

The Top Ten *Sunday Times* Bestselling Author

Katie Flynn

All they want
is a place to
call home

A boy in a patterned vest and white shirt sits on a wooden chair, reading a book. A girl in a red sweater sits on the floor, holding a doll. They are in a room with a fireplace, a Christmas tree, and festive decorations.

A
Family Christmas

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About the Book

Jimmy and Mo Trewin have been living with the cruel Mrs Huxtable since their mother died and their father left them. Life is miserable, but when Mrs Huxtable's brutal son Cyril returns home, they are forced to run for their lives, leaving them homeless on the cold streets of Liverpool.

Young teacher Glenys Trent has just lost her job. With no family to turn to, she's expecting a bleak Christmas, until fate leads Jimmy and Mo to her door.

Glenys's lonely heart is touched by the two ragged children, and she agrees to help them find their mother's family in Wales.

But the journey is fraught with danger as Cyril continues to pursue them. Will they ever find a place of safety?

About the Author

Katie Flynn has lived for many years in the north-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Merseyside. She decided to write her Liverpool series after hearing the reminiscences of family members about life in the city in the early years of the twentieth century. For many years she has had to cope with ME, but has continued to write. She also writes as Judith Saxton.

Also available by Katie Flynn

A Liverpool Lass
The Girl from Penny Lane
Liverpool Taffy
The Mersey Girls
Strawberry Fields
Rainbow's End
Rose of Tralee
No Silver Spoon
Polly's Angel
The Girl from Seaforth Sands
The Liverpool Rose
Poor Little Rich Girl
The Bad Penny
Down Daisy Street
A Kiss and a Promise
Two Penn'orth of Sky
A Long and Lonely Road
The Cuckoo Child
Darkest Before Dawn
Orphans of the Storm
Little Girl Lost
Beyond the Blue Hills
Forgotten Dreams
Sunshine and Shadows
Such Sweet Sorrow
A Mother's Hope
In Time for Christmas
Heading Home
A Mistletoe Kiss
The Lost Days of Summer
Christmas Wishes
The Runaway
A Sixpenny Christmas

The Forget-Me-Not Summer
A Christmas to Remember
Time to Say Goodbye

Available by Katie Flynn writing as Judith Saxton

You Are My Sunshine
First Love, Last Love
Someone Special
Still Waters

A Family Christmas

Katie Flynn



arrow books

For Jean Hughes: If there are any mistakes
in the book they are mine; the bits I got
right are thanks to Jean.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Lyn Davies who heard I was hoping to meet someone who would be willing to talk to me about their life in WWII in the ATS. She put me in touch with Jean Hughes who at the age of 92 still has fantastic memories of being on the AckAck sites and kept a marvellous diary of her experiences, a copy of which she gave me.

Dear Jean, I am so grateful to you for your help: you should write a book yourself.

Dear Reader,

Ever since returning from seeing my son and granddaughters in Australia, I feel as though I've been running which, in a way, I have been because I've been trying to catch up. I had written a third of *A Family Christmas* before I left, but on arriving back at my desk I realised with some horror that the plot, which had seemed simple enough when I left, had changed into a story so complex that I could see no way of resolving it!

I had been away for just over two months and having to virtually scrap a third of a book and start at the beginning again . . . well, I'm sure you can imagine how I felt, and how my poor editor felt too. So instead of getting quietly on with the new story, I began to fiddle with what I had already written . . . and the awful thing was that though I had completely changed the plot, the names remained the same! And for some unknown reason I had named a goody Sam, in this book, whereas a couple of books ago (I think it was in *A Sixpenny Christmas*), the baddy had been called Sam. I cannot tell you how muddled this made us all, though we managed to sort it in the end!

But enough of muddles! Flash is now getting on for sixteen years old and was not at all delighted to come out of the marvellous cattery, where he is an elder statesman, after being incarcerated for over two months. At first he retreated into his bedroom and refused totally to come out, then he tried his 'litter room', and when we finally got him out of his cosy retreat he refused to look at us, turning his back and laying his ears flat whenever he thought himself observed.

He now takes in his stride the presence of my daughter-next-door's two lurchers and two black cats, and they very wisely take no notice of him. But age has made him cautious and he no longer stalks the birds when they come to feed from the seed, peanut and fat hangers. They know in some mysterious way that he is no longer a threat and when we have a sunny day (rare!) he lies in a warm patch and observes in an avuncular manner - you would think him a model bird watcher with no more interest in our feathered friends than was proper.

And I am comfortably into my next book, the early part of which is set in the Yorkshire Dales, though that may change . . . plots have a habit of twisting round and biting you on the nose if you take them for granted. I search for a title, groan groan, always the most difficult part of starting a new book. How about *The Seventh Wave*? Only so far the sea hasn't come into it. Or *The Straight and Narrow*? I don't think so! Or *Searching for Tom*? That might do, because the story starts with Madeleine, who is around ten, trying to follow in the footsteps of Charles Kingsley, who wrote *The Water Babies*, when she discovers that Mr Kingsley actually wrote the book in the Dales near where she lives, and she begins to hope that he really did find the little creatures . . . well, you never know . . . if anyone out there gets a better idea . . . I leave it in your capable hands!

All best wishes,
Sincerely,

Katie Flynn.

Prologue

IT WAS A hot day, but then most days are hot in Malvonía, a small South American republic, and the tall, dark-haired man appeared to be sunk in thought and not taking much interest in his surroundings. Below him the water of the dock had small fish investigating the mud, but the man hardly seemed to notice. There were few people about, for it was siesta, when all the shops and offices closed and respectable people took to their beds and slept away the hottest part of the day.

The man was scarcely aware of the heat, for he was thinking of his home and his children. His mind played wistfully with a mental picture of snow on holly branches, children skating on the nearest pond and gifts beneath the Christmas tree.

He had already bought presents for his son and daughter and wrapped them with great care in several layers of tissue. Then he had placed the gifts in a stout box, sealing it with what seemed to be yards and yards of sticky tape, and enclosing the whole thing in brown paper, adding string and even some sealing wax. Then, with the parcel well secured, he had walked up from the docks into the seedy little town, found a post office, bought the necessary stamps and left the parcel with the clerk, who would dispatch it by the first ship heading for England.

He had left the post office feeling relieved that the job was done, and headed for the dock where his ship, the *Mary Anne*, lay at anchor. The heat was beginning to get to him, and he ran a hand through his tightly curling dark hair, then produced a large handkerchief and wiped his glistening

forehead. He was thinking again of snow and red berries, so he did not even glance at the group of men coming towards him. They were talking and laughing, and just as he reached the *Mary Anne's* anchorage one of them addressed him. The man began to say he did not speak Portuguese, but even as his mouth formed the words he felt a sickening blow on the back of his head and found himself face down in the water of the dock. Desperately he struggled and managed to rise to the surface, but then something struck him another stunning blow, this time on the forehead, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter 1

IT HAD BEEN raining when Jimmy emerged from No. 4 Solomon Court, but by the time he had run his little sister to earth, playing shop in the Latimers' woodshed, the rain had turned to sleet and a sharp wind was blowing what felt like icy needles into his unprotected face. He had looked at Mo, happily selling a piece of broken china to Nelly Latimer, and grinned ruefully. It would have been nice to have her company, but he acknowledged that to request it would not have been fair. Mo was six, too young to be able to help with the laundry. It was far better to leave her playing happily whilst he undertook the errand which might or might not result in the sixpence that Aunt Huxtable had promised, so he had leaned down, patted Mo's curly head and told her he was going to the wash house for Aunt Huxtable and might not be back before dusk, for the December days were short and in a few days it would be Christmas.

Mo had been sitting cross-legged behind the makeshift counter – she was clearly the shopkeeper on this occasion and Nelly Latimer the customer – and had risen reluctantly to her feet, but Jimmy had waved her to sit down again. 'No point both of us getting soaked,' he had said kindly, 'so go on wi' your game.'

And he had set off, slinging the canvas bag across one shoulder as he tried to avoid the worst of the puddles, for the cardboard soles he'd inserted into his ancient boots did not do much to keep his feet dry. He was bound for the tearooms to deliver the clean laundry in his bag and collect the dirty stuff, which he would then take to the wash house. Normally Aunt Huxtable would do the delivery herself, but

today she had handed the carefully ironed linen to Jimmy with instructions to take it to the little café and collect the appropriate payment. He had planned to spend the day cutting holly in Princes Park and selling it on Homer Street market to make a bit of money for the holiday, and had just been telling himself that he could still do this when Aunt Huxtable had added a rider to her instructions. 'And when you've delivered the clean linen, just you take all the dirty stuff what she'll give you straight round to the wash house,' she had ordered him. 'Find yourself a sink and put the cloths in it; there's a bar of yellow soap in the bottom of the bag that you can use to get 'em clean. Then, when there ain't a stain on 'em, you must rinse 'em well and put 'em through the mangle. When that's done grab yourself a bit of line and hang 'em out. And don't you go leaving 'em there else you can be sure someone'll prig 'em. Gather 'em up whilst they's still damp but not really wet, and bring 'em home so's I can iron 'em. Then tomorrer you 'n' your sister can take 'em back to Mrs Simpson.' She had looked at him craftily, her mean little eyes sliding from the top of his head to his leaky boots. 'If you does as I say I'll give you a tanner; always provided the stuff's as clean as a new pin acourse.'

Jimmy had stared at her, aghast. 'But I've never done more'n carry the dirty linen up to the wash house for you,' he had said. 'Lads don't go in the wash house, lerralone do the washin'. Why can't you do it, Aunt Huxtable? I'm bound to make a mess of it, and then where will we be?'

Mrs Huxtable had laughed harshly and given Jimmy a shove so hard that he staggered. 'None of that snivellin'!' she had said sharply. 'I've gorra job in the pub scrubbin' down, which will take most of the day. There's nowt to stop a lad usin' the wash house, 'specially so near Christmas. If your sister were a bit older . . . but she can give you a hand. I reckon she knows how to wash a dozen or so tablecloths even if you don't. Where is she, anyroad? It ain't often the pair of youse is parted.'

‘Mo? I dunno,’ Jimmy had said vaguely. ‘Well, if I’m to do your washing as well as deliver the linen I’d best be off. And if you don’t come up with that tanner, Aunt Huxtable, it’s the last time I’ll run any errand for you, and that’s a promise.’

‘Don’t you threaten me . . .’ the woman had said menacingly, but perhaps there was something in the look Jimmy had given her which warned her that even worms will turn, so she gave a high, artificial laugh and actually smiled at him, though there had been little humour in the set of her thin-lipped mouth. ‘Awright, awright, you’ll get your perishin’ money, provided you do a good job, as I said. If you don’t, if there’s so much as one tea stain on one piece o’ linen, then you’ll not gerra penny. And bear in mind that me son’s ship docks at noon today; he won’t let me be cheated by a snivellin’ kid.’

At her words Jimmy’s heart had given a couple of extra beats. He and Mo hated and feared Cyril Huxtable, for the man was a bully and enjoyed giving pain. Jimmy had known Cyril’s ship was about to dock and wished he had remembered to warn his sister to steer clear of the man, until he recollected that Cyril was always first in at the pub door as soon as he was paid off. He would be in no condition to bully anyone for a couple of days at least.

Jimmy sloshed on, wondering whether he could get someone to give an eye to the washing once it was on the line. Maybe then he would still have time to cut some holly and make some real money, not just the measly sixpence which Aunt Huxtable had promised. But the sleet was turning to snow and Jimmy quickened his pace, seeing his destination ahead. He was looking forward to getting out of the wet, but when he reached the wash house he discovered that the steam from a dozen sinks and four enormous coppers made the atmosphere almost as damp as that of the street outside. Peering around him, he could not see one empty sink; every one seemed to be occupied. He

looked for someone who might be ready to exchange their washing sink for a rinsing one, then turned as his name was called.

‘Hello, Jimmy. Wharrever are you doin’ in here? If you’re wantin’ for an empty sink you can take mine on once I’ve got these perishin’ sheets an’ that over to the rinser. Come to that you could earn me grateful t’anks by helpin’ me to move ’em. Normally I wouldn’t ask, only I’m that wore out wi’ a-scrubbin’ at the stains . . . here, put your lot on me drainin’ board, then no one else will try to take over the sink.’

Jimmy beamed at the speaker, a big Irish woman who lived in Solomon Court a couple of doors down from No. 4. Her name was Mrs McTavish and Jimmy knew she took in a great deal of laundry, doing not only the washing but also the ironing, and turning out piles of crisp, dazzlingly white sheets, tablecloths and the like every day. She was a hard worker and popular with the other women who used the wash house, but for a moment he hesitated, for Aunt Huxtable was also in the business of laundering for others, though in a very small way as yet. Suppose Mrs McTavish resented the competition and meant to splash him with scalding hot water, or wait until his attention was elsewhere so that she might pull Aunt Huxtable’s laundry out of the sink and on to the dirty, puddled floor? It was the sort of thing Aunt Huxtable would have done herself if she could get away with it, but Mrs McTavish was a very different kettle of fish. He caught the fat woman’s eye and saw only appeal, and a sort of rueful friendliness, and so he took the copper stick from her huge, water-softened fingers and began to fish sheets, pillowslips and a couple of big white handkerchiefs out of the hot water.

‘Where d’you want ’em?’ he said gruffly. ‘Which sink is you rinsin’ in?’

The small, skinny woman on the far side of Mrs McTavish gestured to the sink next to her own. ‘Drop ’em in there,

lad,' she said. 'We's all up to our 'oxters in washin', what wi' Christmas so close.' She grinned at the big Irishwoman. 'I'd gi' you a hand meself, Feena, only I's gorra sink full, a-waitin' for a mangle to come free; the minute that happens I'll get this lot across.' She turned back to Jimmy. 'This near the 'oliday we's all at full stretch and workin' our fingers into holes so's we get paid in time to buy a bit of pork, or even a last-minute bird on Great Homey market.'

'Aye, that's why every sink's in use,' another woman remarked, twisting round to smile at Jimmy. She was younger than most of the others and was pegging out a line of nappies. 'When I saw you in here, lad, I thought t'ings is desperate so dey are, else you wouldn't find a lad in the wash house, not if it were ever so.' She chuckled and wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. 'Your mam gorra big order?' she enquired.

Jimmy shook his head, feeling a blush burn up his neck and invade his face. 'Nah,' he said quickly. 'And she ain't my mam, neither. She said she'd gimme a tanner if I brought her tablecloths an' that up to the wash house and stayed until the stuff was dry enough to iron.'

Mrs McTavish snorted and patted Jimmy's skinny shoulder. 'Tell you what, lad - you put your things in to soak and help me wit' me rinsin', then I'll help you wit' yours an we'll be done in no time.' She turned to the younger woman. 'You wasn't to know, Annie. I doubt you ever met Grace Trewin, this young feller's mam. She died a while back in a sannytorium of what we used to call consumption, though there's a big long name for it these days, and a nicer woman - Welsh, mind you - you'd have to go far to find. Her man went back to sea immediately after the funeral.' She lowered her voice. 'And if you ask me, he were took advantage of. They lived at four Solomon Court and Mrs Huxtable told him she'd move in and look after his children as if they were her own, only he'd have to keep paying the rent and hand over summat for their keep as well.' She

turned back to Jimmy. 'I'll warrant you've guessed that your pa agreed in a hurry and don't know the half of what goes on,' she said. 'He barely knew the woman by all accounts - he were away at sea most of the time, and then when your mam were so ill at the end he never left her side, ain't that so, young feller? And now you and your sister gets more kicks than ha'p'orths from the Widow Huxtable, what you calls your aunt.' She looked around, and Jimmy saw for the first time that most of the women were listening and grinning. 'She ain't your aunt, is she? Though even if she were she don't do right by you. Your pa's payin' through the nose and would be fit to kill if he could see how you're treated. You ought to tell 'im, lad, next time his ship's in port. Will you do that?'

Jimmy, dropping the Irishwoman's first two sheets into the sink and beginning to pump cold water over them, nodded uneasily. If Aunt Huxtable heard he had been discussing her with these friendly but forthright women he would get the thrashing of his life; if she could catch him, that was. Despite himself, Jimmy gave a tight little grin. If living with the Widow Huxtable - lor', she'd belt him if she heard him call her *that!* - had taught him anything it had been how to run like the wind, to hide, to stay clear until her fury had worn off, and never to utter a word in her hearing which she could construe as criticism. So he simply nodded at Mrs McTavish's words and continued to pump until the rinsing sink was full. Then he began to heave the rinsed sheets out of the water and on to the wide wooden draining board, looking round to see if there was a mangle free.

Around him, the women chattered, scrubbed, and helped each other to wring out sheets and straighten the big towels which rich folk sent down for washing. Jimmy let his mind wander to past Christmases, when his mother had been alive - and to her last moments, when he and Mo had gone to the sanatorium and seen her, so white and thin and only able to smile at them, to hold out a slender, blue-veined

hand, before her head had fallen sideways on the pillow and blood had gushed . . . but it was no use wishing. He knew she had loved them, had not wanted to leave them. Now there was just Aunt Huxtable, who crowed over having someone else to pay her rent and a nice little sum towards any expenses she might have. He knew she would lie inventively when his father wanted to know where the money was going . . . but that day had not yet come and in the meantime all he could do was make sure he and Mo spent as little time as possible in No. 4 Solomon Court . . . and learned to dodge and run when Aunt Huxtable's spiteful temper was at its worst.

Mrs McTavish started to wring the worst of the water out of the sheets, and then he helped her to fold the linen and feed it into the maw of the mangle. He quite enjoyed the work, only half listening to the chaff and laughter and letting his thoughts go back to Christmas, only a few days away. Not that it would make much difference to his and Mo's lives; Aunt Huxtable would see to that. Even if his father sent extra money for the holiday, Jimmy knew he and Mo would never see it.

The Irishwoman's voice brought Jimmy back to the present. 'True, ain't it?' she said. 'That woman's awful quick wit' a slap or a crack across the legs wit' a stick.' Mrs McTavish's voice was sympathetic, and Jimmy warmed to her. It would be a relief to tell someone of all the mean tricks Aunt Huxtable played on him and his small sister. Promises of food or money if they did her messages or cleaned the house, promises which were never kept; days when he was not allowed out of the house, not even to attend school, because she wanted him to fetch and carry, or to clean the pub on the corner when the landlord was out and would not realise that the two children had done the work for which their 'aunt' had been paid. Then there was her scarcely veiled amusement when Jimmy was caned for non-attendance, though it was scarcely his fault since she

herself had forbidden him to leave the Court. And he would never forget her spiteful gloating when Mo's letter to her father, begging him to come home, was destroyed before her six-year-old eyes.

Feena McTavish was looking at him, eyebrows raised, and Jimmy glanced cautiously around him before replying. 'Yes, she's hard on me little sister,' he said, keeping his voice low. 'I can take it if I have to – though I can run like the wind when she's close on me heels – but it's different for Mo. I tell her over and over not to stand her ground – there's no point in askin' for trouble – but the kid won't listen. And that Cyril near on broke her arm last time he were in port. If our da knew . . .'

He stopped speaking. Another woman had entered the wash house. Jimmy sighed. This was their neighbour, Mrs Grimshaw, and Mrs Huxtable's crony. She was in her forties, with thin greying hair pulled back from a sharp, spiteful face, and the minute she saw Jimmy she burst into speech. 'Here, jest you let Mrs Mac mangle her own perishin' sheets! Your aunt said you'd gi' me a hand if I fed you a morsel, 'cos she were too busy to go cookin' treats for two kids what give her nothin' but cheek! So what did you do after eatin' more'n your fair share of that there meat and tater pie? Lit out, that's what, so your aunt said to tell you there'd be no Christmas cheer for you unless me laundry was delivered, dry and ironed, afore the holiday. Now what does I find you doin'? Makin' yourself a nice little sum by givin' this good lady a hand wi' her manglin' while my tablecloths an' serviettes wait to be scrubbed. I'm tellin' you . . .'

Jimmy immediately released his hold on the sheets, but the Irishwoman winked at him and jerked a thumb. 'Leave off, Mrs Grimshaw,' she said, her voice calm but authoritative. 'The lad's not workin' for money, though I don't deny I'll gladly hand out a copper or two for the help he's give willingly. You find yourself another to do the work . . . which won't over-burden you, by the looks.'

Jimmy waited for an explosion of wrath from Mrs Grimshaw, but though she mumbled a complaint beneath her breath she said nothing more, merely crossing the puddled floor and dumping her washing – there was, indeed, not much of it – into the nearest unoccupied sink. Jimmy hastily picked up the next sheet and soon he and the Irishwoman were working once more. Jimmy decided that mangling was quite fun, or it was with Mrs McTavish cracking jokes to make him laugh and discussing the forthcoming holiday as though he, too, might get some enjoyment from it. She did not say a lot whilst Mrs Grimshaw was within hearing, but as soon as the sharp-faced woman had gone she began to talk freely once more.

‘You and your little sister will have some Christmas cheer, don’t you worry, for your pa’s bound to send a bit extry, a few little t’ings for his kids,’ she observed. ‘Tell you what, young feller; I’ll nip round to number four and put a word in. I reckon you’d rather I did that than paid you a few coppers for your help.’

Jimmy smiled politely, but wished he dared remind Mrs McTavish of the existence of Aunt Huxtable’s grown-up son. He, Jimmy, could outrun Mrs Huxtable, but he had suffered many times at Cyril’s hands. Last time he had come back he had accused Jimmy of some small sin, and when Jimmy had shot out of the house had grabbed Mo, dragged her to the door and bellowed out that if Jimmy didn’t return at once he’d break her perishing arm for her. Jimmy knew that if challenged Cyril would say he had been joking, just teasing the kid to keep him in line, but Jimmy had seen his sister’s face drain of colour as her small arm was forced up her back and he had returned at once, saying nothing when Cyril had hauled him into the kitchen and Aunt Huxtable had slashed his legs with the stick she kept handy by the kitchen fire.

But it was pointless worrying about Cyril, so Jimmy thanked Mrs McTavish but said that he hoped his pa might actually come home this year. The Irishwoman looked a little

doubtful, but she said nothing more on the subject and the two continued to work in harmony.

An hour later, when Mrs Huxtable's linen was dry enough to iron, Jimmy tucked the money she had given him into the pocket of his patched trousers. Then he ventured out of the wash house and looked doubtfully up at the darkened sky. The sleet had eased and lazy flakes of snow fell from the lowering clouds, but Jimmy hated the thought of returning to No. 4 without so much as glancing at the stalls on Great Homer Street. He had done the washing in record time, thanks to the kindly Irishwoman, so there could be no harm in a quick look at the second-hand stalls, where he might find some small gift for Mo which he could now afford to buy with the money Mrs McTavish had given him.

He glanced left and right, hesitated, and turned towards Great Homer Street. As soon as he reached the brightly lit stalls he headed for one where he knew from past experience that amongst the second-hand clothing small toys could sometimes be found. He was just examining a little dog with a torn ear when the stallholder addressed him. 'Hello there, young Jimmy! Lookin' for a gift for that pretty little sister of yours?' Harry Theaker, who Jimmy's mother had always maintained paid a fair price for anything she brought in, and had frequently employed Jimmy to help on the stall, shivered expressively. 'Why the devil they calls this a green Christmas I'll never bleedin' well know. Grey, yes, I'd go along wi' that. Ah well, since you're here you can gi' me a hand to get me goods stowed away. Are you on? Trade's terrible, 'cos no one wants to be out in weather like this, so I'm for home.' He smacked his lips. 'My old woman come past ten or twenty minutes ago and said she'd have the kettle a-boilin' and the muffins on the toastin' fork, so I don't mean to linger.'

Jimmy beamed at his old friend. 'Of course I'll help you. I meant to cut some holly, but I've been to the wash house for Aunt Huxtable and it's too late now. Mebbe I'll do it

tomorrer instead. How much is this little dog? It's only got half an ear, but you know our Mo, she'll just love it.'

He held out the little dog as he spoke and Harry Theaker took it from him, cast a look round the stall and sighed deeply. 'A threepenny joe,' he said decisively. 'And if you help me to get packed up before it's full dark you can have a bag of broken biscuits too; I were goin' to have 'em for my tea but now it'll be toasted muffins instead so you might as well eat them up for me. Is that fair?'

'It's real good of you, Mr Theaker,' Jimmy said gratefully, handing over the coins Mrs McTavish had given him and tucking the little dog and the biscuits into the bosom of his ragged shirt. He began to pack the items nearest him into a large tea chest. 'And don't you worry. I reckon tomorrow is bound to be better and you'll sell the rest of your stock.'

Harry Theaker laughed. 'You're a cheery little beggar,' he said jovially. 'And ain't you lucky young Mo weren't with you to see you buy that dog? Come to think of it, where is she?'

Jimmy thought that Mo was unlikely to have gone back into No. 4, because she was still in Aunt Huxtable's bad books. Some days before, Mrs Huxtable had been chatting to one of the neighbours as Mo descended the front steps and the woman had smiled at the small girl and said, 'Ain't you the lucky one? Your aunt's put money down to buy a nice fat chicken for your Christmas dinner. Ain't she a queen, Mo?'

'Yes, she is. I heared Mrs Carruthers what lives up the other end of the Court say she's the queen of liars,' Mo had said innocently. 'She said she has a new lie for every day of the week.'

It might not have been so bad if the other woman had not laughed, but laugh she did, for Aunt Huxtable's reputation had gone ahead of her. Normally Mo would have got a whipping, but because they were in the open with neighbours coming and going it had been passed off as a joke, albeit in rather bad taste. Mo had been shaken,

slapped and sent supperless to bed, and she was still wary in Aunt Huxtable's presence.

So now Jimmy grinned at the older man. 'Playin' shop in the Latimers' woodshed,' he said, continuing to pack Harry's stock neatly away. 'Are you going to collapse the stall? Only it looks as though it might rain again later.'

His companion shook his head. 'No point, me laddo,' he said. 'I'll be back here bright an' early settin' up shop, so I just cover the top with this here tarpaulin and I'm ready to start tradin' as soon as customers appear.'

'Right,' Jimmy said briskly, and very soon he was bidding Mr Theaker goodbye and setting off for the Court.

As he walked he began to wonder whether there really was any chance of his father's returning for the holiday. It had been more than a year since his mother's death, and though most folk were too tactful to remark on Mr Trewin's absence Jimmy knew that there were mutterings from kindly folk in the Court, who saw how Mrs Huxtable treated them and knew that their father would be horrified if he knew one half of what went on. Naturally enough Jimmy and Mo agreed with their well-wishers, for they yearned for their father's return and could not understand why he had left them for so long. Jimmy told Mo constantly that Dad loved them both and would come home one day and take them away from Mrs Huxtable, but recently he had overheard something which at least partially explained why he had not yet done so.

Jimmy had been queuing at the big brass water tap at the end of the Court with two empty buckets to fill, trying to think how he could get a letter to his father when he had no idea which ship he was on, when he suddenly heard a neighbour ahead of him in the queue mention his name.

'You know young Jimmy Trewin's pa haven't been home not once since his wife died? Did you know her?'

Her companion had shrugged, looking puzzled. 'I dunno. What did she look like?'

The neighbour sighed. 'She had wonderful ash blonde hair soft as a dandelion clock, big blue eyes and a rare lovely complexion, though as she got worse the colour faded from her cheeks and left her very pale.'

The other woman pulled a doubtful face. 'There's a kid round here what's got ash blonde curls,' she said, and Jimmy saw her friend nod.

'That's why we reckon he won't come back no matter what, 'cos he worshipped that Grace and just the sight of the little 'un brings his loss back.'

Jimmy had broken away from the queue with a mumbled excuse. He needed to think. It had never occurred to him that Mo was like anyone but herself, but now he realised the truth of the woman's statement. Mo was the image of their dead mother, in colouring at least. He thought the resemblance ended there, but could not help despising his father for staying away when he must know how their mother would have reproached him for his behaviour.

But right now, with the toy dog and the biscuits tucked away safely in his shirt, Jimmy decided there was nothing he could do about it, so there was no point in worrying. He was just thinking that if the weather was better the following day he would get Mo to help him cut holly when he saw her small figure tearing along the wet pavement as though the devil himself was on her heels. He guessed she was heading for the wash house to help him carry the laundry home, and stepped out in the middle of the pavement to bar her way.

Far from turning to accompany him back to Solomon Court and asking how his day had gone, however, she tore herself free from his arms, grabbed his hand and began to hustle him back the way he had come. Jimmy protested, reminding Mo that he had to deliver the old girl's washing so that she could iron the tablecloths and napkins damp and finish off the drying process by spreading them on the old wooden clothes horse before the fire. But Mo interrupted him,

tugging as hard as she could on his arm, and Jimmy saw that her eyes were dilated with fear and she was trembling.

‘What’s up?’ Jimmy said, turning at his sister’s imperious pulling. ‘You in Aunt Huxtable’s bad books again? We’ve no need to go back to the wash house; Mrs McTavish has given me a hand and the stuff’s just the way it should be, so you can stop worryin’. It’s all done, right and tight, so let’s go home and see what the old devil’s got us for tea.’

Glancing down at his sister, he realised that Mo was not wet through; even her pale curls were dry and fluffy, so whatever the reason for her flight along the road it was something which had only just happened. ‘Don’t say Mrs Latimer were cross because you and Nelly were playin’ in the woodshed? If so, I’ll have a word . . .’ He glanced up at the sky. ‘Only I reckon there’s more rain and sleet up there, just waitin’ to come tumblin’ down and drench us to the skin. We ought to get back to Solomon Court just as soon as we can.’

Mo pulled him to a halt as a few feathery flakes floated down to land on her crisp curls. ‘I can’t go back to Solomon Court ever,’ she said mournfully. ‘Oh, Jimmy, I never meant to do it, but I’ve been and gone and killed Cyril, and everyone’s after me!’

Chapter 2

JIMMY STARED AT his small sister, his mouth dropping open. 'You couldn't kill a great hefty bloke like Cyril Huxtable; I expect you just frightened him,' he said at last, though he continued to let Mo pull him back along Scotland Road. 'Tell me what happened and I'll see what we must do, only first we'd best get into some shelter because it's going to snow again any minute.' He made for Harry Theaker's stall, and he and Mo crawled under the canvas covering and made themselves quite a little nest by half emptying a tea chest of clothing, squeezing into it and pulling the displaced clothing in after them.

'Go on, fire ahead,' Jimmy said as they settled themselves, and Mo, nothing loth, began to speak. Cyril's ship had docked and as was his habit he had gone straight to the nearest pub and drunk nearly all his wages away. Then he had returned to No. 4, so sozzled that he had not even seen Mo curled up in her favourite spot on the hearth rug within the enclosing arms of the clothes horse upon which Mrs Huxtable had spread various articles of clothing. Mo had taken into her little refuge a sack of sprouts which Mrs Huxtable had given her to clean before she sold them to the neighbours for their Christmas dinners. Warmed by the fire, knowing she was well hidden, Mo did not worry when she heard Cyril Huxtable come stumbling across the kitchen. She saw that he had a bottle of rum in one hand and what looked like a parcel in the other. He dragged a chair up to the fire, muttering imprecations as to what he would do to anyone who interfered with him, and proceeded to tear the parcel open. It was well protected by several

layers of brown paper, and as one of them fluttered to the floor Mo saw her own name and thought it might be a Christmas present from her father. Not that it really mattered, Mo reminded herself ruefully, because Cyril would simply take the contents of the parcel down the road, either to the nearest pawn shop or to one of the stalls on Paddy's Market, and sell the contents for whatever he could get.

The brown paper concealed a large white box reinforced with sticky tape, and though from where she was hidden it did not look particularly strong appearances were obviously deceptive, because in the end Cyril, with a curse, had to take his knife to it, wrenching it open with little regard for the contents. Mo, craning her neck, saw that her guess had been right. The parcel contained presents: a soft toy, a teddy so fluffy and sweet that Mo's susceptible heart went out to it, and a harmonica.

She gasped; Jimmy was musical, had longed for a real mouth organ, and here it was, his heart's desire! More important, these gifts could only have come from their father, for only he would remember Jimmy's passionate desire for a proper instrument rather than the tinny little pipe her brother played in the school orchestra.

Mo gave a small moan. She remembered her mother apologising to Jimmy a couple of years earlier for her inability to buy the present he most wanted, saying that a really good harmonica was way beyond their means. Even if Cyril did not recognise its value, Aunt Huxtable would take it away and sell it for sure. She had to rescue the parcel before that happened; taking a deep, silent breath, Mo waited to see what Cyril would do.

At last, frowning heavily and taking swigs from his bottle every now and then, he seemed to make up his mind. 'Load of rubbish, that lot. Won't get nothin' for them down the market.' He chuckled to himself. 'It's lucky I've got other plans for making gelt.' And he took what looked to Mo like a sparkling string out of his pocket. She had never seen