
JUDITH EAGLE
THE STOLEN SONGBIRD
illustrated by Jo Rioux

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Judith Eagle mysteries

THE SECRET STARLING
THE PEAR AFFAIR
THE ACCIDENTAL STOWAWAY
THE STOLEN SONGBIRD

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FOR LUCY AND MARGOT

PROLOGUE

1940

They left early, when it was still dark—before the lady who was meant to be looking after them woke up. They walked for miles and miles, through fields and woods, and along narrow twisting lanes banked by hedgerows. They didn't have a map, and the signposts that could've helped them were blacked out. It was common knowledge that the enemy must be thwarted at all costs.

As dawn broke, they shared the hunk of bread they'd stolen from the pantry. They'd had to be quick—quick as lightning—the boy grabbing it when no one was looking, the girl hastily shoving it under her sweater. They worked as a team. They were a team, having grown up together since the girl had been orphaned, years and years earlier, and taken in by the boy's family.

Swallowing the last of the crumbs, they pressed on. To pass the time, they took turns whistling—they were good at whistling—and they tried to outdo each other, showing off their prowess, with wilder and wilder and more complicated tunes.

At last, they came to a bus stop, and a bus that took them to Tonbridge, and then a train. Arriving at Charing Cross, they turned out their pockets. Three chestnuts, two marbles, and a hard candy. But no more money.

"We'll have to walk," said the girl. Neither of them minded. They would've walked to the ends of the earth if they had to. They were going home.

It was dusk now, and the scents of London filled the air: soot, cabbage, chips and vinegar—smells that followed them up St. Martin's Lane, along Tottenham Court Road, and up again to Camden Town. Other things were familiar too: the trolleys rattling by, the carts and the cars, the shops still open for business even though some of them were boarded up.

But it *wasn't* the same. For a start, there were people walking about in uniform, and some of them were wearing tin hats.

"Wardens," said the girl authoritatively. She was knowledgeable. Read the newspapers, knew everything. "They help people find shelter when the bombs come."

The air raids hadn't seemed real when they were in the countryside, but now they could see the evidence: great gaps where buildings had crumpled in on themselves; glimpses of streets where on one side there were mounds of rubble, and on the other side houses still standing, but with all the windows blown out. In a house on one corner, a hole gaped so big, you could actually see straight inside. The wallpaper was a pretty rose print, pale pink blooms with green leaves, just like the girl had in her own bedroom.

She'd see it for herself soon.

By the time they had climbed the hill to Hampstead, their feet were dragging.

"Nearly there," said the boy as they skirted past the houses that faced the heath.

It was still warm, right at the tail end of September, and the front gardens were a mass of Michaelmas daisies and blowsy roses. The girl breathed deeply. She could already see the lamp by the gate. She remembered how its golden light glinted on the ivy and the laurel bushes. For the first time in ages, her chest relaxed.

They had just reached the drive when the wailing rose up. It started low and got higher and higher. It sounded eerie, like the shriek of a banshee, making the hairs on the back of the girl's neck prickle and stand on end.

"I think that means an air raid . . ." she said, her chest tightening again.

"We'll be quick," said the boy firmly—now that he was here, he couldn't wait any longer. "Let's get him first and then we'll surprise her."

The boy rushed along the side of the house toward the back garden. The girl could almost feel his joyful anticipation. She waited, listening for the happy cries that would make the long arduous day worth it, but instead the sirens wailed again. She glanced up at the house, properly worried now. It was still dark.

"He's not here!" burst out the boy as he reappeared. "She got rid of him!"

"She wouldn't do that, silly. Go back and check in the shed," said the girl. "Perhaps—"

High above came a droning sound. The girl looked up and for the first time felt a sharp blade of fear.

"Quick! We need to go in," she shouted. They would go down to the cellar. They'd be safe there. She darted toward the house, trusting the boy to follow her. The droning was deafening now, like a swarm of bees.

She heard a rumbling noise, like faraway thunder, and then, much, much closer, a *swish* and a dull *thwump*

followed by a shudder. A wall of air rushed at her, lifting her up and flinging her to the ground.

She lay quite still.

Everything was choked in black: billowing clouds of smoke in her eyes and her nose and her mouth, making her cough and splutter. A shower of dust and debris rained down. Fingers of fire leaped into the sky. Cinders floated in the air.

It was like being caught in a terrifying dream with dancing devils and hellish furnaces and . . .

Except it wasn't a dream. It was real.

Much later, she got to her feet. The sky had turned a dirty, bruised yellow. Her ears were ringing.

Something very, very bad had happened.

"I can't see you, where are you?" the girl called to the boy.

But there was no answer.

ONE

1959
NINETEEN YEARS LATER

He was a large rabbit, at least the weight of five bags of sugar, but Caro Monday was strong.

Reaching into the hutch, she hauled him out. It was a sizable hutch, taking up a quarter of the cobbled yard, smelling of sweet hay and sawdust. The rabbit sighed happily and flumped against Caro as she wrapped her arms around him. His ears were soft as velvet, supremely comforting in the chill of the late afternoon air.

"I won't go, she can't make me," she whispered into his warm fur. The rabbit, who was all white apart from one ginger ear and a matching patch over his left eye, gave a little snuffle, and she knew he was agreeing. "You understand me," she said. "We'll wait here for Mum. She *will* come."

But where *was* Mum? She was meant to have arrived home yesterday. Caro had been crossing the days off on the calendar, listening out for the familiar sound of her whistling "The Flower Duet" as she walked up the street. It was the start of the school break, and she had promised to help Caro build an outdoor gym. There was going to be a beam for balancing on, a pole to climb, and maybe even a trapeze. Once it was built, she would be able to start her training in earnest.

Caro was so looking forward to it that she'd gotten out Jacinta's tools in readiness: the saw, the hammer, the pliers, and the nails in their screw-top jars. She had spent weeks scouring the Rubbles for the most useful odds and ends; she had collected all the scrap wood she could find. She and Horace had even marked out an area in the Rubbles where the gym was going to be constructed and had cleared the ground, making sure it was tidy, level, and ready for building.

But building things was her mother's forte, and if Jacinta didn't show up today and Ronnie got her way, Caro couldn't see how she could build the gym on her own. And if she didn't have a gym, how could she practice? And if she couldn't practice, how was she ever going to make her mark?

Behind Caro, the door opened, and a chink of light illuminated the small yard. From inside the pub, the familiar

sounds of clinking glasses and the hubbub of conversation drifted out, along with a whiff of tobacco, whiskey, and beer. The rabbit—who was named His Nibs and tended toward an air of refinement—sneezed.

"Caro," said Veronica Rudd as she stepped outside, "we've been through this a thousand times. My sister is not well; she needs my help. And I need yours."

Put like that, it sounded so simple. But Caro knew it was far from simple. Veronica's sister lived miles away, "up north." "Needing help" meant leaving the pub and leaving Caro.

And the problem was Caro couldn't be left on her own.

Veronica Rudd was a fierce-looking woman—you had to be to run a pub, even if it was a tiny one tucked into a cramped space, under the arches, just along from the station at Waterloo. She rubbed her hands on her flowered apron and sighed. As usual, she was run off her feet: whizzing between the bar and the back kitchen, peeling potatoes for Caro's tea, totaling up the monthly accounts, keeping the customers happy, and pulling pints. But besides being fierce, Veronica Rudd was also fair; she loved Caro as if she were her own child. And Caro loved her back—for her fierceness, for her capability, for always being there. But Caro was stubborn, and Ronnie was stubborn too. "A pint of bitter beer, Mrs. Rudd, if you please," called a customer from the saloon.

In answer, the publican kicked the door shut. If they wanted a drink, they'd have to wait. And wait they would; nobody dared argue with Ronnie Rudd. The real name of the establishment was the Railway Tavern. But everyone stuck to calling it Mrs. Rudd's Pub.

"I'm not going to Great-Aunt Mary's, Ronnie!" Caro burst out. His Nibs agreed with a sort of short, shocked quiver. "I'd rather be sent away to boarding school!" At least there might be a gym there. "If Mum knew what you were planning, she'd have a fit."

"Boarding school!" Ronnie Rudd shuddered. "Jacinta would like that even less."

It was true that Jacinta Monday was particularly passionate about Caro's freedom. Having been brought up in the strictest of circumstances herself, she was determined her daughter should not be similarly confined. Caro was allowed to roam all over the place. Across the river, up to Holborn, even as far as Camden Town. Passersby would often stop and stare. It wasn't every day you saw a wiry girl and a ginger-eared rabbit bounding up and down London's busy streets.

"All right, then, just let me stay in the pub!" Caro pleaded. For all her fearlessness, Caro Monday did not like change. Yes, she loved her freedom, she loved to explore.

But that was because the pub was always there to come home to afterward. It was her anchor. She couldn't think of anything worse than being cast away into a stranger's home. She didn't understand why she couldn't just stay in Waterloo, even though Ronnie wouldn't be there to look after her.

She nudged His Nibs back into his hutch and watched as he made himself comfortable and started to munch on some fresh carrot tops.

"If Toby's allowed, why not me?"

Toby lived in the attic room at the top of the pub. He was employed to collect and wash the glasses and do heavy work, like unloading the crates and changing the beer barrels. In actual fact, he spent more time admiring his own reflection in the ancient spotted mirror in the saloon bar or hanging around in the street, smoking and chatting with his friends. He didn't seem remotely interested in Caro, and she wasn't remotely interested in him.

But just as Ronnie had decided to give him his marching orders, he'd caught a break.

"Toby *won't* be on his own," Ronnie explained. "It's a stroke of luck his mother used to run a pub. She's going to mind this place for me. I can't ask her to look after you as well."

"But, Ronnie! I don't *need* looking after. I can look after myself. And anyway, Mum is bound to get your telegram any day now!" wailed Caro. "As soon as she does, she'll come home."

But the trouble was everything had happened so quickly: Ronnie's sister having the operation; Ronnie announcing she would have to leave the pub for a while so she could go and visit her.

They'd thought it would be OK because Mum would be home by then. But the first telegram had been sent a week ago, to the Manaus Opera House in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. The second had gone off a few days later, and then another one yesterday. Neither Caro nor Ronnie could understand why they'd heard nothing back. Ronnie had said, "Try not to worry," but that was easier said than done.

"It won't be so bad, you'll see," said Ronnie, drawing Caro close. Her apron was patterned with tiny violets and daisies. She smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg, and her hug made Caro feel, for a moment, safe. But as quick as it had come, the moment passed. Ronnie was wrong. It *would* be bad. How could it not be when Caro couldn't remember a time without the woman who, in partnership with Jacinta, had looked after her since she was a baby?

Caro had heard the story so many times, it had stitched itself into their family history: how, eleven years ago, caught out in the rain, Ronnie had taken shelter in the Sunset Club, in Soho.

How, once inside, time seemed to stop as Ronnie sat transfixed, watching Jacinta Monday whistle her way through her repertoire.

How, when the applause finally died away, Ronnie didn't leave with the rest of the audience but went backstage to ask the whistler for an autograph.

And *that* was when she saw the baby: tiny, pink-cheeked, asleep in a drawer in Jacinta's dressing room, and . . .

In one fell swoop, Ronnie fell in love with Caro just as much as she had with Jacinta.

The trio had been together ever since. They were a family, and Caro called Ronnie her "other mother."

"Remember, Caro," Ronnie was saying, back in the here and now, "Great-Aunt Mary has another ward as well—a boy called Albert—so you'll have company."

Caro jerked back. She knew all about Great-Aunt Mary: *Gam*, she called her in her head. Strict, coldhearted, stuck in the Victorian age. She had been her mother's guardian until she was sixteen, at which point, unable to stand it any longer, Jacinta had run away.

Barely a word had been exchanged since. And now Caro couldn't understand why Ronnie was sending her to stay with someone her mother quite clearly detested. "Why can't I stay with Horace?" she asked. She and Horace Braithwaite were best friends. They had known each other since they were three years old and had stuck together through thick and thin—a necessity at school, where they'd been picked on. Caro because she had two mums; Horace because his family were Bajan.

"You're different, be proud of it," Ronnie and Jacinta had said.

"You're better than them, they'd better believe it," said Mrs. Braithwaite.

So Horace and Caro had banded up, fought their corner, and—apart from their sworn enemies, the Bully Boys—they weren't picked on anymore.

Staying with Horace would be perfect, thought Caro. It made much more sense than being packed off to Hampstead.

But Ronnie reminded her, "Mrs. Braithwaite has her hands full with little Edwin. And you know very well there's not an inch of spare space."

"I'd sleep on the floor!" burst out Caro. "Or let me come with you! I can help look after your sister. I'll be good, I'll do anything you ask me to!"

"I wish I could say yes," said Ronnie, frowning. "But Marjorie really has been very ill. Maybe when her condition improves . . ."

They both knew the real problem was Marjorie's husband, Harry, who was in the navy and had somehow planned to be on maneuvers when his wife came out of the hospital. It should be him looking after her while she was recuperating, not Ronnie, thought Caro.

Caro turned back to the hutch and stuck her finger through the chicken wire to tickle the rabbit's nose.

"Oh, Caro," said Ronnie. "Don't you think I've been through all the possibilities? I'm at my wit's end. If only Jacinta had come back when she was meant to, we wouldn't *be* in this pickle."

Caro ignored her. It was more than a pickle. It was a catastrophe. "Just you and me, then," she said to His Nibs.

Ronnie gave an awkward cough.

Caro whirled around and saw that Ronnie's eyes had turned down at the corners, a sure sign that she was about to say something serious.

But what could be more serious than the fact that her sister was sick, that Jacinta Monday had gone missing, and that there would be no gym?

As realization dawned, every bone in Caro's body seemed

to crackle, and a whole host of butterflies inside her chest began to beat their wings. Jacinta had given His Nibs to Caro for a reason. To look after her when she was away. "For extra love" had been her actual words. And it had worked. When Caro was upset, His Nibs always calmed her. When she couldn't sleep, she would fetch him from his hutch and he would soothe her. How could she be expected to weather this change if they were to be separated? They'd never been separated before! Even on the few occasions when they'd been on vacation, he had been allowed to come too.

The thought of leaving him behind made Caro feel peculiarly dizzy and a bit sick.

"Don't tell me . . ." She could hardly get the words out. "Am I not allowed to take him with me?"

"We can't expect your great-aunt to house a rabbit as well as you. How would you get his hutch there? It's too complicated. He'll be fine here; Toby can feed him—"

"That ignoramus?!"

In the fading light, Caro Monday turned red, then white, then red again. Not only was she being sent to stay with someone who had made her mother miserable; she wasn't even allowed to take her one comfort, His Nibs, with her. She couldn't believe Ronnie was even thinking it. Didn't she understand that she wouldn't survive?

Angrily, she shoved past Ronnie, stomped through the pub, ignoring the surprised stares of the regulars, and slammed out the front door.

"Got yer knickers in a twist, have ya?" said Toby, who was loitering outside.

"Oh, shut up," said Caro. And in a blind rush, she ran through the narrow tangle of streets, up Waterloo Road, past the Rubbles, past the shot tower, and across the stretch of green in front of the Royal Festival Hall—bright white against the soot-blackened city, its great glass windows casting huge puddles of light onto the River Thames.

The sky had darkened, the lamps had been lit, and specks of rain clung to the foggy air. Taking three at a time, Caro leaped up the steps to Hungerford Bridge. Below, the black waters of the river churned menacingly. To her left, a train screeched and wailed its way into Charing Cross. Above, the iron girders hulked like giant monsters. It was her place. The place she always came to when she was angry and upset. It was both terrible and wonderful at the same time.

Swiftly, Caro swung herself up so that one foot was planted on top of the railing and the other was jammed into the wire fence separating the narrow walkway from the railway track. Unlike His Nibs, who was afraid of heights, Caro Monday loved to climb. One day, she was going to travel the

world just like her mother. Maybe as an acrobat. Or a tightrope walker. Or someone who could scale whole buildings using just her hands and feet.

But how could she do that if she didn't get the chance to practice? And practicing meant she needed a gym. Throwing her head back, Caro howled, her voice in strained competition with the racket of the train, the curl of her breath disappearing into the murky air.

No one could hear her. The city workers, who thronged the bridge during rush hour, wouldn't be back until Monday morning. *They* weren't being sent away, holiday plans ruined, and deprived of the company of their dear darling rabbit. The train rumbled past, clanking and sparking, and then it was gone and on the opposite side of the river. Big Ben chimed six, a kind of finale, each *dong* thudding deep inside Caro's chest.

Tucking her legs over the railing, Caro swung upside down, so that she could see everything the wrong way up: Waterloo Bridge, the curve of the Thames, the dome of St. Paul's.

"Caro!"

Caro flipped back up into a sitting position. It was Horace, dashing up the steps, jumping elegantly over the puddles, dressed in his school uniform even though it was a Sunday.

Of course, on Horace, it didn't look like a school uniform. It looked like a suit, a particularly dashing suit, with a sage-green handkerchief peeping out of his top pocket and a matching tie. Horace wanted to be a fashion designer when he grew up, like his hero, "the little prince of fashion," Yves Saint Laurent. At twenty-three, Saint Laurent was the world's youngest couturier, famous for producing six hundred drawings in fifteen days. Horace was always sketching nineteen to the dozen too. Caro wouldn't be surprised if he could produce six hundred drawings in *seven* days.

Caro jumped down from her perch, landing on the balls of her feet with her arms outstretched and her back arched, like a Russian gymnast. Horace pushed his black-framed glasses back onto his nose and looked anxiously back the way he had come.

"What? Are the Bully Boys after you again?"

The Bully Boys were in the same year as Caro and Horace at South Square Secondary. They had hard faces and mean eyes, and they were always starting fights with anyone who wasn't like them.

"They tried to get me," said Horace. "But I was too quick for them." He put his fists up and danced on the spot like the greatest boxer of all time, Sugar Ray Robinson.

Caro knew Horace could fight his own corner. Still, she would've punched those ignoramuses right in their faces if she'd been there.

"Anyway, forget about them. Mrs. Rudd sent me to get you," said Horace. "Says it's important. Says you have to come home right away."

Back at the pub, Ronnie was waiting with Caro's best supper ever, "the three-potato special," a plate piled high with mashed potatoes, roast potatoes, and fries. Caro eyed the plate uneasily. Potatoes were Caro's favorite. Having three varieties all at once meant there was bad news.

Caro sat down at the table with a thump and picked up her fork. She was dimly aware that Ronnie had her coat on. And that her suitcase was by the door.

On the kitchen counter, the radio crackled. Something about an elderly lady who had just been burgled. "They took my best soup tureen!" she said in a frail, wavery voice. "It was a family heirloom!"

Ronnie clicked off the radio and sat down across from Caro, regarding her solemnly.

"What's going on?" asked Caro. "You've packed already? And why have you got your coat on? I thought you weren't going until the day after tomorrow?!"

"I'm so sorry, Caro love, but the doctor called while you were out. They're ready to discharge Marjorie, and with Harry still away I've got no choice but to go immediately. I've shut the pub early, and I'm catching the last train."

Caro set her fork down with a crash. At least if Ronnie had stuck to the original plan and left the day after tomorrow, there might've been the tiniest chance that Jacinta would've turned up in the nick of time.

But now?! It was really happening. She was actually going to have to go to this unknown great-aunt's home tomorrow!

A horrible feeling of dread crept over her.

"I still don't understand how you can . . . I mean, Mum . . . when she finds out . . ." She could barely string the words together, she was so upset. Ronnie didn't seem to understand how terrible she was feeling. How scared she was and how frightening it was even *thinking* about being away from the pub.

"Your mum's stubborn . . ." said Ronnie. She had a funny look on her face. Almost as if she were hiding something.

"Stubborn?!" cried Caro disbelievingly. "But of course she is. Great-Aunt Mary was awful to her, that's what she *always* said!"

"When we could squeeze any information out of her," responded Ronnie quietly.

Caro picked up a chip and then put it down again. She wasn't remotely hungry. Even for potatoes. It was true that Jacinta didn't like to talk about certain things. In fact, mainly two things: the war and Great-Aunt Mary. She always said, "Don't waste your breath," and changed the subject, and that was that. Caro and Ronnie had come to learn they were subjects best avoided.

"Thing is," said Ronnie, "what with Marjorie being ill and your mum going AWOL, it started me thinking. Family *is* important."

"But we *are* a family!" said Caro. What was Ronnie getting at?

Ronnie met Caro's gaze and held it steadily. "If anything were to happen to your mum—not that it will!—but just say it did . . . maybe it's time to make amends . . . with her family. *Your* family."

"What do you mean, if anything happens to her?" Caro felt a chilly prickle of fear. What was Ronnie talking about? "She'll be home soon. She's just gotten into one of her scrapes!"

Ronnie stood up. Kissed Caro's forehead. "I'm sure you're right," she said. "But in the meantime, Toby's mum will be here first thing in the morning, and Great-Aunt Mary is expecting you in the afternoon. Can you manage?

You'll need to pack a suitcase. Take Jacinta's old one. And there's money in the teapot for your Tube fare . . ."

Despite the practical instructions, Caro had never seen Ronnie look so worried. In fact, it was more than worry—it was distress. A deeper frown had appeared than had ever been there before, and the corners of her eyes were so droopy, it did something painful to Caro's heart.

"I'm sorry, Caro. We're just going to have to make the best of it. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," she said, "I suppose so." Despite all her protestations, she didn't want to add to Ronnie's difficulties.

"And you promise to try and be polite to your great-aunt? Not cause any trouble?"

Was that an actual tear squeezing its way out of Ronnie's right eye? But Ronnie *never* cried.

In a flash, Caro jumped up and clutched her other mother in a fierce hug. She wouldn't be selfish. She couldn't. "Sorry, sorry, sorry! I promise I won't cause any trouble. I'll be polite. You go to Marjorie. I'll go to Hampstead, and before we know it, Mum will be home."

TWO

It was an odd night, all alone in the pub, without the comfort of Ronnie's steady snoring.

Toby had gone straight out after Ronnie had left and hadn't been seen since. He'd been out an awful lot lately, thought Caro. Maybe that would change when his mum arrived.

Caro stayed up late, watching *her* mum's favorite program, Barry Bucknell's *Do It Yourself*, and then, in bed, tried not to listen to the pub's creaks and groans. She knew perfectly well they were just the familiar sounds of a tired old building, but all of a sudden they seemed to have taken on a rather sinister tinge.

Unsurprisingly, she couldn't sleep. Her head was full of thoughts and questions about tomorrow. She tried to picture

herself turning up in Hampstead, with her mum's old suitcase, but she couldn't hold the picture still. All she could think about was what had this Great-Aunt Mary done to make Jacinta run away? Was she actually as cruel as Jacinta said? She must have done something really unspeakable if—even now—her mother could hardly bear to talk about her.

And why had Ronnie said that thing about families? About making amends? "If anything were to *happen* to your mum," had been her actual words. But nothing could happen to her, could it? Not to her wonderful mum. Jacinta Monday, world-famous whistler, who traveled all over the globe to perform in theaters and concert halls. Jacinta Monday who could whistle anything: birdsong, whole arias, all the hymns, symphonies, and sonatas.

At last, Caro smiled into the dark. She couldn't whistle a *thing.* Or snap her fingers. Ronnie and Jacinta would egg her on to try and then collapse in fits of giggles at her efforts.

But where *was* her mother?

It wasn't the first time she had disappeared.

Once, in Moscow, she had boarded the Trans-Siberian Express to Vladivostok instead of the sleeper train to Berlin and hadn't been seen or heard from for ten whole days. Another time, she'd gone on an expedition deep into the Amazon jungle, got lost, and—until she was found by an isolated

tribe—been unable to make contact for an entire week.

Ronnie called these episodes "scrapes," but Caro and Jacinta preferred to call them adventures. *Spectacular* adventures. Caro crossed her fingers. She was almost 100 percent sure that her mother was having one right now.

Just . . . why did she have to have one when they were meant to be building the gym? *And* when Ronnie had to go on her emergency mission to look after Marjorie? It really was the worst possible time to get into a scrape. And when she *did* get back, she'd be so cross to find that Ronnie had sent Caro to stay with Gam. Jacinta had always been very clear. She didn't want anything to do with her aunt.

Caro turned over and drew her knees up to her chest. Tomorrow morning, before she left, she'd meet Horace in the Rubbles. She pictured the abandoned car with the yellowy foam exploding out of the red leather seats, the den they'd made out of old blackboards and planks of wood, the tires to swing from, and the trash can lids and all the other stuff that nobody wanted. She loved the Rubbles: half bomb site, half junkyard, full of stuff to build with, and no grown-ups to bother you.

There probably wouldn't be anything *half* like the Rubbles in Hampstead. And even if there was, it wouldn't be the same without Horace.

She would come back every day. It was only half an hour on the Tube. They could still *try* to build the gym on their own. Even if it was bound to be a bit ramshackle. It would be a surprise for Jacinta when she got back.

Outside, a train rumbled past. Caro flung herself from bed and peered through the window. Her bedroom looked onto the railway arches, and she watched the tail end of the train disappear into the velvety night air. Below, she could just about make out the long shadow of the rabbit hutch. His Nibs would comfort her. *He'd* stop her mind from racing. Grabbing her bathrobe, she padded downstairs and into the yard.

"Come on, sonny boy," she said, heaving the rabbit out and holding him over her shoulder like a giant baby. He snuffled contentedly. When he'd first arrived, he'd been small enough to fit into her cupped hands—hard to believe now that he was so huge. They thudded back up the stairs. Ronnie always said that for all Caro's gymnastics, she had the grace of an elephant.

Mind you, there wasn't a chance of doing anything gracefully when you were carrying a heffalump like His Nibs.

In bed, Caro stroked the rabbit's ears and slowly a plan started to form. A plan that made her feel much, much better. Now that Ronnie had gone, she wouldn't know if Caro

decided to take the rabbit to Hampstead, would she? And if His Nibs came with her, she might—just might—be able to bear it, being away from the pub, and Mum and Ronnie and Horace. True, Caro had made Ronnie a promise not to cause any trouble. Well, if she had His Nibs by her side, she would be much less likely to. She'd have to keep him a secret, of course. This Gam didn't sound much like the animal-loving type.

Downstairs, the front door slammed. At last. It must be Toby. She could hear him crashing around in the saloon bar, and as he passed her room, she heard him muttering to himself.

"I'll show 'em. A black leather jacket, a nice little sports car, furs and diamonds . . ."

Caro snorted. Toby obviously had more of an imagination than she gave him credit for. If you wanted those things, you had to work hard for them, not be the sort of person who did the least that was expected of him!

Carefully, she nudged His Nibs, who—as usual—was taking up far more space than his fair share of the pillow.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "I'll never abandon *you*."

His Nibs twitched his nose in reply, and Caro felt a wash of calm sweep over her.

And at last, she slept.

The next day His Nibs and Caro had breakfast together. There was just enough space on the kitchen table for the rabbit to munch his hay and for Caro's plate of toast and jam. She was about to wash her plate when Toby sauntered in. He had put some greasy stuff into his hair and a new pimple bloomed on his chin.

"Mrs. Standing . . . Emerald . . . I mean, Ma, is held up. She said to look after yourself and keep the pub closed today. No harm done."

Caro and His Nibs looked at Toby agog. No harm done? Apart from yesterday when emergency matters had forced an early closing, Ronnie had never taken a day off in her life. Caro imagined all the regulars shuffling up to the entrance and looking baffled and befuddled at the closed doors. That wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all.

"No need to look like that," said Toby crossly. He had a funny way of talking, as if he always had a blocked-up nose, which made it hard to take him seriously. "It ain't the end of the world." He dug his comb out of his pocket and swung through the door into the saloon bar, where in front of the old spotted mirror, he began the laborious process of perfecting his pompadour.

His Nibs and Caro stared at each other. His Nibs blinked first and resumed his hay chewing. Caro got a pen and paper out of the odds-and-ends drawer.

Very sorry, pub shut today.
Open again tomorrow.

She was just pinning it to the front door when Toby emerged, squinting in the bright morning light.

"Got some business to attend to," he said, in a way that made Caro think he was trying to be as mysterious as possible. He stuck his hands in his pockets and swaggered off down the street. Honestly, thought Caro, he thinks he's so important now that his mum is going to be running things. He wasn't even very good at swaggering. She and Horace were much better.

"I won't be here when you get back," she yelled after his disappearing figure. "And you don't need to worry about feeding His Nibs, I'm taking him with me."

Caro spent a short while in the saloon practicing walking on her hands while His Nibs hopped around her in circles. She turned the radio on and listened to a snatch of news—something about the Snakes yet again.

The Snakes were dangerous criminals suspected of a recent spate of thefts across the capital. They were probably the ones who had stolen that elderly lady's soup tureen she'd heard about on the radio yesterday. Now, a brisk-sounding reporter was interviewing an ex–gang member called Trevor.

Trevor described how the Snakes had chopped off his finger because they thought he was giving away trade secrets. They'd wrapped it up in newspaper and sent it to his mum in the mail as a warning. Caro imagined the dismembered finger tumbling out, all gray and bloody. Trevor said his mum had fainted from the shock of it. Caro would've screamed the house down if that had happened to her.

"Cross them at yer peril," Trevor told the reporter.

Caro shuddered and tuned the radio to a more cheerful station. That was more like it: Buddy Holly. "That'll be the day-yay-yay when I die," Caro sang along. Then she grabbed a shopping bag and some money from the teapot, and left His Nibs snuffling happily along to the music in the saloon.

In Lower Marsh, she bought two doughnuts and two sacks of hay. Then she made her way to the greengrocer's, where she collected a huge bag of carrot tops and a load of cauliflower leaves.

"There's some peelings in there, from last night's dinner," said the grocer. "And how about these apples? Bit bruised,

but cut off the bad bits and they should be fine."

Back in the pub, Caro wriggled under Ronnie's bed in search of the suitcase, but the only things under there were a thick layer of dust and several old copies of the *Practical Householder*.

Caro sniffed and tried once again not to think about her mother's whereabouts or about the gym she and Horace were going to have to build on their own. The important thing was to find the suitcase. Where was it? Then she remembered. Last year she and her mum had gone to Swan and Edgar to choose a brand-new one. They'd picked out a bright red suitcase with gold buckles. Afterward they'd gone to the café on the top floor for marmalade tarts.

The old suitcase would be in the cellar, tucked among the beer barrels, along with all the other ancient stuff that was no longer in use but too precious to throw out. It was a handsome thing—chestnut leather, stamped with all the places Jacinta had been to: Vienna, Rome, Istanbul, and lots of other distant destinations too faded and torn to read.

Caro clattered down the cellar steps, grabbed the suitcase, and ran back up, fast. She didn't like the cellar. It was dark and musty and had ominous corners. Only last week Ronnie had reported hearing scrabbling sounds, and Caro had convinced herself it was full of sharp-toothed rats.

When she had packed, Caro set off for the Rubbles with the doughnuts and the apples. Apples were always useful in an emergency.

Horace was already there, reading a battered old copy of *Vogue* with his feet up on the back seat of the abandoned car. He was wearing brown lace-up shoes polished to such a shine that you could almost see your face in them, and bright pink socks with a green stripe at the top.

"What?" he said. "What's the matter, Caro?" They knew each other so well, he could tell just by looking at her that something was wrong.

"Ronnie had to leave yesterday, which means I've got to go to my great-aunt Mary's house this afternoon," she said glumly.

"But what about the gym?" asked Horace, looking just as indignant as Caro had felt yesterday. She knew he'd understand. He seemed to be the only person in the world who did. "You know we worked out that you've only got four more years of vacations to practice your skills before you leave school!"

He was right. They'd done the math together, in the back of Horace's sketchbook. Thirteen weeks (six weeks of summer break, two weeks each at Easter and Christmas, three one-week half-terms) times four years equaled fifty-two

weeks of practice. Each week was absolutely vital. Caro was already twelve, and her great plan was to be a performer by the time she was sixteen.

"I know!" wailed Caro. "But Mum's not back to help and—"

"It's only half an hour on the Tube, though, isn't it?" interrupted Horace. "You could—"

"—come back every day to visit?" said Caro. Great minds think alike, she thought.

"We can *try* to build it on our own," said Horace thoughtfully. "Or at least make a start. Your great-aunt will probably be pleased to have you off her hands. Especially as it sounds like she doesn't much like children."

That was true. But even though that should've made Caro feel better, it didn't.

"What else?" asked Horace, because he knew his friend, and he could tell there was something else troubling her.

Caro hung over one of the tire swings, resting her tummy on the rubber so that her legs and arms swung free.

"Ronnie said something really odd yesterday," she started. "About the importance of families and making amends and—" A horrible thought suddenly struck her, and it was so shocking she blurted it out. "What if Mum doesn't come back and I have to live with this Great-Aunt Mary for the rest of my life?"

"That's not going to happen, Caro!" Horace exclaimed. "Your mum's just off having one of her adventures. She'll be back soon."

"D'you really think so?" she said. How could he be so sure? Did he really believe that? The voice of reason, Jacinta always said about Horace. He was the sensible one, mostly.

"And just say she doesn't come back," he continued, because Horace was good at looking at a subject from all angles, "although I'm sure she will—then why wouldn't Ronnie just carry on looking after you?"

Caro didn't answer because she wasn't sure what the answer was. Would Ronnie be able to look after her? They called themselves a family . . . but strictly speaking . . . well, Caro knew there were laws about it. Marriage, blood relations, all that. Was Great-Aunt Mary the type to follow the law?

"Caro!" Horace was clicking his fingers, trying to get her attention. "Look what I fetched from home!"

He disappeared behind the car and came back moments later with an enormous stroller, boasting huge silver wheels and a capacious hood.

"Ta-da! It's been in the backyard for ages—that's why it's a bit rusty. Mum's saving it to pass on to Aunty Sandra when she has her baby."

"*Is* Aunty Sandra having a baby?" asked Caro. Aunty Sandra was a singer in the Sunset Club, and she could hit a G over a high C, which meant she could sing three whole octaves. Sometimes she and Caro's mum dueted together, giving impromptu performances at the pub. That was how Caro's and Horace's families had gotten to know each other.

"Not yet," said Horace. "Says she's got to find a man first. So, no one's going to need this stroller for a while." He trundled it back and forth, and then he demonstrated how you could have the hood up or down, like a stroller salesman. The wheels squeaked noisily as they turned.

"You saying I can borrow it?" asked Caro.

"That's why I fetched it!" said Horace. "Thought it might come in handy if you need to keep His Nibs a secret from your great-aunt."

"Horace, you are the brilliantest friend," she said. She could use the stroller as a sort of makeshift hutch. Plus, His Nibs hated traveling on the Tube. He would feel much safer tucked up inside it.

"*And* I made something for you. It's your lucky day."

Horace was holding out a brown paper package and waving it about enticingly. He was always making things. He had his own sewing box, and everyone gave him their old clothes so that he could take them apart and turn them

into something new. Last year he'd made Jacinta a turquoise cocktail dress for a performance at the Royal Albert Hall, and Aunty Sandra had made him promise that if she ever got married, he would design her wedding dress.

Inside the package was a swingy cape fashioned out of chestnut-brown velvet.

"It's a *traveling* cape," said Horace. "I know it's only eleven stops on the Tube, but . . . I made it out of the old sitting-room curtains. D'you like it?"

"I love it!" said Caro, admiring the neat stitching and the gold ribbon trim. She swung the cape over her shoulders and did up the little gilt clasp under her chin. It was exactly the same shade of brown as Jacinta's old suitcase. It fit perfectly and flipped satisfyingly when she moved.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Starving," he said. And so Caro dug in the bag of now rather squashed doughnuts and handed one over.

While they munched on their doughnuts, they talked. They loved to talk. They could talk for hours. The subject today was the circus Horace had been to see with his dad the day before. He was just getting to the bit about an acrobat known as Tomaz Topaz, who wore turquoise sequins and performed death-defying feats on the tightrope, and Caro was firing questions left, right, and center about his balancing

technique, when on the other side of the Rubbles, three figures emerged from a mound of scrap metal and timber.

"Uh-oh," said Caro.

"The Bully Boys," groaned Horace. There was no mistaking their long jackets and skinny ties and the way they ran their fingers through their greasy mops of hair. Acting like they owned the place, as usual.

"Quick," said Caro. "Behind the den."

Hidden from sight, Caro grabbed a couple of trash can lids, passed one to Horace, and kept one for herself. They made good shields.

They could hear the Bully Boys' rough shouts and laughter. They never passed up the chance to have a good fight.

"We don't have any ammunition," whispered Horace.

"We do," said Caro, waving the emergency bag of bruised apples at him.

"We saw ya," yelled the biggest one. His name was Frank, and his mum worked in the tobacconist's by the station.

"Chicken!" yelled the middle one, Stanley, all taut, wiry muscles with the manner of a bull terrier.

"Sissy!" parroted the third one, Carl, who was as scrawny as he was short, but more than made up for it in venom. Just because Horace liked drawing and making clothes, "sissy" was their favorite insult, which showed how stupid they were.

"No-brains!" yelled Horace, grabbing a handful of apples and leaping up to take aim. He was a good shot, and the first apple whizzed straight through the air, hitting Frank squarely on the forehead. The second shot pounded—*BAM!*—into Stanley's chest. And the third one made direct contact with Carl's Adam's apple.

Before the Bully Boys could collect themselves, three more apples came hurtling through the air, this time expertly dispatched by Caro.

And then there was a battle of apples and sticks and stones, the shields clanging as they took the brunt of the missiles. Steadily, the enemy advanced: the biggest one brandishing a large stick, the middle one preparing a sling out of a dirty handkerchief crammed with wizened chestnuts, the shortest one with his fists up and a terrifying scowl.

Caro and Horace fought back with all their might, Caro drawing on all the frustration of the last few days and directing it at Frank and Stanley and Carl. The tension that had been eating away at her bubbled up and spilled over, making her stronger and braver and unwilling to back down.

"Caro," muttered Horace when they had hurled the last of the apples. "What next?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Caro spied the remains of a fire they'd made a few days earlier. In a sudden rush, she

kicked out at the mound of charred wood and cinders, using her heel for added impact. A great billowing cloud of dusty black ash filled the air, and—yes!—it was as if a curtain had come down between them and the enemy, and then they were off, dragging the stroller behind them, rattling and bumping their way to a hole in the wall hidden by brambles.

By the time the dust had settled, the Bully Boys, still coughing and spluttering, finally found the hole themselves. But by then their prey were streets away, sauntering up Belvedere Road, busily making plans for the construction of Caro's gym in the Rubbles.

THREE

His Nibs detested the London Underground. It was loud and juddery, and as the train rattled its way from south to north, his muscles tensed, his ears drooped until they lay flat, and no amount of stroking and gentle scratching from Caro could make it better. It was a relief when they finally reached their stop.

But as Caro turned onto the cobbled street that led down to the heath, her legs turned leaden. She felt as if there were weights attached to her feet. Her resolve—buoyed up by her decision to travel back to Waterloo every single day to see Horace and build the gym—crumbled. The fluttering feeling rushed back into her chest with a vengeance. She was convinced that she couldn't possibly take one more step.

There was a bench at the top of Flask Walk, and she sat down with a bump, gripping the handle of the stroller with such force that her knuckles turned white.

Opposite the bench was a newsstand. The *Daily News*, the *Hampstead News*, the *Illustrated London News*, all jostling for space, their headlines jumping out at her: "Snakes Seemingly Unstoppable." "Latest Thefts in Highgate, Hampstead, and Kensington." "'Guard Your Antiques,' Advise Scotland Yard."

"My word, he's a fine fellow."

In her panic, Caro hadn't noticed the gentleman bundled up in several coats sitting at the other end of the bench. He had a long reddish-brown beard, and at his side was a large stick with a sack slung on the end of it. He was talking about His Nibs, who was sitting up in the stroller and peering all around with great interest.

"Yes, he is, isn't he?" she replied, struggling to keep her voice level. It was the kindness, maybe, in the man's voice that made her feel suddenly tearful. Only eleven stops on the Tube, Horace had said. But already, Waterloo and everyone she loved most felt like a world away.

"Everything all right?" asked the man.

"Sort of," said Caro, even though it wasn't.

"You've had a hard day." A statement, not a question.

The man leaned down to pull up a clump of chickweed that was bursting through the cracks in the pavement and handed it to His Nibs.

"There you go, old fellow," he said.

His Nibs attacked the chickweed gratefully.

"Tomorrow will probably be better," said the gentleman. "And if not, the day after that. Things keep moving. Nothing stays as it is, that's what I always tell myself."

"Yes," said Caro. The gentleman's words were oddly comforting. She supposed he was right. After all, tomorrow was one day sooner to Jacinta coming home and Ronnie coming back.

She looked at her wristwatch. Nearly five o'clock. Ronnie had said Gam was expecting her in the afternoon.

"We'd better go," she said, a little of her resolve returning. She stood up and turned the stroller in the direction of the heath, toward the rolling field with its unruly grasses and wildflowers.

"Courage!" said the man. He said it the French way—*cou-rarrrge*—and at the same time he gave a sort of salute. Caro saluted back, and as she did so, she felt her chest lift a little and her shoulders go back.

"It was nice to meet you," she said, and she genuinely meant it. "Thanks for the chickweed."

"A pleasure," said the man. "And by the way, the name's Victor. I do hope we shall meet again."

Gam's house was a large red-brick villa facing the heath, all dark windows and creeping ivy. In front was a gravel drive, its edges shrouded in a thicket of bushes. It was a solemn-looking house. On the gate was screwed an iron plaque: Heath View.

Glancing up at the blank windows, Caro pushed the stroller a little way along the drive. Ronnie had said not to bring the rabbit. What if Gam was so cross about it that she called Ronnie straightaway and told her what Caro had done? Ronnie would be so disappointed. Caro could almost hear her saying, "Caro! You failed at the first hurdle. Didn't I tell you not to cause any trouble?"

In a flash, Caro knew what she had to do and, executing a quick right turn, pushed the stroller into the depths of the deepest, darkest shrub.

"Stay there," she whispered as commandingly as she was able. His Nibs's little black eyes met hers trustingly. "I'll be back to get you when the coast is clear. All right?"

He was a loyal rabbit, and he twitched his one ginger ear and one white ear in agreement.

"What on earth are you doing, girl?"

Caro whirled around, trying hard not to look guilty.

The front door had opened, and a forbidding-looking figure in a long, droopy black dress stood on the threshold. She was leaning on a green silk umbrella as though it were a walking stick. Now she raised the umbrella and pointed it at Caro.

"Nothing," said Caro, darting away from the bush, adjusting her cape, and picking up her suitcase. Gam looked exactly like she had expected her to, her expression cold, her attire giving the impression that—just as Jacinta had said—she was stuck in the Victorian age. *"Cou-rarrge,"* Caro said to herself, echoing the gentleman Victor's words. Then, taking a deep breath, she approached the house and mounted the front steps.

"I take it you are Caroline Monday," said Great-Aunt Mary, giving her a piercing look.

"It's Caro," said Caro stoutly. "I won't answer to anything else." Ronnie had said she must be polite. But didn't she also always say to start how you mean to carry on?

Great-Aunt Mary's eyebrows shot up, almost disappearing under her black lace cap.

"Well, I never! Answering back already," she said in an aggrieved tone. "I can see you've not been taught your manners, and I cannot say I am surprised. Anyone raised in a pub must be expected to have picked up—how should I put it?—rough ways."

Caro glowered, but she followed her great-aunt inside the house and waited while she bellowed, "Marks, please come at once! You are never here when I need you!" She had a surprisingly booming voice for such a gaunt figure.

A clatter of steps heralded the arrival of a young woman. She had a curtain of black hair and bangs so long she could barely see out from under them. She could not have been much older than twenty.

"Sorry, Mary," she said. "I was just making the tea."

"Tea! At this hour? Marks, how many times do I have to tell you that tea is traditionally served between three and four? Take this young smidge up to the nursery, make the necessary introductions, and then show her to her room."

The elderly lady turned to Caro and regarded her with a steady eye. "Marks is my 'help,' not a maid of all work, so don't even *think* of ordering her about."

Caro nodded *OK*, even though she had never heard of a maid of all work, and even if she had, she would never have dreamed of ordering her about. It sounded like a job from a bygone age.

"Now, I shall see you in the dining room at seven o'clock sharp for supper. Marks, *do* try not to burn anything."

As Great-Aunt Mary disappeared into her lair, Marks grabbed Caro's suitcase and, balancing it on top of her head,

proceeded up the stairs. Caro noticed she had a streak of blue paint on her trousers and something that looked like a paintbrush sticking out of her hair.

"D'you live here too?" she asked, hurrying to keep up. Marks was taking the stairs two at a time.

"Your great-aunt lets me live in the room at the top of the house," said Marks. "See, I had a big blowout with my family last year 'cause they wanted me to go to secretarial college and *I* want to be an artist. Some people compare my work to Jackson Pollock, you know."

Caro didn't know. She didn't have the faintest idea who Jackson Pollock was.

"Anyway," carried on Marks, oblivious to Caro's ignorance, "I answered the ad at the newsstand. In exchange for doing some cooking and cleaning, I get to live here rent-free and I can paint whenever I want."

They had reached the third-floor landing, and Marks kicked a door open with her foot, nodding at Caro to step inside.

It was a large room looking out onto the back garden, and on the floor, in front of a gas fire, knelt a slight-looking boy surrounded by a vast array of knitting needles and wool. He glanced up, gave a huge sniff, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Cheer up, Albie, the world's still turning," said Marks. "This is Caro. Be nice, please, and show her to her room."

"Why can't you?" asked Albie.

That wasn't very welcoming, thought Caro. In fact, it was downright rude.

"*Please*, Albie. I've got a shepherd's pie to put in the oven, and I've got to use the last of the blue before it goes dry . . ."

The door closed, and they both listened as Marks thundered her way up the stairs to her room above. Caro pressed her lips together tight. Charming! It was as if Gam and Marks couldn't wait to get rid of her. They'd certainly been quick enough about dumping her with this sorry-looking little fellow. Well, she wasn't going to be the one to get the ball rolling. She thought she could probably manage without any conversation, thank you very much.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked Albie eventually, turning back to his knitting needles. Well, it seemed he didn't care very much about her either. It didn't matter. She wasn't here to make friends. And it looked like that would suit everyone just fine.

"I didn't *choose* to come—my other mother Ronnie made me," said Caro. "As soon as my mum comes home, I'll be gone."

"You've got *two* mums?" said Albie. *That* had gotten his attention. It usually did.

"Yeah, and what're you gonna do about it?" asked Caro combatively. She was used to people thinking two mums instead of one was a bit unusual, and she wasn't about to let a little boy get all high-and-mighty about it. Most people's eyes popped when she told them. "Get used to it," Jacinta would say.

"I was only asking," said Albie in a wounded tone, and sniffed again.

"What's that?" asked Caro, nodding at the tangle of knitting needles and wool.

"Just making stuff," he said. "I found a box of them in the attic. Size-thirteen wooden ones are best. They're strong enough to—"

"Aren't you meant to be showing me to my room?" Caro interrupted. His face, which had become a little more animated when he'd been explaining about the knitting needles, closed up again. Still, Caro thought, it was probably best not to encourage him, seeing as she wasn't planning on hanging around.

Albie carefully laid the knitting needles aside and got to his feet. "This way," he said meekly.

Caro followed Albie along the landing to a room at the front of the house. It was a small, pretty room, with pale green walls and a yellow quilt on the bed. She couldn't help

wondering if this might have been her mum's room when *she'd* lived here. Was this where Jacinta had practiced her whistling? Had she stared out at exactly the same view when she'd been planning her escape at sixteen?

Caro pushed the curtains aside. It was almost dusk, but she could just about make out the loom of the shrub that concealed His Nibs. Beyond that lay the gate and then, across the road, the boundless heath. She crossed her fingers and hoped that the rabbit would stay tucked up inside the stroller. Rabbits disliked change, that was a fact, so she was banking on him staying put and resisting exploration.

"What's out there?" asked Albie. Caro jumped. She hadn't realized he was hovering right behind her.

"Don't creep up on me like that!" said Caro crossly, stepping away from the window. How did she know he wasn't a snoop? A tattletale? Best not say anything about His Nibs for now.

Albie was still carrying a knitting needle, and now he started to tap out a rhythm on the wooden bed frame. The tune sounded much jollier than he looked. He had a narrow face and a pinched expression.

His eyes followed her as she unbuckled her suitcase and began dividing her belongings between the chest of drawers and the large wardrobe.

"Why are *you* living here?" she asked, seeing as he didn't seem to be going anywhere. She thought Ronnie might've mentioned the reason, but she couldn't remember what it was.

"My parents died," he said. "In a car accident. A bad one. There weren't any other relatives. And Mrs. Monday was Dad's godmother."

"Oh!" said Caro. She didn't know what else to say. Ronnie definitely hadn't mentioned *that*. It sounded awful.

"Anyway," said Albie after a short silence, "it's better than an orphanage. Or boarding school. Even if she does keep getting awful nannies to look after me."

"Nannies?" echoed Caro. She had a vision of Mary Poppins swooping in with a carpetbag and an umbrella to rival Gam's green silk one.

"That's what *she* calls them," said Albie. "But they're just ordinary ladies who don't even seem to *like* children very much. They answer the adverts she puts up in the newsstand, and then they come and boss me about. What's this?"

He was kneeling down, his head in Caro's suitcase, and now he turned, holding up a small package wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. "Presents?"

His pinched little face looked hopeful. You couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for the poor thing, Caro thought. Orphaned then sent to live with Gam, and then subjected to

a string of bossy nannies. Still, she hadn't asked him to help her unpack, nor should he be touching her things.

"Hand it over," she said brusquely. She took the package from Albie and turned it over in her hands. Had Ronnie put it in there as a going-away present? It was doubtful. She hadn't even remembered to tell Caro that the suitcase had been moved to the cellar.

"Where'd you find it?" she asked.

"In there." Albie was pointing to a zipped compartment in the lining of the suitcase that Caro hadn't noticed before.

Carefully, Caro untied the string and peeled away the newspaper wrapping. Inside was a painting. It was small, about the size of a postcard, and gilt-framed. It was the prettiest painting Caro had ever seen, of a bird, all speckly brown, with a small crest, pale breast, and white-tipped feathers. The bird was perched on a branch littered with dark pink blossoms, and there were patches of pale blue sky in the background.

"Just a boring old painting," said Albie, disappointed.

"It's not boring, it's beautiful!" said Caro. What did he know? He was just a little kid. Horace would be much more appreciative. He knew all about art. He was always going to the big museums with his sketch pad. She wished he was here now so she could show it to him.

Maybe it *was* a present. Jacinta must have brought it back from one of her travels and forgotten to give it to her.

Down in the hall, a clock chimed seven.

"Suppertime," said Albie anxiously. "Come on, we mustn't be late. She doesn't like it."

Caro thought of the stern figure with the green silk umbrella waiting for them downstairs. What would happen if they were late? Would they be sent to bed without any supper? She wondered if Albie had always been so timid, or if it was living with Gam that had made him this way.

Caro turned to him. "Are you afraid of her?"

"No!" said Albie crossly, twirling the knitting needle like a drum major's baton.

"OK, OK," said Caro, vowing to herself that however horrid Gam turned out to be, she would never be cowed by her like timid little Albie was.

"Come on!" said Albie. He was already out the door.

"All right, coming," said Caro, and, shoving the painting back into the suitcase, she steeled herself and followed Albie downstairs to the dining room.

FOUR

Downstairs, Great-Aunt Mary and her umbrella were waiting for them. There was no sign of Marks.

The dining room stretched the entire length of the house. At one end, glass-paned double doors opened straight onto a back lawn. At the other end, a window looked out onto the gravel drive and the dark bushes in which His Nibs was concealed.

"Gracious," Gam pronounced as they clattered into the room, "I never heard such a racket! It's like the storming of the Bastille down here."

She was still dressed in her droopy black, and her mouth was set in a thin, disapproving line.

"So, you've met this flibbertigibbet," she said, nodding at Albie. "I hope he has been polite and showed you to your

room. You should have everything you need. Tell me if you've not."

"Everything's fine, thank you," said Caro stiffly. She wanted to go home, that's what she really wanted; she wanted Jacinta and Ronnie and life back to normal, but there was no point in saying so.

Marks had left a steaming shepherd's pie on the table and a note informing them to look in the refrigerator for dessert. Albie opened the fridge door immediately. "Ugh!" he said. "Jell-O with pineapple chunks inside!"

There was a bit of life in him, then, thought Caro.

"I heard that," yelled a distant voice.

After a long remonstration, during which the umbrella was pointed and Great-Aunt Mary delivered a tiresome lecture on being thankful for what you are given, they all sat down, Great-Aunt Mary at the head of the table, her umbrella hooked on the back of her chair, Caro and Albie on either side.

"Albert, will you *please* blow your nose?" said Great-Aunt Mary. "Caroline, *why* is your mouth hanging open? It looks *most* unbecoming."

"I said to call me Caro!" said Caro. Was she being impolite? She was a bit, but getting names right was important, everybody knew that.

"Caroline," continued Gam, ignoring the interruption, "we do *not* wolf our food down in this house. I daresay you are hungry and perhaps you've had a long day, but at this present moment, you really do rather resemble a Stone Age cave dweller."

Caro laughed. It was partly a nervous laugh and partly a real one, because comparing her to a Stone Age cave dweller was actually quite funny. She had certainly never been compared to one before.

Gam laid her knife and fork down and stared at her hard.

"Tell me, is your mother still gallivanting all over the world?"

"If you mean, is she in great demand for her whistling skills, then yes!" said Caro truthfully.

"She whistles?" said Albie, his head shooting up.

"Albie," rapped out Great-Aunt Mary brusquely. "Do not speak with your mouth full."

"She's whistled in *all* the best places," said Caro, who was proud of her mother and never tired of telling people how amazing she was. "Prussia, Borneo, all the way up the Amazon."

Jacinta had been invited *back* to the Amazon, to perform at the Manaus Opera House. That's where she should have been coming home from yesterday, but instead she'd . . .

Caro pushed the thought away.

"Just wait till you hear her!" she boasted. "Have you ever heard Mozart's 'Queen of the Night'?"

Albie shook his head.

"Or Bach's 'Badinerie'?"

"No."

"Well, anyway, she can whistle them note perfect."

"Humph!" grunted Gam.

"Women," said Caro, unstoppable now, "have been whistling professionally since before the First World War. It's an undervalued art form." That's what her mum said, anyway. "They're called *siffleuses*. People say when you see my mum whistling, you can't help but smile."

Albie stared at Caro in a sort of wonderment.

"I'd like to hear that," he said quietly.

"Yes, yes," said Gam irritably, clearly unimpressed. "That's quite enough about whistling for today, thank you very much. What of your father?"

"I don't have one," said Caro. She was surprised Gam didn't know even this most basic piece of information. She must not have talked to Mum in eons.

"Everybody," said Gam, "has a father."

Carefully, Caro carved a line down the middle of her

shepherd's pie. The knife made a scraping noise on the plate, which was very fine bone china.

"Mum was young," said Caro. "They were . . ." She searched for the right word. "Incompatible." ("Good riddance" was what Jacinta had actually said.) "He went away." ("Thank goodness.") "And anyway, two mums suits me fine."

Gam snorted and a piece of shepherd's pie shot out her nose. For the first time, Albie caught Caro's eye, and she detected a hint of a smile.

"I've never heard of anything so preposterous. Two mothers? That . . . *barkeep*? The one who rang to say you had to come here? As I expected, you are a wild little thing just like your mother."

"That's rude, that is!" said Caro. Ronnie had said to be polite, to not cause trouble. But surely if she could hear what Gam was saying, she'd change her mind?

Caro opened her mouth to deliver a few more home truths, but Gam was still talking, and it was as if Caro hadn't even spoken and Gam was a train gathering steam.

"Your hair, your manners, the way you eat. It's all quite deplorable. If you are going to live in this house, you will have to change your ways. I failed your mother, but I *will* tame you."

"You can't *tame* anyone," said Caro, unable to contain herself any longer, flinging down her fork so forcefully, it skidded across the table and crashed into Albie's plate. "I don't *want* to be here. I've come under . . . duress. As soon as I can, I'll leave."

"How dare you!" said Gam. She picked up her napkin and dabbed at her mouth indignantly. "You can eat the rest of your supper in your bedroom. I do not want to see or hear from you until breakfast."

"Don't worry, I'm going," said Caro, pushing her chair back with such a clatter that Gam put her hands over her ears. Then, grabbing her plate of half-finished shepherd's pie, she stalked out angrily, all thoughts of being polite quite thoroughly extinguished.

Upstairs, Caro flung herself onto her bed and sobbed into her pillow at the unfairness of it all. How was she going to be able to bear it? How could she spend any more time in the company of that horrid woman downstairs? A woman who was so rude and dismissive of her two mothers, whom she loved most in the world? She felt sick. Sick for home and Ronnie and Waterloo. She couldn't *wait* until tomorrow, when she would get out of this heartless place and travel back on the train to see Horace. The thought made