tears. As per usual.

But I'm not settled, thought Poppy, taking out

the key she'd kept hidden away. And all I'm going to do is pop in for a moment to make me feel calmer.

With her heart beating a little too fast because she didn't usually disobey her mum and because it seemed weird being here on her own, Poppy turned the key and opened the door. Light came in from the landing, falling brightly on the carpet at the bottom of the stairs.

Something on the floor caught Poppy's eye. She took another step forward and saw, quite clearly, two round red spots. She took another step and saw another spot by the door to the kitchen.

They were the brilliant red of fresh blood.

Slowly she walked forward and pushed open the door. It was darker inside because her mum had drawn the curtains before she left. She peered around but the room seemed empty. Perhaps she was imagining things. Then she saw two more spots by her feet.

'Hello!' Her voice wavered. She felt brave not running away.

'Poppy?' Despite her being so brave, the whispering voice nearly made her jump out of her skin.

'Who is it?'

'It's me. Angel. I need help.'