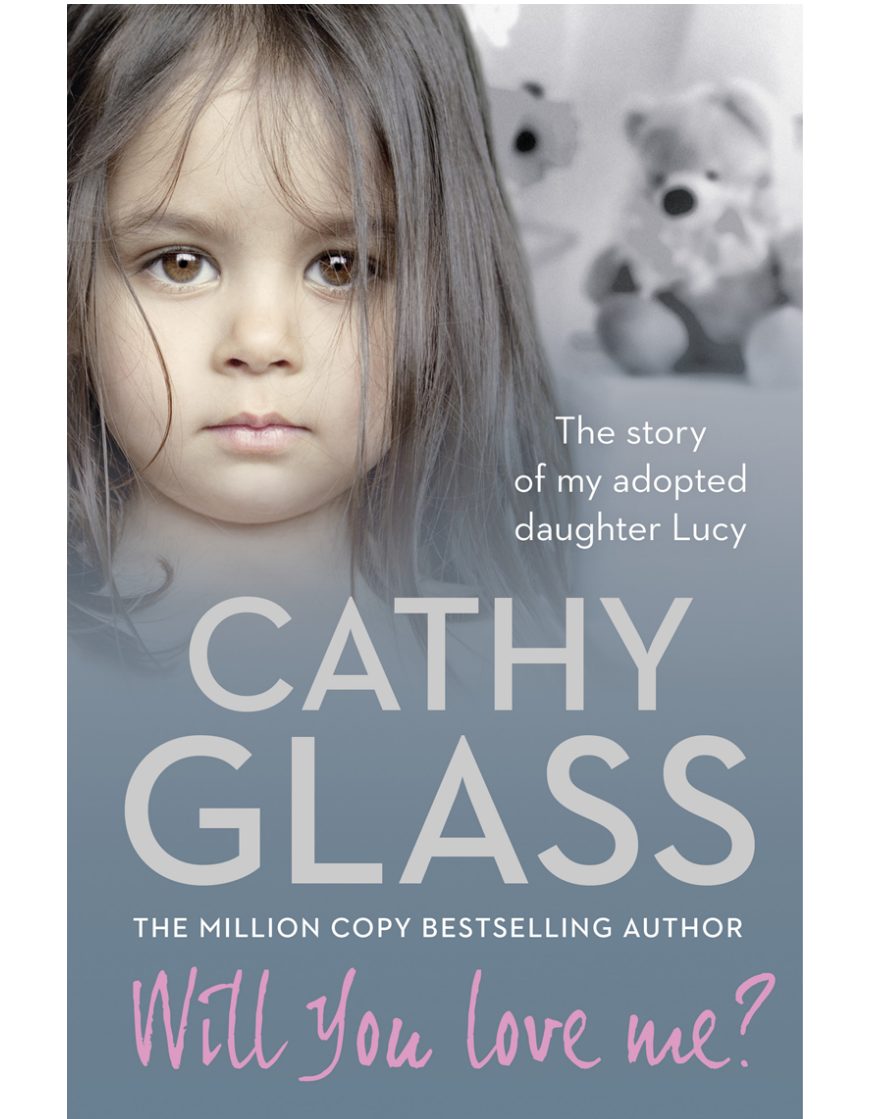




The story
of my adopted
daughter Lucy

CATHY GLASS

THE MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Will you love me?

Cathy Glass

**Will You Love Me?: The story
of my adopted daughter Lucy**

Аннотация

This eleventh memoir and latest title from the internationally bestselling author and foster carer Cathy Glass can either be read as a full eBook or in 3 serialised eBook-only parts. Will You Love Me tells the true story of Cathy's adopted daughter Lucy. Lucy was born to a single mother who had been abused and neglected for most of her own childhood. Right from the beginning Lucy's mother couldn't cope, but it wasn't until Lucy reached eight years old that she was finally taken into permanent foster care. By the time Lucy is brought to live with Cathy she is eleven years old and severely distressed after being moved from one foster home to another. Withdrawn, refusing to eat and three years behind in her schooling, it is thought that the damage Lucy has suffered is irreversible. But Cathy and her two children bond with Lucy quickly, and break through to Lucy in a way no-one else has been able to, finally showing her the loving home she never believed existed. Cathy and Lucy believe they were always destined to be mother and daughter – it just took them a little while to find each other.

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Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates, have been changed to protect the family's privacy.

HarperElement

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperElement 2013

FIRST EDITION

© Cathy Glass 2013

Cover layout design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2016

Cover photograph © Urban Zone/Alamy (posed by model)

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

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Source ISBN: 9780007530915

Ebook Edition © September 2013 ISBN: 9780007530922

Version: 2018-04-06

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Acknowledgements

A big thank-you to my editor, Holly; my literary agent Andrew; and Carole, Vicky, Laura and all the team at HarperCollins.

Epigraph

‘Every time I hear a newborn baby cry ...
Then I know why,
I believe.’

‘I Believe’ by Ervin Drake

Prologue

I heard Pat, Lucy's carer, knock on Lucy's bedroom door, and then a slight creak as the door opened, followed by: 'Your new carer, Cathy, is on the phone for you. Can you come and talk to her?'

There was silence and then I heard the bedroom door close. A few moments later Pat's voice came on the phone again. 'I told her, but she's still refusing to even look at me. She's just sitting there on the bed staring into space.'

My worries for Lucy rose.

'What should I do now?' Pat asked, anxiously. 'Shall I ask my husband to talk to her?'

'Does Lucy have a better relationship with him?' I asked.

'No, not really,' Pat said. 'She won't speak to him, either. We might have to leave her here until Monday, when her social worker is back at work.'

'Then Lucy will have the whole weekend to brood over this,' I said. 'It will be worse. Let's try again to get her to the phone. I'm sure it will help if she hears I'm not an ogre.'

Pat gave a little snort of laughter. 'Jill said you were very good with older children,' referring to my support social worker.

'That was sweet of her,' I said. 'Now, is your phone fixed or cordless?'

'Cordless.'

‘Excellent. Take the handset up with you, knock on Lucy’s bedroom door, go in and tell her again I would like to talk to her, please. But this time, leave the phone on her bed facing up, so she can hear me, and then come out. I might end up talking to myself, but I’m used to that.’

Pat gave another snort of nervous laughter. ‘Fingers crossed,’ she said.

I heard Pat’s footsteps going up the stairs again, followed by the knock on Lucy’s bedroom door and the slight creak as it opened. Pat’s voice trembled a little as she said: ‘Cathy’s still on the phone and she’d like to talk to you.’

There was a little muffled sound, presumably as Pat put the phone on Lucy’s bed, and then I heard the bedroom door close. I was alone with Lucy.

Lucy and I believe we were destined to be mother and daughter; it just took us a while to find each other. Lucy was eleven years old when she came to me. I desperately wish it could have been sooner. It breaks my heart when I think of what happened to her, as I’m sure it will break yours. To tell Lucy’s story – our story – properly, we need to go back to when she was a baby, before I knew her. With the help of records we’ve been able to piece together Lucy’s early life, so here is her story, right from the start ...

PART ONE

Chapter One

Desperate

It was dark outside and, at nine o'clock on a February evening in England, bitterly cold. A cruel northeasterly wind whipped around the small parade of downbeat shops: a newsagent's, a small grocer's, a bric-a-brac shop selling everything from bags of nails to out-of-date packets of sweets and biscuits, and at the end a launderette. Four shops with flats above forming a dismal end to a rundown street of terraced houses, which had once been part of the council's regeneration project, until its budget had been cut.

Three of the four shops were in darkness and shuttered against the gangs of marauding yobs who roamed this part of town after dark. But the launderette, although closed to the public, wasn't shuttered. It was lit, and the machines were working. Fluorescent lighting flickered against a stained grey ceiling as steam from the machines condensed on the windows. The largest window over the dryers ran with rivulets of water that puddled on the sill.

Inside, Bonnie, Lucy's mother, worked alone. She was in her mid-twenties, thin, and had her fair hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was busy heaving the damp clothes from the washing machines and piling them into the dryers, then reloading the machines. She barely faltered in her work, and

the background noise of the machines, clicking through their programmes of washing, rinsing, spinning and drying, provided a rhythm; it was like a well-orchestrated dance. While all the machines were occupied and in mid-cycle, Bonnie went to the ironing board at the end of the room and ironed as many shirts as she could before a machine buzzed to sound the end of its cycle and needed her attention.

Bonnie now stood at the ironing board meticulously pressing the shirts of divorced businessmen who didn't know how to iron, had no inclination to learn and drove past the launderette from the better end of town on their way to and from work. Usually they gave her a tip, which was just as well, for the money her boss, Ivan, gave her wasn't enough to keep her and her baby. Nowhere near.

With her earphones in and the volume turned up high on her Discman, plus the noise coming from the machines, Bonnie didn't hear the man tapping on the window and then rattling the shop door. With her concentrating on the ironing and her back turned away from him, he could have stood there indefinitely trying to attract her attention. The door was Chubb locked and double bolted, as it was every evening when Bonnie worked alone. It was lucky, therefore, that after a few moments Bonnie set down the iron to adjust the volume on her Discman, because as she did so she caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye. Turning, she peered from the brightness of the shop into the darkness outside and was a little startled to see the

silhouette of a man at the door. Then, with relief, she recognized the silhouette as that of Vince.

Bonnie crossed the shop floor, taking out her earphones and switching off her Discman as she went. She was expecting Vince; he was the reason the shutters weren't down. He'd phoned earlier and said he needed to see her urgently as he was leaving – for good. Bonnie hadn't been shocked to hear that the father of her baby was leaving. Vince (not his real name, which he'd told her was unpronounceable to English people) had come over from Thailand on a student visa four years previously, although as far as Bonnie knew he'd never been a student. His visa had long since run out, and in the fourteen months Bonnie had known Vince he'd said many times that immigration were after him and he would have to leave. But after the first few times, as with many of the other things Vince had told her – like his age and where his money came from – Bonnie had begun to doubt that it was true, and suspected it was just an excuse to come and go from her life as he pleased. However, as Bonnie now slid the bolts aside and opened the door, letting the cold night air rush in, she could see from his expression that something was different tonight. Vince's usually smooth manner was ruffled and he appeared to be sweating, despite it being cold outside.

'My sister phoned,' he said, slightly out of breath, as he stepped in and locked the door behind him. 'My mother is ill. I have to go to her.'

Bonnie looked at him. He was the same height as her – about

five foot eight inches – with pale olive skin and jet-black hair; she saw his charm and appeal now as she always had, despite the way he treated her. Her mother had said it was her fault that she allowed men to treat her like a doormat, but at least Vince didn't hit her, as some men had.

‘Your mother is always ill,’ Bonnie said, not unkindly, but stating a fact. ‘You told me your sister looks after her.’

Vince rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. ‘My mother is in hospital. She has cancer and will not live long. I have to go home.’

Bonnie looked into his dark, almost black eyes and searched for the truth in what he said, which was also probably the key to her future.

‘You’re going home? On a plane?’ she asked, raising her voice over the noise of the machines, for he’d never said before that he was going home, only that he was going away.

Vince nodded and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket.

‘For how long?’ Bonnie asked.

He shrugged. ‘Maybe for good.’

‘And your daughter?’ Bonnie said, irritated by his casualness, and still not fully believing him. ‘What do I tell Lucy when she is old enough to ask about her father?’

‘I’ll write,’ he said with no commitment. ‘I’ll write and phone on her birthday.’

‘Like your father does with you?’ she said bitterly, aware that

Vince only ever heard from his father on his birthday. But if she was honest, she knew Vince had never wanted a baby; it had been her decision not to terminate the pregnancy.

‘I have to go,’ he said, glancing anxiously towards the shop door. ‘I need to buy my ticket home, but I haven’t the money.’

Bonnie gave a small, sharp laugh. ‘So that’s why you’re here? To borrow money. No, Vince,’ she said, before he could ask. ‘The little I earn is for me and my baby. There’s never any left over, as you know.’

‘You live rent free here in the flat,’ he said, an edge of desperation creeping into his voice. ‘You must have some cash you can lend me?’

‘No. I have to pay bills – heating and lighting. I have to buy food and clothes. I’ve told you before I have no savings. I don’t have enough for Lucy and me.’ She was growing angry now. A better man would have realized and not asked.

‘I’m desperate,’ Vince said, almost pleading. ‘You wouldn’t stop me from seeing my mother when she is dying, would you?’

Bonnie heard the emotional blackmail, but it didn’t stop her feeling guilty. ‘I don’t have any money,’ she said again. ‘Honestly, I don’t.’

Vince’s eyes grew cold, as they did sometimes, though not normally in relation to her. It made her uneasy, as though there was a side to him she didn’t know.

‘The till,’ he said, shifting his gaze to the far end of the shop where the till sat on a table fixed to the floor. ‘You have the day’s

takings. Please. I'm desperate. I'll repay you, I promise.'

'No. It's impossible,' Bonnie said, an icy chill running down her spine. 'I've told you what Ivan's like. He's always saying he'll beat me if the day's takings are down. He would, I'm sure. He's capable of it. You wouldn't put me in danger?'

But she could tell from Vince's eyes that he could and would. His gaze flickered to the till again as he nervously licked his bottom lip. 'You don't understand,' he said. 'It's not just about my mother. I owe people money. People who'll kill me if I don't pay them. I'm sorry, Bonnie, but I don't have any choice.'

His mother's illness or creditors? Bonnie didn't know the truth and it hardly mattered any more; his betrayal of her was complete. She watched in horror as with single-minded determination he walked the length of the shop to the till. She watched from where she stood as he opened the till draw, struggling to accept that he thought more of his own safety than hers and would put her in danger to save himself. But as he began taking out the money – the money she had collected from hand washes, dry cleaning and ironing; which could be £500 or more; and which she took to the flat each night for safe keeping, ready to give Ivan the following morning – her thoughts went to Ivan and what he would do to her if any of the money was missing. She knew she had to stop Vince.

'No, Vince!' she cried, rushing to the till. 'No!' She grabbed his arm. 'No! Stop. Think of Lucy. Ivan will hurt her as well as me if you take the money.'

‘Not as much as the gang I owe will hurt me,’ he sneered. He pushed her from him and continued filling his jacket pockets.

‘No. Stop!’ Bonnie cried again. In desperation she grabbed his hands and tried to stop him from taking the money, but he shook her off.

She grabbed his hands again but his next push was much harder and sent her reeling backwards against the hard metal edge of a washing machine. She cried out as the impact winded her and pain shot through her. Vince quickly stuffed the last of the money into his jacket pockets and without looking back ran from the shop.

Bonnie stayed where she was, trying to catch her breath. She was also trying to come to terms with what had just happened. Vince had gone, probably for good, and he’d taken all of Ivan’s money – the money Ivan would expect to collect at 8.00 the following morning. Tears stung the backs of her eyes as she stood and leant against the washing machine, trying to work out what to do.

The launderette was uncannily quiet. The dryers that had been working when Vince arrived had completed their cycles and now stood still; the washing machines were in mid-cycle, their drums gently swishing water from side to side. Bonnie looked at the shop door, which was still wide open from Vince’s exit. The chill from the night was quickly replacing the previous warmth of the shop. Before long, if she didn’t close the door, a drunk, druggie or yob would come in. Not that there was any money left to steal,

she thought grimly; there was just her safety to worry about.

Heaving herself away from the support of the machine, Bonnie rubbed her back and began to make her way towards the open door. Despite Vince's behaviour, Bonnie didn't condemn him for what he'd done; she believed she deserved it. Abuse was always her fault. Things like this didn't happen to nice girls. She was bad, so men treated her badly. It was as simple as that. She closed and locked the door, slid the bolts across and turned to survey the shop. Baskets of washing waited to be loaded into machines and dryers, the ironing was half done and the whole shop needed to be cleaned and tidied ready for when it opened at 7.30 a.m. the next day. Bonnie usually did all this before she went to bed. Ivan expected it and liked a clean and tidy shop when he called to collect his money at 8.00 a.m. Even if it took her until midnight to finish, she always made sure everything was done, just as Ivan liked it.

But not tonight, Bonnie thought. There's no point in finishing the laundry and cleaning the shop, for the crime of losing Ivan's money was far greater and could not be put right by a clean and tidy shop. It briefly crossed her mind that perhaps she could say they'd been broken into and the day's takings had been stolen, but with no forced entry she doubted Ivan would believe her, and she didn't dare take the risk. Bonnie lived in fear of Ivan, as she did most men who came into her life.

With a very heavy heart and her back paining her, Bonnie went to the corner of the shop and opened the internal door that

led to the flat above. She pressed the light switch and the staircase was illuminated, then she turned off the lights in the shop – all except the night light, which always stayed on. Closing the door on the shop, she began up the stairs, and as she did so she heard Lucy crying. Bonnie knew from the distress in her screams that she'd been crying for a very long time.

Chapter Two

Escape

Halfway up the damp and foul-smelling staircase, with its dangerously frayed carpet, the light went out. Ivan had the light switches at the top and bottom of the stairs on timers so as not to waste electricity: he paid for the electricity on the stairs and in the shop; Bonnie paid for it in the flat. As usual, Bonnie climbed the last six steps in darkness and then groped for the light switch on the landing and pressed it, which gave her another ten seconds of light – enough to open the door to the flat and go inside.

The door opened directly into the room where Lucy lay, and her screams were deafening now. The living room was lit by a single standard lamp that Bonnie left on whenever Lucy was alone – which was often. The main overhead light had never worked, and Ivan had never offered to fix it. In the half-light Bonnie crossed to where her daughter lay in a Moses basket on the floor. Lucy's eyes were screwed shut and her mouth was open in a grimace of crying. The smell was putrid, a combination of the diarrhoea and vomit that had been festering since the last time Bonnie had checked on Lucy and changed her nappy, over five hours previously. Bonnie knew it was wrong to leave a baby unattended for so long, but she had to work. She also knew that, at six months old, Lucy was too old for a Moses basket, but she

couldn't afford a cot. She kept the basket on the floor so that if Lucy did tumble out she wouldn't have far to fall.

Lucy's eyes shot open as her mother picked her up and she stopped crying. But her expression wasn't one of relaxed reassurance sensing that, as a baby, all her needs were about to be met. She didn't smile on seeing her mother, as most six-month-old babies would. No, Lucy's little brow furrowed and her eyes registered concern and anxiety, as though she shared her mother's fears and responsibilities for their future.

The sheet in the Moses basket and the Baby-gro and cardigan Lucy wore were caked with dried vomit. Round the tops of the legs of the Baby-gro were fresh brown stains where her nappy had overflowed. Lucy's sickness and diarrhoea were in their third day now and Bonnie knew she should really take her to a doctor, but if she did she would be registered on their computer system, and then it would only be a matter of time before concerns were raised and a social worker came knocking on her door. At present, no one knew where she was, not even her mother. Only the hospital where Lucy had been born – over 100 miles away – knew of her baby's existence, and that was all they knew.

Bonnie felt Lucy's forehead. Thankfully she didn't feel hot so Bonnie assumed she didn't have a temperature. Bonnie was hoping, praying, that nature would take its course and Lucy would get better of her own accord, although how long that would take she didn't know. Ignoring the squalor of the living room, Bonnie carried her daughter through to the bathroom where she

pulled on the light cord. Filthy broken tiles formed the splashback to an old chipped and badly stained bath. What was left of the lino on the floor was stained from the leaking toilet and the ceiling was covered with large, dark, irregular-shaped water marks from the leaking roof above. This room, like the rest of the flat, was cold, and mould had formed between the tiles, around the edge of the bath and around the window, which couldn't be opened but rattled in the wind. Bonnie knew that this room – like the others she was allowed to use in the flat: the living room and kitchen – was unfit for human habitation. Ivan knew it too, and that she wouldn't complain, because she was desperate and had nowhere else to go. The doors to the two bedrooms were permanently locked and Ivan had the keys. He'd never told her what was in them and she'd never dared to ask.

Spreading the one towel she owned on the filthy bathroom floor, Bonnie carefully laid Lucy on top of it. Lucy immediately began to cry again, as if she anticipated what was coming next.

'There, there,' Bonnie soothed. 'I'm sorry, but I have to wash you.' Bonnie always felt a sense of panic when Lucy cried, as though she was doing something wrong.

Lucy's cries grew louder as Bonnie began taking off her dirty clothes. 'You must stop crying,' she said anxiously. 'The man next door will hear you.'

The Asian man who ran the newsagent's next door and lived in the flat above with his wife and two children had twice come into the launderette worried that they'd heard a baby crying for

long periods and that there might be something wrong. Bonnie had reassured him, but now lived in dread that he would voice his concerns to the police or social services.

Bonnie placed Lucy's soiled cardigan, Baby-gro and vest to one side and then unfastened the tabs on her nappy. The smell was overpowering and Bonnie swallowed to stop herself from gagging. Before removing Lucy's nappy, in a well-practised routine she reached into the bath and turned on the hot tap. Cold water spluttered out as the pipes running through the flat creaked and banged. Bonnie held her fingers under the small stream of water until it lost its chill and became lukewarm. This was as hot as it got, so she and Lucy always washed in lukewarm water, and Lucy always cried.

Leaving the tap running, Bonnie took off Lucy's nappy and lifted her into the bath where she held her bottom under the tap. Lucy's cries escalated. 'Sssh,' Bonnie said, as she washed her with an old flannel. 'Please be quiet.' But Lucy didn't understand.

Having cleaned her back and bottom, Bonnie turned Lucy around and washed her front, finishing with her face and the little hair she had. Lucy gave a climactic scream and shivered as the water ran over her head and face. 'Finished. All done!' Bonnie said.

Turning off the tap, she lifted Lucy out of the bath and onto the towel. The comparative warmth and comfort of the fabric soothed Lucy and she finally stopped crying. 'Good girl,' Bonnie said, relieved.

She knelt on the floor in front of her daughter and patted her dry with the towel. Lucy's gaze followed her mother's movements apprehensively as though at any moment she might have reason to cry again. Once Lucy was dry, Bonnie wrapped the towel around her daughter like a shawl and then carried her into the half-light of the living room, where she sat on the threadbare sofa with Lucy on her lap. 'Soon have you dressed,' she said, kissing her head.

Bonnie took a disposable nappy from the packet she kept with most of her other possessions on the sofa. Bonnie owned very little; her and Lucy's belongings were easily accommodated on the sofa and armchair. At least I won't have much packing to do, she thought bitterly. Where she would go escaped her, but she knew she had no choice but to leave, now that Ivan's money had gone.

Lying Lucy flat on the sofa, Bonnie secured the clean nappy with the sticky fasteners, and then reached to the end of the sofa for Lucy's clean clothes. One advantage of working in the launderette was that she'd been able to wash and dry their clothes for free.

Taking the clean vest, Baby-gro and cardigan (bought second-hand), Bonnie dressed Lucy as quickly as she could. The only heating in the room was an electric fire, which was far too expensive to use, so Bonnie relied on the heat rising from the launderette to take the chill off the flat, but it was never warm. Lucy didn't cry as Bonnie dressed her; in fact, she didn't make

any noise at all. Bonnie found that Lucy was either silent or crying; there was no contented in-between. Neither had she begun to make the babbling and chuntering noises most babies of her age do. The reason was lack of stimulation, but Bonnie didn't know that.

Once Lucy was dressed, Bonnie replaced the sheet in the Moses basket ready for later and then carried her daughter into the squalid kitchen. Balancing Lucy on her hip with one arm, she filled and plugged in the kettle with the other, and then took the carton of milk from the windowsill. There was no fridge so the windowsill, draughty from the ill-fitting window, acted as a fridge in winter. Bonnie kept her 'fridge foods' there – milk, yoghurt and cheese spread. An ancient gas cooker stood against one wall but only the hobs had ever worked, so since coming to the flat five months previously Bonnie had lived on cold baked beans, cheese spread on bread, cornflakes, crisps and biscuits. Lucy was on cow's milk – the formula was too expensive – and Bonnie wondered if this could be the reason for Lucy's sickness and diarrhoea.

Bonnie prepared the milk for Lucy in the way she usually did, by half filling the feeding bottle with milk and topping it up with boiling water. Without a hob or milk pan it was all she could do, and it also made the milk go further. She made herself a mug of tea and, taking a handful of biscuits from the open packet, returned to the living room. She sat on the sofa and gave Lucy her bottle while she drank her tea and nervously ate the biscuits. She

would have liked to make her escape now so she was well away from the area before Ivan returned in the morning and found his money and them gone, but the night was cold, so it made sense to stay in the flat for as long as possible. Bonnie decided that if she left at 6.00 a.m. she'd have two hours before Ivan arrived – enough time to safely make their getaway.

Physically exhausted and emotionally drained, Bonnie rested her head against the back of the grimy sofa and closed her eyes, as Lucy suckled on her bottle. She wondered if she should head north for Scotland where her mother lived, but her mother wouldn't be pleased to see her. A single parent with a procession of live-in lovers, many of whom had tried to seduce Bonnie; she had her own problems. Bonnie had tolerated her mother's lifestyle for as long as she could but had then left. Aged seventeen and carrying a single canvas holdall that contained all her belongings, Bonnie had been on the streets, sleeping rough or wherever she could find a bed. Bonnie's two older brothers had left home before her and hadn't kept in touch, so as Lucy finished the last of her bottle and fell asleep Bonnie concluded that she didn't have anywhere to go – which was how she'd ended up at Ivan's in the first place.

Dioralyte! Bonnie thought, her eyes shooting open. Wasn't that the name of the medicine you gave babies and children when they had diarrhoea or sickness? Hadn't she seen it advertised on television last year when she'd stayed in a squat where they'd had a television? She was sure it was. She had a bit of money – the

tips from the day – she'd find a chemist when they opened in the morning and buy the Dioralyte that would make Lucy well again. With her spirits rising slightly, Bonnie looked down at her daughter sleeping peacefully in her arms and felt a surge of love and pity. Poor little sod, she thought, not for the first time. She deserved better than this, but Bonnie knew that better wasn't an easy option when you were a homeless single mother.

Careful not to wake Lucy, Bonnie gently lifted her from her lap and into the Moses basket, where she tucked her in, making sure her little hands were under the blanket. The room was very cold now the machines below had stopped. It then occurred to her that tonight neither of them had to be cold – she didn't have to worry about the heating bill as she wouldn't be here to pay it. They could be warm on their last night in Ivan's disgusting flat! Crossing to the electric fire she dragged it into the centre of the room, close enough for them to feel its warmth, but not too close that it could burn or singe their clothes. She plugged it in and the two bars soon glowed red. Presently the room was warm and Bonnie began to yawn and then close her eyes. She lifted up her legs onto the sofa, kicked off the packet of nappies to make space and then curled into a foetal position on her side, resting her head on the pile of clothes, and fell asleep.

She came to with a start. Lucy was crying, and through the ill-fitting ragged curtains Bonnie could see the sky was beginning to lighten. 'Shit!' she said out loud, sitting bolt upright. 'What time is it?' Groping in her bag she took out her phone. Jesus! It was

7.00 a.m. The heat of the room must have lulled her into a deep sleep; Ivan would be here in an hour, possibly sooner!

With her heart racing and leaving Lucy crying in the Moses basket, Bonnie grabbed the empty feeding bottle from where she'd left it on the floor and tore through to the kitchen. She filled the kettle and then rinsed out the bottle under the 'hot' water tap. While the kettle boiled she returned to the living room and, ignoring Lucy's cries, changed her nappy. It was badly soiled again; she would find a chemist as soon as she could. Returning Lucy to the Moses basket, Bonnie flew into the kitchen, poured the last of the milk into Lucy's bottle and topped it up with boiling water. Back in the living room she put the teat into Lucy's mouth and then propped the bottle against the side of the basket so Lucy could feed while she packed.

Opening the canvas bag, Bonnie began stuffing in their clothes and then the nappies and towel. She put on her hoody and zipped it up; she didn't own a coat or warmer jacket. Bonnie then ran into the bathroom, quickly used the toilet, washed her hands in the lukewarm water and, taking her toothbrush and the roll of toilet paper, returned to the living room and stuffed those into the holdall. Bonnie didn't have any toiletries or cosmetics; they were too expensive and she never risked stealing non-essential items; she could live without soap and make-up.

In the kitchen Bonnie collected together the little food she had left – half a packet of biscuits, two yoghurts and a tub of cheese spread. She remembered to take a teaspoon from the drawer so

she could eat the yoghurts, and then returning to the living room she put them all in the holdall. The bag was full now so she zipped it shut. She'd packed most of their belongings; all that remained were Lucy's soiled clothes and they would have to stay. There wasn't room for them and they would smell.

Bonnie checked the time again. It was now 7.15. Her heart quickened. She'd have to be careful as she left the area and keep a watchful lookout for Ivan. He arrived by car each morning, but from which direction she didn't know. With a final glance around the dismal living room and with mixed feelings about leaving – at least the place had provided a roof over their heads and a wage – Bonnie threw her bag over her shoulder and then picked up the Moses basket. She felt a stab of pain in her back from where Vince had pushed her into the washing machine.

Opening the door that led from the flat to the staircase, Bonnie switched on the timed light and then manoeuvred the Moses basket out and closed the door behind her. She began carefully down the stairs, her stomach cramping with fear. The only way out was through the launderette and if for any reason Ivan arrived early, as he had done a couple of times before, there'd be no escape. The back door was boarded shut to keep the jobs out. Halfway down the stairs the light went out and Bonnie gingerly made her way down the last few steps, tightly clutching the Moses basket and steadying herself on the wall with her elbow. At the foot of the stairs she pressed the light switch and saw the door to the launderette. Opening it, she went through and then closed

it behind her. With none of the machines working the shop was eerily still and cold. She began across the shop with her eyes trained on the door to the street looking for any sign of Ivan; her heart beat wildly in her chest. With one final glance through the shop window, she opened the door. The bell clanged and, leaving the sign showing 'Closed', she let herself out.

Chapter Three

Concerned

The cruel northeasterly wind bit through Bonnie's jeans and zip-up top as she headed for town, about a mile away. She had no clear plan of what she should do, but she knew enough about being on the streets and sleeping rough to know there would be a McDonald's in the high street open from 6.00 a.m.; some even stayed open all night. It would be warm in there and as long as you bought something to eat or drink – it didn't matter how small – and sat unobtrusively in a corner, the staff usually let you stay there indefinitely. That was how she'd met Jameel last year, she remembered, sitting in a McDonald's. He'd sat at the next table and had begun talking. When he'd found out she was sleeping rough, he'd taken her back to the squat he shared with eight others – men and women in their late teens and early twenties, many of whom had been in the care system. One of the girls had had a four-year-old child with her, and at the time Bonnie had thought it was wrong that the kid should be forced to live like that and felt it would have been better off in foster care or being adopted, but now she had a baby of her own it was different; she'd do anything to keep her child. Bonnie had lived at the squat for two months and had only left when Vince had reappeared in her life. Bad move, Bonnie thought resentfully, as she continued towards the

town with Lucy awake and gazing up at her.

‘You all right, love?’ a male voice boomed suddenly from somewhere close by.

Bonnie started, stopped walking and turned to look. A police car had drawn into the kerb and the male officer in the driver’s seat was looking at her through his lowered window, waiting for a reply.

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ she said, immediately uneasy.

‘Bit early to be out with a little one in this cold,’ he said, glancing at the Moses basket she held in front of her.

Bonnie felt a familiar stab of anxiety at being stopped by the police. ‘I’m going on holiday,’ she said, trying to keep her voice even and raising a small smile. She could see from his expression that he doubted this, which was understandable. It was the middle of winter and she didn’t exactly look like a jet-setter off to seek the sun. ‘To my aunt’s,’ she added. ‘Just for a short break while my husband’s away.’

The lie was so ludicrous that Bonnie was sure he’d know. Through the open window she could see the trousered legs of a WPC sitting in the passenger seat.

‘Where does your aunt live?’ the officer driving asked.

‘On the other side of town,’ Bonnie said without hesitation. ‘Not too far.’

The WPC ducked her head down so she, too, could see Bonnie through the driver’s window. ‘How old is the baby?’ she asked.

‘Six months,’ Bonnie said.

‘And she’s yours?’

‘Yes. Don’t worry, she won’t be out in the cold long. I’ll get a bus as soon as one comes along.’

Bonnie saw the driver’s hand go to the ignition keys. This was a bad sign. She knew from experience that if he switched off the engine it meant they would ask her more questions and possibly run a check through the car’s computer. When that had happened before she hadn’t had Lucy, so she’d legged it and run like hell. But that wasn’t an option now. It would be impossible to outrun the police with the holdall and Lucy in the Moses basket.

‘Where does your aunt live?’ the WPC asked, as the driver cut the engine.

Shit! Bonnie thought. ‘On the Birdwater Estate,’ she said. She didn’t know anyone on the estate, only that it existed from seeing the name in the destination window on the front of buses.

Suddenly their attention was diverted to the car’s radio. A message was coming through: ‘Immediate support requested for an RTA’ – a multi-vehicle accident on the motorway. Bonnie watched with relief as the driver’s hand returned to the ignition key and he started the engine.

‘As long as you’re OK then,’ the WPC said, straightening in her seat and moving out of Bonnie’s line of vision.

‘I am,’ Bonnie said. ‘Thank you for asking.’

The driver raised his window and the car sped away with its lights flashing and siren wailing.

‘That was close,’ Bonnie said, and quickened her pace.

She knew she'd attract the attention of any police officer with child protection on his mind, being on the streets so early with her holdall and a baby. That was how she'd arrived at Ivan's launderette at 7.30 a.m. when Lucy had been one month old. Living rough, she'd dodged a police car that had been circling the area, and Bonnie had run into the launderette, which had just opened, to find Ivan cursing and swearing that the woman who should have been opening up and working for him had buggered off the day before. They'd started talking and when she'd heard that the job came with the flat above she'd said straight away she would work for him.

Now she crossed the road and waited at the bus stop. It was only a couple of stops into town, and she could just afford the fare. She also knew from experience that she was less likely to be stopped by the police while waiting at a bus stop than she was while walking.

It was a little after 8.00 a.m. when Bonnie entered the brightly lit fast-food restaurant, with its usual breakfast clientele. She was thirsty, her arms and back ached from carrying the Moses basket and bag and she desperately needed a wee. She was also hungry; apart from the handful of biscuits she'd eaten the evening before, she'd had nothing since lunch yesterday, and that had only been a cheese-spread sandwich made from the last of the bread. Although she had enough money to buy breakfast, she had no idea how long she'd be living rough, so she wasn't about to spend it until it became absolutely necessary. Bonnie opened the door

to the corridor that led to the toilets and one of the staff came out. 'Oh, a baby!' she said, surprised, and then continued into the restaurant to clear tables.

Bonnie manoeuvred the Moses basket and holdall into the ladies. Fortunately it was empty, so she left the bag and Moses basket with Lucy in it outside the cubicle with the door open while she had a wee. Flushing the toilet, she came out, washed her hands and then held them under the hot-air dryer. As the dryer roared, Lucy started and cried. 'It's all right,' Bonnie soothed, and quickly moved away from the dryer.

She picked up the Moses basket and bag, and as she did she caught sight of her face in the mirror on the wall. Under the bright light she looked even paler than usual and she seemed to have lost weight; her cheekbones jutted out and there were dark circles under her eyes. With a stab of horror, Bonnie thought that if she didn't change her lifestyle soon she'd end up looking like her mother, haggard from years of drinking and smoking and being knocked around.

Returning to the restaurant, Bonnie ordered a hot chocolate for herself and a carton of milk for Lucy. 'Eat here or takeaway?' the assistant asked.

'Here,' Bonnie confirmed.

She paid and then, lodging the drinks upright at the foot of the Moses basket so she could carry everything in one go, she crossed to one of the long bench seats on the far side – away from the cashiers and the draughty door. Placing the Moses

basket on the seat beside her, Bonnie quickly began drinking her hot chocolate. The warmth and sweetness was comforting and reminiscent of the hot milky drinks her gran used to make for her when she'd stayed with her as a child. Bonnie wondered what her gran was doing now. Her mother had fallen out with her and they hadn't spoken for some years. Bonnie loved her gran, although she hadn't seen her since she'd left home eight years previously.

She took the packet containing the last few biscuits from her bag and kept it on her lap, out of sight of the staff, as she quickly ate them. The sugar rush lifted her spirits and helped quell her appetite for the time being. Lucy was watching her, but didn't appear to be hungry so Bonnie decided she'd keep the carton of milk she'd just bought for later and tucked it back in at the foot of the Moses basket, ready for when it was needed. She also had the yoghurts, one of which she'd give to Lucy later. She'd started giving her some soft food – yoghurt, a chip chewed by her first to soften it or a piece of bread soaked in her tea. When they were settled, she thought, and she had more money, she'd start buying the proper baby foods for weaning.

'It won't always be like this,' Bonnie said out loud, turning to her daughter and gently stroking her cheek. 'It will get better. I promise you.' Although how and when it would get better Bonnie had no idea.

At 9.00 a.m. Bonnie hitched the bag over her shoulders, picked up the Moses basket and left the fast-food restaurant in search of a chemist. Lucy was asleep now and, although she

hadn't been sick or had a dirty nappy yet that morning, Bonnie wanted to buy the medicine so she had it ready in case it was needed. She tried to be a good mum, she told herself, but it was very difficult with no home, no regular income and having her own mother as a role model. When she'd been a child she'd assumed that the chaos and poverty she and her brothers were forced to live in was normal, that all families lived like that. But when she was old enough to play in other children's houses she realized not only that it was not normal but that others on the estate pitied her and criticized her mother for neglecting her and her brothers. Bonnie wondered why no one had intervened; perhaps it was because of her mother's ugly temper, which she'd been on the receiving end of many times and was always worse when she'd been drinking. This might also have been the reason why the social services hadn't rescued her and her brothers as they had some of the other kids on the estate, she thought; that, or they weren't worth saving – a view she still held today.

Bonnie spotted the blue-and-white cross on the chemist's shop a little further up and went in. There were two customers already inside: a lady browsing the shelves and a man being served at the counter. Bonnie scanned the shelves looking for the medicine she needed but couldn't find it. Once the man at the counter had finished, she went up to the pharmacist – a rather stern middle-aged Asian woman dressed in a colourful sari.

'I think what I need is called Dioralyte,' Bonnie said.

'Is it for you?' the pharmacist asked, giving Bonnie the once

over.

‘No, for my baby.’

‘How old is it?’

‘Six months.’

She glanced at the Moses basket Bonnie held in front of her.

‘What are the symptoms?’

‘Sickness and diarrhoea.’

‘How long has she been ill?’

‘Two days,’ Bonnie said.

‘She needs to see a doctor if it continues,’ the pharmacist said.

Reaching up to a shelf on her right, she took down a box marked Dioralyte. ‘This box contains six sachets,’ she said, leaning over the counter and tapping the box with her finger. ‘You follow the instructions. Mix one sachet with water or milk. You understand this doesn’t cure sickness and diarrhoea? It replaces the salts and glucose lost from the body. If your baby is no better in twenty-four hours, you must take her to your doctor.’

‘I will,’ Bonnie said, taking her purse from her pocket.

‘Four pounds twenty,’ the woman said.

‘That’s a lot!’ Bonnie exclaimed. ‘Can’t I just buy two sachets?’

The pharmacist paused from ringing up the item on the till and looked at Bonnie. Bonnie knew she should have kept quiet and paid. Through the dispensing hatch Bonnie could see a man, presumably the woman’s husband, stop what he was doing and look at her. Then the woman came out from behind the counter and leaned over the Moses basket for a closer look at Lucy.

‘I can smell sick,’ she said, feeling Lucy’s forehead to see if she had a temperature. Lucy stirred but didn’t wake.

‘It might be on the blanket,’ Bonnie said defensively. ‘I didn’t have time to wash that before I left. Her clothes are clean.’

‘Have you taken the baby’s temperature?’ the woman now asked.

‘Yes,’ Bonnie lied. ‘She doesn’t feel hot, does she?’

‘No, but that isn’t necessarily a good test. What was her temperature?’

‘Normal,’ Bonnie said, with no idea what that was.

The woman looked at her and then returned to behind the counter. ‘Babies can become seriously ill very quickly,’ she said. ‘You need to watch her carefully. If you go to your doctor’s, they will give you a prescription for free. Where do you live?’

‘Eighty-six Hillside Gardens,’ Bonnie said, giving the address of the launderette she’d just left. It was the only local address she knew by heart.

‘Do you want the Dioralyte?’

‘Yes,’ Bonnie said, and quickly handed her a five pound note.

‘Remember, you see your doctor if she’s no better tomorrow,’ the woman said again, and gave her the change.

‘I will,’ Bonnie said, just wanting to get out. Once she’d tucked the change into her purse, she dropped it along with the paper bag containing the Dioralyte into the Moses basket and hurried from the shop.

However, inside the shop Mrs Patel was concerned. The young

woman she had just served looked thin and gaunt and her baby was ill. She'd appeared agitated and the basket she carried her baby in was old and grubby; she hadn't seen one like it for years. And why was the mother out on the streets with her bags packed in the middle of winter when her baby was ill? It didn't add up; something wasn't right. Mrs Patel was aware that in the past chemists had missed warning signs when intervention could have stopped suffering and even saved a life. Half an hour later, having voiced her concerns to her husband, he served in the shop while she went into their office at the back of the shop and phoned the social services.

'This may be nothing,' she began, as many callers to the duty social worker do. 'My name is Mrs Patel, I'm the chemist at 137 High Street. I've just served a young woman with a sick baby and I'm concerned. Is it possible for someone to check on her? I have an address.'

And that was the first time Lucy came to the notice of the social services – as a six-month-old baby with an address but no name.

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