

Note to the reader

Dear Reader,

Long ago, when my niece, Heather Hague, was about twelve, she was taken by her school to an exhibition regarding the slave trade in Liverpool during the eighteenth century. After visiting the exhibition, their teacher took them to the Goree Piazza to see the bucket fountain, which intrigued Heather so much that she told me about both visits in great detail.

For some reason I had not, until then, heard of the Liverpool connection with the 'black birders', as slave traders were called, but when I myself visited the Goree Piazza, I was tremendously impressed by the sculpture which was there then; a most dramatic and intriguing memorial to those men and women, stolen from their own lands, who were brought to this country, auctioned like animals, and worked out the rest of their lives in miserable slavery.

And when I began to think about the plot of *The Forget-Me-Not Summer*, I remembered what Heather had told me and found it the perfect solution for a problem which had haunted me. The mystery of Arabella is never quite solved, but that long ago connection between what goes on in any port and a missing woman began to take shape in my mind. In the thirties, white slave traders were

feared in all the English ports and *The Forget-Me-Not Summer* takes place in the thirties and forties, so the story seemed credible and, whilst my heroine, Miranda, searched for her mother, I hoped devoutly that I should find out what had happened to her before the story ended, for, as is so often the case, my characters tell me what is going to happen rather than vice versa.

You cannot see the exhibition of slavery now, and neither can you see the magnificent sculpture of slaves in the Goree Piazza, bearing buckets which tilt as they fill so that the water runs constantly down, progressing from bucket to bucket, in a fascinating and indeed beautiful way, because some councillor or official decided that the splash of water into buckets reminded him of toilets flushing (how odd!!), so he had the sculpture removed, which is sad.

But I still remember the bucket sculpture and my niece's contribution to this particular story with gratitude. Have I got you hooked??

All best wishes,

Katie Flynn

Chapter One

1937

Miranda Lovage was dragged up from fathoms deep in sleep by some unexpected sound. Groggily she sat up on her elbow and peered about the room, suddenly aware that her heart was fluttering. An only child, she shared her room with no one, had it all to herself, but night noises had never previously worried her. Indeed, she seldom heard them, for she usually went to bed late, at the same time as her mother, and slept as soon as her head touched the pillow, continuing to do so until roused by her mother's call up the stairs, or even a hand on her shoulder.

But then Miranda remembered the row which had raged between herself and Arabella – she always called her mother Arabella – earlier that evening. Now that she thought about it, she realised that it had started because she had been telling Arabella that her teachers thought she stood a good chance of getting her School Certificate, perhaps even going to university. She had come home from the Rankin Academy both excited and delighted, and had been horrified when Arabella had said, flatly, that university was out of the question. 'I've done my best to get you a decent education, living in a good neighbourhood and seeing that you were always nicely turned out, with everything the other girls have, even though I've been on my own ever since your father died,'

she had said. 'Well, Miranda, I've been meaning to tell you that I've reached the end of my tether. I simply can't afford to go on paying your school fees indefinitely, so I'm afraid that next term you'll have to start at an ordinary council school.' She had wagged a reproving finger when Miranda began to protest. 'Don't try to bully me, Miranda. Just remember you are still a child and have to do as I tell you. Next year you will be at the same school as your cousin Beth . . .'

She would have gone on to explain more fully but Miranda had not been listening. She had been too busy trying to shout her mother down, saying that she had no intention of changing schools, that Arabella must jolly well find the money for the fees from somewhere; she had even suggested that her mother might do 'a real job' instead of hanging round the theatre taking every tuppenny-ha'penny part she was offered.

Arabella had waited until Miranda had run out of breath and had then replied, with a cold finality which had frightened her daughter. 'Miranda, in case you have not noticed, we are in the middle of a depression. I admit my wages from the Madison Players are small, but I'm sure that one day I'll get the sort of parts I deserve and then money will not be so tight. As it is, the only means I have of continuing our present way of life is by what I think of as clipping both our wings. You will go to a council school until you are old enough to work on your own account, and we'll move into a house in one of the courts and take a lodger – two, if necessary – because the rent of this house is crippling me, honest to God, queen. The only alternative is to marry Mr Gervase, that fellow who haunts the stage door . . .'

‘A stage-door Johnny?’ Miranda had been both scornful and incredulous. ‘But you laugh at them, say they’ve never got two pennies to rub together . . . isn’t Mr Gervase that little weaselly one with a bush of grey hair? You scoffed at him, you know you did! You said he ought to be a monk because he had a built-in tonsure. You can’t mean to marry him!’

‘He’s rich,’ Arabella had said simply. ‘During the week he lives in a service flat. Oh, Miranda, it’s the height of luxury. He gets his breakfasts and the most wonderful dinners as part of his rent, and the flat is kept clean as well. And then he’s got a mansion in the Lake District – I’ve always loved the Lakes – and he says that if I marry him, we’ll live there whenever I haven’t got an important part at the theatre.’

‘But you told me ages ago that if you got an important part at the theatre we’d be in clover . . .’ Miranda had begun, only to be immediately interrupted.

‘Don’t rub it in. It was sheer prejudice which got Maria the part of Lady Macbeth instead of me,’ Arabella had said hotly. ‘So now you jolly well choose, Miranda Lovage: a pauper’s existence on our own or a life of pampered luxury with Gervase. And since it would be me who had to put up with him day *and* night, I don’t see why you should even be asked which you would prefer.’ She had looked sideways at her daughter through her thick, curling, blonde lashes. ‘I’ve told him that *if* I agree to marry him it will be what you might call a marriage of convenience. I shall have my own room, and though we shall share a name I will be like a – a sister to him. Or a housekeeper. Do you understand, Miranda? He is offering me a way out of my difficulties and

expecting nothing in return, save for the duties a house-keeper would perform. Of course he hopes I will become truly fond of him as time goes by, but . . .'

But Miranda had heard enough. 'Just because you aren't a good enough actress to earn a decent salary, that doesn't mean I have to suffer,' she had shouted, but even as she did so she realised her own helplessness. Until she was old enough to earn her own living, she really had no choice. Her father had died some years previously, and she knew of no living relative save for her Aunt Vi, her mother's half-sister, and Aunt Vi's daughter Beth, both of whom disliked Arabella and her offspring and would, Miranda knew, be more likely to gloat over the Lovages' misfortune than to offer help.

So when Arabella had said: 'Oh, darling, if I'd got Lady Macbeth . . . or if you'd agreed to my joining that repertory company last year, when I was offered a place – only you didn't want to move up to Scarborough – then we would have managed somehow, but as it is . . .'

She had held out her arms as she spoke and Miranda had hesitated, then heaved a sigh and gone stiffly into her mother's embrace, saying: 'But do try to think of a way out, Arabella. Surely there must be something you could do so I wouldn't have to change schools and houses and everything. I'll think as well, and perhaps between us . . .'

'My dearest little Miranda, do you not realise that I've been racking my brains for a solution ever since the Madison Players gave Lady Macbeth to Maria? Things have got to change. The rent for this house has gone up again; your school fees are downright ridiculous – even the uniform . . . but it's no good talking. It's either marry

Mr Gervase or change our whole way of life, and I do think Mr G's offer is extremely generous. However, we'll both sleep on it and tomorrow we'll talk about it again.'

So now Miranda, finding herself abruptly awake, remembered the quarrel and thought it was a miracle that she had ever managed to get to sleep at all. Indeed, it had taken her quite a while to drop off, but having done so she had slept so deeply that for a moment she wondered what on earth could have woken her, apart from a trumpet call, or a brigade of guards marching through the bedroom and exhorting her to get up at once. But judging by the dim light coming from between the curtains, it was still the middle of the night. So what had woken her? Miranda lay down again, but sleep would not come. Suppose her mother had been so upset by the quarrel that she had failed to lock the door, and burglars had entered the house? The Lovages lived in Sycamore Avenue, near Prince's Park, for Arabella Lovage believed appearances were important, and if a thief did ransack their home it would be a major expense. Worse, even, than the increase in the rent and school fees, to say nothing of the smart uniform.

Miranda took a deep breath, slid out of bed and crossed to the window. They were having a hot summer so the casement was up and the night air, warm and scented, came pleasantly into the room. She peered up and down the street, examining their neat little garden and those of the neighbours on either side, but saw no sign of any living soul except for a cat which appeared on the pavement opposite and made its way down the hill, no doubt on some nefarious business of its own.

Miranda squatted on the comfortable bench beneath

the open window trying to guess what had disturbed her. Suddenly it came to her. It must have been the front door closing; she guessed that Arabella, to calm her nerves and forget their quarrel, had decided to take a walk before coming up to bed. Miranda knew she sometimes did this and was reassured by the thought. But perhaps she really ought to go downstairs and make sure that Arabella was all right, and had locked the door against night-time intruders.

But the annoyance she had felt over her mother's arbitrary decision to take her away from her school or present her with Gervase as a stepfather still rankled. Arabella had no right to change their whole way of life without consulting her. Well, all right, she had consulted her, but it wasn't much of a consultation! Live in penury or accept that ugly old man as a stepfather. Drowsily, she decided that there was no need to investigate. If her mother needed a period for quiet reflection and had chosen to go walking in the middle of the night, that was her affair. Miranda got off the bench and returned to her bed, suddenly conscious of chilled feet and the flimsiness of her white cotton nightie. She cuddled down, pulling the sheet up round her ears, and this time, as her body warmed into a delicious glow, she slept.

Afterwards, she could never decide at what moment her life had truly changed. Had it been when she heard the sound which had woken her from her deep and peaceful sleep? Or had it been next morning, when nobody woke her, and she was left to wash in the tiny bathroom on her own and to struggle into her clothes whilst her heart beat a wild tattoo, for when she had put her head round

her mother's door there was no one there and Arabella did not answer Miranda's shout. Galloping down the stairs, she had burst into the kitchen expecting to see her mother turn from the stove with a smile and apologise for not waking her even as she spooned creamy porridge into two small earthenware bowls, before exhorting her daughter to eat her breakfast whilst it was hot.

But the kitchen was empty, nobody stood by the table, the curtains were still drawn across the windows and when Miranda ran to the back door, to check that her mother was not in the garden, it was unlocked.

Miranda stood in the cold kitchen and big tears welled up in her eyes. Arabella must have gone for a walk, and something must have happened to her! Suppose she had fallen, or been attacked by some wicked person intent upon stealing her fine gold chain with the locket, or her thin little wedding ring, who had then left her unconscious in the gutter? Suddenly, their quarrel seemed of no significance; what mattered now was the whereabouts of her beautiful, talented mother. That she was beautiful had never been in question and now Miranda told herself, loyally, that only jealousy and spite had prevented Arabella's talent from carrying her to the very top of her profession.

Miranda burst out of the house and looked wildly up and down the street. What should she do? She must go to the neighbours, get help, contact the police. She knew she should do one or all of these things, but she was, after all, only thirteen, and had never had to take a decision without consulting an adult in her life. So she returned to the kitchen and simply sat down at the table, put her head on her folded arms and began to weep in earnest.

When someone knocked on the back door she flew across to it, wrenching it open and almost falling into the arms of the girl standing there. 'Miranda! What on earth's the matter? You don't look as though you're ready for school; aren't you well?'

Miranda stared at her friend, who often called for her so that they might walk to school together. 'Oh, Louise, it's you. I thought it was my mother . . . oh, Lou, I heard something in the night which woke me up, and when I came down for breakfast this morning, Arabella had gone.'

'I 'spect she ran out of milk or bread or something and has gone down to the shops to buy some more,' Louise said cheerfully. 'Why are you in such a taking? But for God's sake make your own breakfast or we'll be late for school.'

'But there's no note; if my mother means to go anywhere she always leaves me a note,' Miranda said, but she was insensibly cheered by the other girl's easy acceptance of the situation. Perhaps Louise was right and her mother had simply slipped out to buy milk; there was a delivery every morning but sometimes it came too late for breakfast. Hastily, Miranda went to the pantry, and her hopeful heart dropped into her neat button shoes once more; there was a good three quarters of a loaf and a whole pint of milk left, besides all the usual things: porridge oats, butter, jam and a couple of the little milk rolls she always took to school for elevenses.

Turning, she saw that her practical friend had filled the kettle, put it on the stove and lit the gas, and was looking at her expectantly. Then Louise seized the loaf from its place on the shelf and cut two rather chunky

slices, buttered them briskly, and pushed them and the jam pot across to her friend. 'Come along, Miranda,' she said impatiently, 'we've not got all day. Your mam will be back in time to get your tea. Did she take the key with her? We don't want to lock her out.' Miranda crossed the room and checked the hiding place: no key. She returned to the kitchen, went across to where her school blazer hung on its peg, and checked again. Her key was in the pocket. She said as much to Louise who nodded with satisfaction. 'There you are then!' she said triumphantly. 'Your mam realised she needed something from the shops, unlocked the back door, tucked the key in her jacket pocket, and went off. That means that when we leave – do eat up, Miranda, or we'll be late for class – we can lock the back door and know we're not shutting her out.'

Miranda stared doubtfully at her friend's bright, self-confident face. Louise was almost a year older than she and far more worldly wise. She must be right; her own abrupt awakening in the night must have had an innocent cause. Miranda finished her breakfast and tidied round quickly so that her mother would not have to do so on her return, for during the quarrel the previous evening Arabella had claimed, with justice, that her daughter never helped in the house, made her own bed or offered to do the messages. When she sees the nice tidy kitchen she'll know she misjudged me, Miranda told herself defiantly. And I'll make our tea just as soon as I get home from school; that'll show her!

'Come on, slowcoach,' Louise said, helping herself to a round of bread and butter and shoving it into her mouth rather less than delicately. 'Here's your blazer.'

‘Thanks,’ Miranda said, shrugging it on and locking the back door carefully behind them. ‘What’s our first subject, Lou? Oh, *not* French! I didn’t learn that poem last night – Mum and I had a bit of a disagreement – but if you’ll hear me when we’re on the tram I’ll get it lodged in my brain somehow, before Mamselle asks awkward questions.’

When Miranda returned home from school later that day, however, it was to find a deputation from the theatre awaiting her outside the house in Sycamore Avenue. The manager, Tom Fox, Miss Briggs the wardrobe mistress, Lynette Rich, who was a member of the chorus, and Alex Gordon, the theatre’s leading man, had all come along. They wanted to know if Arabella was ill because there had been a *matinée* performance that day and she had neither arrived at the theatre nor sent a message to say she was unwell. Miranda nearly fainted, but fortunately Louise was with her and between the two of them they explained the little they knew.

Arabella’s colleagues gazed at one another before saying that the police must be informed and ordering Miranda to unlock the door so that they could search the house to see if there were any clues as to why on earth their bit-part player and assistant stage manager should suddenly disappear. Only the wardrobe mistress seemed to realise that this was a body blow for Arabella’s daughter. ‘You can’t stay here tonight, chuck,’ she said kindly. ‘Not all by yourself, at any rate. Got any aunties, have you? You could move in with ‘em for a few days, just till your mam turns up again, which she’s bound to do.’

'I dunno,' Miranda said doubtfully. 'I've got an aunt and a cousin that live up Old Swan, but I don't know them very well. Couldn't I – couldn't I stay here, if Lou's mum will let her stay with me? My mother can't have gone far. Oh, I wonder . . . does anyone know where Mr Gervase lives? She – she was talking about marrying him, though I can't believe she'd really do it. But she might have gone to his house to talk things over, I suppose.'

'She could have gone anywhere, lighting out without a word to a soul,' Alex Gordon said irritably, and Miranda saw the wardrobe mistress give him an angry look and flap a hand to shut him up. Alex, however, was clearly more annoyed than worried. 'Typical of a bloody woman to bugger off without a word to anyone. Arabella's got a contract, the same as the rest of us, but if she's prepared to let us down in mid-run . . .' He turned angrily to Miranda. 'Do you mean that stage-door Johnny? He's got a service flat in the city centre. I went there once, so I'll nip round and hear what he has to say. If she really means to marry him, though . . . to let us down without a word . . .'

Now it was the manager's turn to scowl at Alex. 'She's never let us down before, and I see no reason why you should think the worst,' he said angrily. 'Just you mind your tongue, Alex Gordon, or it'll be you searching for a company prepared to take you on, because you can say goodbye to the Madison Players.'

The man muttered something like 'That'll be your loss' but said no more, and Lynette Rich cut in before more acid comments could be exchanged. 'I'll go to the flat, find out what Mr Gervase knows,' she said. 'If Arabella's not there and he can't help us, I suppose I'd better take

Miranda up to her aunt's house, since she can't possibly stay here alone, though I'm sure Arabella will be home before dark. I'll pack a bag with the kid's night things and that and leave a note for Arabella, explaining what we've done.' She turned to Miranda and gave her a reassuring smile. 'Your mam will be home tomorrow, sure as check,' she said. 'I'm rare fond of Arabella, 'cos I've known her these past six years, and to my knowledge she's never done a mean thing or let anyone down before.' She glared at Alex, then held out a hand to Miranda. 'Come and help me pack a bag with a few bits and pieces to last you till your mam gets home.' She turned to the rest of the players. 'You'll do the necessary? I'm sure Arabella will be back tomorrow, but just in case, the scuffers ought to be told, and the neighbours . . .'

She glanced uneasily at Miranda. 'Now don't you worry, chuck, it's just a precaution, like.'

So saying, she led the way into the house and let Miranda take her up to her bedroom where the two of them packed a bag with rather more clothing than Miranda thought necessary, but, as her new friend pointed out, you could never tell what you might need until you needed it. As they crossed the room, Miranda took one last look around her and suddenly realised that she was saying farewell to her own little room, for a while at least. She would have to share not only her cousin's bedroom, but maybe her bed as well, and she knew that her aunt despised her half-sister's feckless ways. But then Beth and Aunt Vi were not beautiful or talented, Miranda reassured herself; they were just ordinary, as she was. Nevertheless she lingered in the bedroom doorway and, on impulse, ran back into the room and

snatched the beautiful old-fashioned looking-glass, with its gilt cherubs and swags of gilded fruit, from its hook on the wall. She loved that little mirror and told herself that it would be safer with her than in an empty house. She tucked it into the top of the bag she and Lynette had packed and set off, leaving the only home she had ever known behind her.

Though she did not know it, she would never again sleep in that cosy little bed, or bask in the solitude of her lovely room. In fact, her life would never be the same again.

For the first few weeks of her sojourn in Jamaica Close, Miranda was so unhappy and so bewildered that nothing seemed real. Arabella neither returned nor got in touch, and Mr Gervase had been as puzzled – and upset – as Miranda herself. She felt as though she were enclosed in a glass case, through which she could see people and movement, but could make no sense of what was said. She had terrifying dreams in which she saw Arabella's body floating in the dock, or cast up by the roadside after a fatal accident. She began to see her mother – or someone very like her – in the street and would run in pursuit, sometimes even following a woman on to a tram or a train, only to realise, with sickening disappointment, that this was yet another stranger whose resemblance to Arabella was so slight that she wondered how she could possibly have made such a mistake.

Things simply grew worse when Mr Gervase, saying ruefully that he had always known Arabella was too good for him, left the city, whilst the police stopped being comforting and simply said that she must remain with

her aunt in the little house in Jamaica Close until such time as her mother chose to return. To her horror, the contents of the house in Sycamore Avenue had to be sold, as Arabella had owed a month's rent, and now Miranda was dependent on Aunt Vi if she needed so much as a tram fare.

But she continued her search. Desperate, she asked everyone in the Avenue if they had seen Arabella that fateful night, and very soon it was commonly accepted, as Mr Gervase had clearly believed, that she had gone off with some man. This cruel slander was backed up when word got around that a handsome young acrobat, working at a larger and more prestigious theatre in the city, had disappeared on the same day as Arabella. Perhaps it was this that persuaded the police, and the Madison Players, to say that they had done all they could, although they advised Miranda to keep on asking around. However, it was soon clear to her that Arabella's disappearance was something of a nine-day wonder, and the nine days were up.

Because she was living in a nightmare, the attitudes of her aunt and cousin did not bother her at first, but gradually it was borne in upon her that her mother's half-sister had cared nothing for the younger woman. She began to realise that Aunt Vi and Beth actually resented her, hard though she tried to be useful, and her unhappiness was so intense that she would have run away, save that she had nowhere to run. She would simply have to endure until she was old enough to leave Jamaica Close. Then she would concentrate on searching for her mother, because she was sure she had a better chance of finding Arabella once she was able to leave

her aunt's malignant influence. She knew Aunt Vi did not believe her half-sister would ever return.

Perhaps because Aunt Vi was much older than Arabella, the two women had not really known one another very well. Arabella had taken Miranda to see her aunt and her cousin Beth in Jamaica Close perhaps twice a year, once at Christmas and once in summer, but had never attempted any sort of friendship. She had explained to Miranda that their mother had been a gentle soul, but that her first husband had been totally different from her second. Vi's father had been a warehouseman and a bully, and Arabella had confided in her daughter that when he was killed in an industrial accident her gran must have heaved a sigh of relief. 'She couldn't stand up to him; she wasn't that sort of person,' she had said. 'But despite the life he had led her, your gran – my mum – was still a very pretty woman. Then John Saunders fell in love with her and they got wed; I was their only child and your aunt thought I was spoiled rotten.' She had sighed. 'Compared to the way Vi had been brought up, I guess I was. The thing is, though, it didn't make for a happy relationship between her and myself, so I wasn't sorry when she got married and moved away.'

The young Miranda had nodded her comprehension. She had seen the spiteful glances cast at her mother when they met her aunt, had heard the muttered comments, indicating that Vi thought Arabella was what she called toffee-nosed, too big for her boots, and considered herself above ordinary folk.

And so she might, because she *was* better than other folks, the young Miranda had thought rebelliously.

Arabella was not just pretty, she was very beautiful. She had a great mass of curly white-gold hair, skin like cream and the most enormous pair of blue eyes, the very colour of the forget-me-not flowers she loved. And those eyes were framed by curling blonde lashes whilst her eyebrows, two slender arcs, were blonde as well.

Aunt Vi, on the other hand, was short and squat, with sandy hair and a round, harsh face, for she took after her father, whereas Arabella's looks seemed to have come from their mother. Miranda would have loved to look like that too, but in fact she did not. To be sure, Arabella often congratulated her on her colouring; her hair was what her mother called Plantagenet gold, but kids in the street called carrot, or ginger. 'When you're older, it will darken to a beautiful deep auburn,' Arabella had been fond of saying. 'You're going to be a real little beauty one of these days; you'll knock me into a cocked hat, so you will.'

But Miranda had no desire to knock anyone into anything. She had no urge to be an actress, though she admired her mother tremendously, and was proud of her. However, it was one thing to be proud of someone, and quite another to wish to emulate them. Miranda's own ambitions were far less exotic. She wanted to be a writer of books and had already hidden away in her bedroom cupboard a number of wonderfully imaginative fairy stories. To be sure, these stories were often connected with the theatre – perhaps one day she would turn them into plays – but wherever her writing ended up, it was her secret hope for the future.

Now, though, nothing was important but to find Arabella and escape from the horrors of life in Jamaica

Close, for after the first few days, during which Aunt Vi and Beth had pretended anxiety for her mother and affection for herself, they began to show their true colours. They had disliked Arabella and now they disliked her daughter, besides resenting her presence in the dirty, neglected little house. She was forced to sleep in a creaking and smelly brass bedstead with her cousin Beth, who was a year older than she, though they were now in the same class at the council school, for Beth was slow-witted and Miranda was bright. The pair of them did not have the bed to themselves, however; fat Aunt Vi took up more than her fair share of the thin horsehair mattress – she kept promising to buy another bed, since she had sold Miranda’s beloved mirror, but so far had failed to do so – and grumbled every night that her bleedin’ sister might have taken her horrible brat with her when she ran off. Miranda tried to ignore such jibes, but when she had nightmares she soon learned to slip out of bed and go down to the kitchen, for if her cries woke her aunt she would speedily find herself being soundly slapped, whilst her aunt shouted that she was a selfish little bitch to disturb folk who had been good enough to take her in.

Another threat was that she would be sent to an orphanage, but Miranda thought that as long as she was useful she need not fear such a fate. Beth was lazy and spoilt, encouraged by her mother never to do her share around the house, and very soon Miranda got all the nastiest jobs. So when her aunt pretended her young half-sister had dumped her child and gone off just to annoy them, Miranda said nothing, deciding that the remark was too stupid to even merit a reply.

The members of the cast at the theatre had done their best to persuade the police, and anyone else who was interested, that Arabella Lovage was not the sort of woman to simply walk out on her colleagues and friends and particularly not on her daughter. But unfortunately the police had felt it incumbent upon them to visit Aunt Vi and had gained a very different picture of the missing woman there.

'She'll ha' gone orf with that young feller she's been seein', the acrobat, you mark my words,' her aunt had assured everyone. 'Oh aye, a right lightskirt, our Arabella.'

For a few moments anger had driven Miranda out of her glass case, and she had shouted at her aunt that this was a wicked falsehood. The Players had agreed that they were sure their fellow actor had had nothing to do with any young man, save Gervase, who could scarcely be described as young. It was he who had discovered that the rival company's acrobat had also gone missing, leaving his lodgings and the variety show on the very day that Arabella had disappeared.

Furious, Miranda had assured anyone who would listen that her mother would never have left her to go off with a man, but though she knew, with utter certainty, that her mother would never have willingly deserted her, she stopped repeating her conviction. She felt life was stacked against her, that the harder she tried, the less convincing she became. So she retreated into her glass case and simply waited.

After the first month of bewildered misery, Miranda had stopped expecting the door to open and her mother to reappear. She had forced herself to face up to the fact that something had happened to keep Arabella from her,

and when spiteful remarks were made by Aunt Vi, indicating that Arabella had deliberately landed her with her unwanted daughter, she simply folded her lips tightly and said nothing. What, after all, was the point? She and the cast at the theatre had tried hard enough, heaven knew, to make the authorities take Arabella Lovage's case seriously, but with little success. The police had gone over the house with a fine-tooth comb, searching for any clue as to Arabella's disappearance or evidence of foul play; there had been none. They had asked Miranda if any clothing was missing, but she could not say. Arabella's wardrobe bulged with garments; for all her daughter knew, she might have taken away a dozen outfits without Miranda's being any the wiser. In fact, she could not even remember what her mother had been wearing that last evening.

Only one small indication, several weeks after Arabella's disappearance, caused people to raise their brows and become a little less certain that she had gone of her own free will. One dark night, Miranda was woken from a deep slumber by someone shaking her shoulder and speaking to her in a rough, kindly voice.

'What's up, me love? Good thing it's a fine night, but if you asks me them clouds up there mean business.' The hand on her shoulder gave a little squeeze. 'Lost your way to the privy, queen? My goodness, I know it's not as cold as last night, but you've got bare feet and the road's awful rough, and there was you walkin' down the middle of the carriageway as though you'd never heard of cars, trams or buses . . .'

Miranda, completely bewildered, opened sleep-drugged eyes and stared about her. In the bright

moonlight everything looked very different; the shadows black as pitch, the moonlight dazzlingly white. She looked down at her feet and saw that they were indeed bare, as well as very dusty and dirty. Then her eyes travelled up her white cotton nightie and across to the man bending over her. He was a policeman, quite young, and his expression was puzzled. 'Where's you come from, chuck? I don't know as I reckonise you. How did you get here?'

Miranda's brows knitted; how had she come here? Where was here, anyhow? She shook her head. 'I dunno,' she mumbled. 'Where am I? It doesn't look much like Jamaica Close to me.'

The policeman hissed in his breath. 'Jamaica Close?' he said incredulously. 'Is that where you come from, queen?' He stood back and Miranda looked up into his face properly for the first time. It was a young face, and pleasant; a trustworthy face, she decided. But he was giving her shoulder another gentle shake and repeating his question: 'Have you come from Jamaica Close?'

Miranda looked wildly about her, but could recognise nothing. Reluctantly, she nodded. 'I suppose I must have walked from there to wherever we are now,' she said slowly, 'only I must have done it in my sleep because I don't remember anything. I guess I was searching for my mother; she's disappeared. Only I know she's still alive somewhere and needing me.'

The policeman stared, then nodded slowly. 'Oh aye, you'll be Arabella Lovage's daughter. Well, you won't find her here, my love, so I guess I'd best take you back home again. You live up the Avenue, don't you?'

Miranda heaved a sigh, realising suddenly that she

was terribly tired and wanted nothing more than her bed. Even a miserable little four inches of mattress, which was all she managed to get at Aunt Vi's house, would be preferable to standing in the cold moonlight whilst she tried to explain to a total stranger why she no longer lived up the Avenue.

But explain she must, of course, and managed to do so in a few quick words. The scuffer pulled a doubtful face. 'That's well off my beat, chuck, so perhaps the best thing will be for the pair of us to walk back to the station. The sarge is a good bloke; he'll get you a cup of tea and see that someone – probably me – takes you home. I reckon there'll be a fine ol' to-do in Jamaica Close when they find you're missing.'

They carried out the policeman's suggestion, and as he had assumed he was told to accompany Miranda back to her aunt's house. First, though, because of the chill of the night, he wrapped her in a blanket and sat her on the saddle of his bicycle so that she was pushed home in some style, and for the first time in many weeks she felt that somebody cared what became of her.

They reached the house to find the back door standing open, but it soon became clear that she had not been missed. The policeman, who told her his name was Harry, was rather shocked and wanted to wake the household, but Miranda begged him not to do so and he complied, though only after she had promised to come to the station the next day to discuss what had happened. 'For we can't have young ladies wanderin' barefoot in the streets, clad only in a nightgown,' he told her. 'I'm on duty tomorrow from three in the afternoon so you'd best come to the station around four o'clock; I'll see you there.'

Miranda slipped into the house, closed the door behind her and went up to bed. Beth moaned that her feet were cold, but then fell immediately asleep once more and made no comment when the family awoke the following day.

Miranda, usually the most eager of pupils, sagged off school and went straight to the theatre, because she wanted at least one member of the cast to hear about her weird experience, a desire that was fully justified by the excitement her story engendered.

‘If you walks in your sleep, ducks, then it’s quite likely your mam did as well,’ Miss Briggs informed her. ‘Runs in families that does, sleepwalkin’ I mean. In times of stress some folk can go miles; I’ve heard of women catchin’ trams or buses – trains, even – when they’s sound asleep and should be in their beds. If your mam was loose on the streets, someone could ha’ took advantage.’ She gave Miranda a jubilant hug. ‘Mebbe we’re gettin’ somewhere at last. Wharra lucky thing it were a scuffer what found you. He’ll know full well you didn’t make nothin’ up and mebbe they’ll start searchin’ for Arabella all over again. Oh, if your mam’s e’er to be found we’ll find her, don’t you fret.’

But the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, and both dreams and nightmares grew rarer. The picture of Arabella which Miranda kept inside her head never faded, but Miranda’s pretty clothes grew jaded and dirty whilst hope gradually receded, though it never disappeared altogether.

Harry, the policeman, became a friend and Miranda knew it was he who was responsible for notices which appeared around the city asking for information as to

the whereabouts of Arabella Lovage, the beautiful actress who had charmed the citizens of Liverpool whenever she appeared on the stage. The cast, too, clubbed together to pay for notices in the papers, begging anyone with information as to Arabella's whereabouts to come forward. They might have enquired also for the young acrobat, but since it seemed he had left the theatre under a slight cloud, and Miranda objected vociferously to any linking of her mother's name with his, they did not. Gradually, Miranda began to accept the terrible change in her circumstances until it was almost as though she had had two lives. The first one, a life of pleasure and luxury, was gone for ever; the second one, of penury and neglect, had come to stay, at least until she could claw her way out of the hateful pit into which she had been dragged.

There had been many advantages to the life she had lived in Sycamore Avenue, and very few indeed to the one she now endured. Her cousin Beth occasionally showed signs of humanity, appearing to want if not friendship at least mutual tolerance, but Miranda ignored such overtures as were offered. She became, almost without knowing it, a sort of Cinderella, a general dogsbody, belonging to no one and therefore ordered about by everyone. She was not even sure that she cared particularly; why should she? She had a strong will, however, and beneath all her outward meekness there gradually blossomed a determination to succeed. She felt she was just marking time, waiting for something wonderful to happen. So she continued to work conscientiously at school, made no objection when her clothes grew shabbier, the food on her plate shrank to the leftovers no one

else wanted, and her share of the housework grew heavier and heavier. Once or twice Beth, who wasn't such a bad creature after all, gave her a hand, or put in a word for her; sometimes even stole food for her, but by and large, had she but realised it, Miranda was playing a waiting game. Arabella Lovage, she reminded herself half a dozen times a day, had disliked her half-sister, and would have moved heaven and earth rather than have her daughter live in the dirty, dilapidated house in Jamaica Close. If Arabella could see her daughter now, pale, dirty, always hungry and bitterly overworked, she would tell her miserable half-sister what she thought of her and whisk Miranda off back to the Avenue and the life they had both enjoyed.

But that time had not yet come, and the weeks continued to turn into months until at last it was a whole year, and the hope which had brightened the eyes of the Madison Players grew dim. Then the acrobat returned. He told anyone who was interested that he had got a job with the circus for the remainder of the summer season and then gone on to act in panto – a scene in the giant's kitchen, his ex-colleagues guessed – and had met and married one of the chorus to their mutual pleasure, though this romantic narrative was slightly tempered by the fact that the chorus girl had just announced she would be having a baby before Christmas.

Folk who had been convinced that Arabella had fled with the acrobat had to eat their words, but by now few people thought twice about it. Miranda, who had never believed it anyway, was shocked by her own lack of surprise; why should she be surprised, indeed? But perhaps it was then that little by little Miranda's

confidence in her mother's return began to trickle slowly away. She thought afterwards that it bled away, as if from a horrible wound which would not heal, and the worst thing was there was nothing she could do about it. She knew she should fight against the way her aunt treated her, she knew she should tell somebody – Harry, or one of her teachers, or some other responsible adult – but she was too weary. Money was short as the Depression bit deeper and deeper. If you argued about the price of a simple apple in the market the stallholder would throw the Depression in your face. If you chopped kindling, ran messages, or carted heavy buckets of water, where once a few coppers would be pressed into your hand now you were lucky to be given a ha'penny, or maybe a cut off a homemade loaf with a smear of margarine. Yes, times were hard, and if it hadn't been for Steve . . .

Chapter Two

'Lovage! Drat the girl, where's she got to?'

Miranda, who was awaiting her turn to jump into the skipping rope being expertly twirled by two of the older girls who lived in the small cul-de-sac, stood up and headed for the steps of Number Six, upon the top one of which her Aunt Vi stood. She hung back a little, however, for her aunt's expression was vengeful, and even from halfway across the paving Miranda could see her hand preparing for a slap.

'Yes, Aunt?' she said, knowing that it would annoy Aunt Vi if she spoke nicely; her aunt would have preferred impudence so she could strike out with a clear conscience. Not that she would hesitate to hit her niece if the fancy took her, as Miranda knew all too well. Aunt Vi waited for her to get closer, and when she failed to move began to swell with indignation, even her pale sandy hair seeming to stand on end.

'Come *here*, I say,' she shouted, her voice thin with spite. 'Why can't you ever do as you're told, you lazy little madam? There's your poor cousin sick as a cat, smothered in perishin' spots, and instead of givin' me a hand to nurse her, you're off a-pleasurin'. Considerin' it was you give my poor girl the measles . . .'

'She might have caught them off anyone.'

'No; it were bloody well you what passed them on,'

her aunt said aggressively. 'Why, you were still a-scrawpin' and a-scratchin' at the spots when my poor Beth began to feel ill. And now she's been and gone and thrown up all over her bed and the floor, so since it's your bleedin' fault you can just git up them stairs and clean up.' She grinned spitefully as her niece approached the front door, then scowled as the girl looked pointedly at her right hand.

'If you so much as raise your arm you can clear up the mess yourself,' Miranda said bluntly. 'When I was sick and ill you never even brought me a cup of water, but you expect me to wait on Beth. Well, I won't do it if you so much as touch me, and if you try anything else I'll tell the scuffers.'

It would be idle to pretend that the spiteful look left her aunt's face, but she moved to one side and made no attempt to interfere as Miranda squiggled past. Miranda had lately discovered that Vi did not want anything to do with the police, and though mention of Harry's name might not save her from all her aunt's wrath it certainly made Vi think twice before hitting her without reason.

But right now she had work to do and if her aunt had bothered to use her brain she might have realised that Miranda was perfectly willing to clear up the mess. Not only because she shared Beth's bed, but also because she and Beth were getting on slightly better. Whilst Miranda herself had had the measles Beth had brought food up to her occasionally, and had insisted that her cousin should have a share of anything soft that was going. Thanks to Beth, Miranda had kept body and soul together with bread and milk. Now Miranda was actually quite happy to do as much for her cousin, so she went into

the kitchen, poured water from the kettle into a bucket, added a scrubbing brush and a bar of strong yellow soap and hurried upstairs. And it was nowhere near as bad as she had feared; the bed seemed to have escaped altogether, and though Beth, lying back on her pillows, was clearly still feeling far from well, it was the work of a moment for Miranda to clean the floor and to grin cheerfully at her cousin. 'Awful, isn't it?' she said. 'The first three days are the worst, but then you begin to realise you ain't goin' to die after all.' She stood the bucket down by the door and sat on the sagging brass bedstead. 'Poor ol' Beth! But at least you'll get all sorts of nice things once you feel a bit better; I had to exist on bread and milk. No wonder I were weak as a kitten and could scarcely climb the stairs.'

Beth sniffed. 'You were lucky to get bread and milk,' she said sullenly. 'Mam wanted to give you bread and water; said milk were too rich . . . well, conny onny was, at any rate. So if it weren't for me sneakin' a spoonful on to your bread and water you'd likely still be in bed and covered in spots.' She pulled a face. 'And aren't you the lucky one? When you had measles it was term time so you missed school, but me, I got 'em on the very first day of the summer holidays.' She glared at her cousin. 'I tell you, you're lucky you even had pobs.'

'You're probably right and I'm real grateful to you,' Miranda said. 'But if you don't mind me sayin' so, Beth, your mam isn't very sensible, is she? When I were ill and couldn't clean or cook or scrub, she had to do all my work whilst you got the messages and prepared the meals. You'd have thought she'd be keen to get me back on me feet, and that would have happened a good deal

quicker if I'd had some decent grub now and then.' She sighed. 'Sometimes the smell of scouse comin' up the stairs tempted me to go down and ask for a share – like Oliver Twist, you know – but I guessed I'd only get a clack round the ear and I could do without that.'

She waited, half expecting her cousin to react angrily, for though Beth must know how badly her cousin was treated neither of them ever referred to it aloud. Now, however, Beth gave Miranda a malicious smile. 'Your mam spoiled you when you lived in the Avenue, made sure you got the best of everything going,' she said. 'And my mam gives me the best what's on offer; you can't blame her for that.' Her eyes had been half closed, but now they opened fully and fixed themselves on Miranda's face. 'You're an extra mouth to feed; Mam's always saying so, and neither you nor your perishin' missin' mother contributes a brass farthing to this house. You don't pay any of the rent, nor a penny towards the messages, so don't you grumble about my mam, because you're just a burden, you!'

This was said with such spite that Miranda's eyes rounded. She had always supposed that Beth was jealous of her because she was encouraged to be so by her mother. Aunt Vi knew that Miranda was a good deal cleverer than Beth and found this alone difficult to forgive. But now Beth had made it plain that she resented her cousin on her own account, so to speak. Or perhaps it was just the measles talking? Miranda hoped so, but got off the bed and headed for the door, telling herself that she did not have to stop and listen to her cousin's outpourings. It was true that she did not contribute to the rent of Number Six, but she thought indignantly that on all other

counts her cousin was way out. She washed and scrubbed, dusted and tidied, peeled potatoes and prepared vegetables, and sometimes even cooked them, though usually under her aunt's supervision. When she earned a penny or two by running messages or chopping kindling, she was usually forced to hand over the small amount of money she had managed to acquire, whereas Beth got sixpence pocket money each week, and quite often extra pennies so that she might attend the Saturday rush at the Derby cinema, or buy herself a bag of homemade toffee from Kettle's Emporium on the Scotland Road. With her hand on the doorknob, Miranda was about to leave the room when a feeble voice from the bed stopped her for a moment. 'I'm thirsty,' Beth whined. 'I want a drink. Mam went up to the Terrace to get advice on how to look after me and Nurse said I were to have plenty of cool drinks; things like raspberry cordial, or lemonade. Get me both, then I'll choose which to drink.'

The words 'Get 'em yourself' popped into Miranda's head and were hastily stifled; no point in giving her cousin ammunition which she might well hand on to her mother, who would see that Miranda suffered for her sharp tongue. Instead, she pretended she had not heard and went quietly out of the room, shutting the door on Beth's peevish demand that she bring the drinks at once . . . at once, did she hear?

When Miranda entered the kitchen she found her aunt sitting at the table with last night's *Echo* spread out before her and a mug of tea to hand. Miranda contemplated saying nothing about raspberry cordial or lemonade – after all, her aunt had said that she herself intended to be her daughter's principal nurse – but realised that it

would be unwise to irritate the older woman any further. Whilst Vi's sudden protective interest in Beth lasted, which would not be for very long, Miranda guessed, she would take offence at any tiny thing, and when Aunt Vi took offence Miranda headed for the hills. She went outside and emptied her bucket down the drain, then walked down to the pump and rinsed it out before returning to the kitchen. 'Beth wants a drink, either raspberry cordial or lemonade,' she said briefly. 'Did you buy 'em when you were out earlier, Aunt Vi? If so, I'll pour some into a jug and take it upstairs . . . unless you would rather do it yourself?'

She had not meant to sound sarcastic, but realised she had done so when her aunt's hard red cheeks began to take on a purplish tinge. Hastily, she went into the pantry and scanned the shelves until she spotted a bottle of raspberry cordial. Pouring some into a jug, she mixed it with water and, making sure first that her aunt's back was turned, took a cautious sip. It was delicious. The nicest thing she had tasted over the past twelve months, she told herself dreamily, heading for the stairs. Lucky, lucky Beth! When I had the measles all I got was water to drink and old copies of the *Echo* to read. Earlier she had seen a big pile of comics beside the bed – *Chicks' Own*, *The Dandy*, *The Beano* and *The Girl's Own Paper* – and had offered to read them to her cousin. Beth, however, clearly thought this a ruse on Miranda's part to get at the comics and had refused loftily. 'You can't read pictures,' she had said. 'And comics is all about pictures, not words. Go off and buy yourself comics if you're so keen on 'em, 'cos you ain't havin' mine.'

Upstairs, balancing jug and glass with some difficulty,

Miranda got the bedroom door open and glanced cautiously across to the bed. Beth was a pretty girl, dark-haired and dark-lashed with large toffee brown eyes and a neat little nose, but today, flopped against her pillows, she looked like nothing so much as a stranded fish. Her skin was so mottled with spots that she could have been an alien from outer space; her curly dark hair, wet with sweat, lay limply on the pillow, and when she opened her eyes to see what her cousin had brought, the lids were so swollen that she could scarcely see from between them. Miranda, having only just recovered from the measles herself, could not help a pang of real pity arrowing through her. Poor Beth! When she felt better she would be given in abundance all the things that Miranda had longed for when she herself was recovering, but right now no one knew better than she how Beth was suffering. Accordingly she set the glass down on the lopsided little bedside table and poured out some of the delicious raspberry cordial. Beth heaved herself up in the bed and picked up the glass. She took a sip, then another, then stood the glass down again. 'Thanks, Miranda,' she whispered. 'It's the nicest drink in the world, but I can't drink it! Oh, how I wish I were well again.' She looked fretfully up at her young cousin. 'Why does it taste so sticky and sweet? I so want to drink it, but if I do . . . if I do . . .'

'Poor old Beth. I felt just the same,' Miranda assured her cousin. 'Just you cuddle down, and try to sleep. When you wake up you'll feel better, honest to God you will. Why, tomorrow morning you'll be eating your breakfast porridge and drinking cups of tea and telling Aunt Vi that you fancy scouse for your dinner.' She smiled with