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Janey

As she got out of the car, Janey Dobson stared down at her baby daughter, amazed to find herself a mother at the age of eighteen, and still angry that her parents had thrown her out for keeping Millie.

She still hadn't got her head round their rejecting both her and their granddaughter. People complained about the social services, but they'd been wonderful to her when she'd fallen through their local office doors, weeping and desperate, literally on the street with only a small suitcase.

Well, she'd be running her own home and life from now on. It was terrifying, but exciting too.

She heaved the buggy up the stairs while her social worker carried little Millie up to the first floor for her, opening the door with a smile and a flourish.

'Here we are. I think you're going to like living in this flat.'

Taking her wailing daughter into her arms, knowing she had no choice but to live here, whatever it was like, Janey turned round slowly, studying her new home. She closed her eyes for a moment in sheer relief at what she saw.

The main room was bigger than she'd expected with pale cream walls—new paint, too, from the smell. To her relief, the bedroom she and Millie would share was completely separate. The kitchen was in a recessed corner at the back.

‘Thanks, Pam. This’ll be great.’

‘It’d be better if it was on the ground floor, but the other five flats are either occupied or assigned.’

‘I don’t mind. It’ll be mine, at least. I mean, *ours*.’ She planted a quick kiss on Millie’s head in apology for forgetting her.

‘The people from *Just Girls* will be delivering a cot this afternoon and a few other things to help you set up home.’

‘Thanks for all your help, Pam.’

‘My pleasure. Look, let me show you how the heating works and then I’ll have to dash. I’ll pop round to see you next week but if there’s any problem, phone me. And be sure to register at the Medical Centre I showed you. They have an excellent Child Health Clinic.’

‘I will.’

When she was alone, Janey went to sit on the sagging armchair, rocking the buggy to and fro, enjoying the quietness. She’d lived in lodgings for a few months until the birth, working at two or three odd jobs, washing up in a café, anything to earn money. When she’d started having her baby, she’d packed her bags and said goodbye to her landlady, a dour woman who wouldn’t have her back with a baby.

No one except the social worker had visited her in hospital and she’d been glad to move to the *Just Girls* hostel afterwards. The matron there had helped her learn to look after her baby, but she was only allowed to stay for two months. She’d had to go into a B&B until this place became vacant.

‘We’ll be all right here, Millie darling,’ she said, but her voice wobbled. She’d never felt so alone in her whole life. No matter how kind social workers were, you were just a job to them, though even that was better than no one in the world caring whether you lived or died.

She was responsible for a child’s life, but she still felt as if she was playing at being a

grown-up.

Her baby refused to be lulled into sleep, so she unstrapped Millie and spread out a blanket on the floor so that her four-month old daughter could kick. She walked across to investigate the kitchen area. The cupboards were full of dust and odd screws or bits of wood from the recent renovations. The fridge was new—and totally empty. She switched it on and put in her few bits of food. They didn't even fill one shelf.

Millie seemed happy so Janey quickly washed out the cupboards, then made a cup of tea while she waited for the shelves and drawers to dry. When the baby grew hungry, she prepared a bottle of formula. There was never any trouble getting Millie to drink her bottles, thank goodness. She was such a good baby.

Afterwards Millie fell asleep suddenly, which made things a lot easier. Janey put her down on the floor again and covered her with a blanket. Poor little love! She had a bright red patch on one cheek, which meant teeth were coming through.

Janey tiptoed across to deal with the bedroom. There was enough room for a cot as well as the single bed, thank goodness. She pulled a face at the old-fashioned wardrobe against one wall, a huge thing with a mirror on the door and shelves inside it on the left. Since the baby was still asleep, she unpacked their clothes. There was more than enough room.

She studied herself in the mirror. She'd grown her hair because it was cheaper and could just be tied back. It was a nondescript mid-brown but she couldn't afford streaks now. Luckily she'd lost all the extra pregnancy weight and could get into her normal clothes again. Pam had persuaded her mother to hand those over one day when her father was out. He'd have refused just to spite her.

She was learning a lot about charity shops, where you could find all sorts of useful things if you took the time to search.

If only her parents had let her have her computer! She could have played around on it

even if she couldn't afford an Internet connection.

Someone rang the doorbell and as she went to use the crackly intercom for the first time, Millie woke with a start.

'Is that you, Janey? Dawn here from *Just Girls*. We've brought you a cot and a few other things.'

'Brilliant. I'm pressing the release button for the front door. I'm on the right on the first floor.' She picked her daughter up, shushing her gently, then went to open the door.

She knew Dawn, who had visited the hostel a few times, but not the other woman who was helping carry up the pieces of an old-fashioned cot.

Dawn looked round. 'Not bad at all. You should see some of the places where our girls have to live. We'll just fetch the rest then we'll help you set up the cot. Oh, this is Margaret, by the way.'

They brought up all sorts of bits and pieces, three loads in all. 'You never know what you need,' Dawn said cheerfully. 'If you find you don't need any of these, bring them back to our charity shop. One person's throwaway is another person's treasure. You can't miss it. It's on High Street next to the supermarket. Some of the other girls go there on Tuesday afternoons for a cup of coffee and a natter. Now you're living in Abbots Barton, why don't you join us? Do you think you could make it tomorrow?'

'Not tomorrow, no. I'll be too busy settling in here, shopping and catching up with the washing.' And she desperately needed some peace and quiet to get her head round what she would do with her life now.

'Well, don't forget to come next week. Since you're new to town, it'll help you to meet a few people.'

'I know. I won't forget.'

Janey was near tears by the time they'd shown her everything they'd brought, even a bundle of rags for cleaning, something she'd never have thought of. But she'd learned

not to give in to her emotions. Well, she didn't give in as easily as she used to, anyway.

'Thank you. I can't tell you how grateful I am. Um—is there a library near here?'

'Go down to High Street and turn right. It's about a five minute walk on this side.'

Dawn fumbled in her bag and produced a piece of card, scribbling on it. 'Here, give them this. You've no way of proving you live here yet, but they'll take my word for it that you're bona fide and let you join.'

'Thank you.' The tears welled up again but Janey blinked hard, refusing to let them loose.

As they got ready to leave Dawn asked gently, 'Are you sure you'll be all right, dear?'

'Yes. Yes, I'll be fine. I'm really grateful for all your help.'

But of course she wept after they'd left because one of them had given her a calendar. As she turned it to February and hung it up on a nail in the kitchen, today's date seemed to jump out at her and she started to sob. She'd hoped her mother would at least send her a birthday card, because she had Pam's contact details, but she hadn't. Her father never bothered about birthdays, but her mother had usually managed to conjure up some small treats.

She was glad she'd told Pam not to give them her new address, though she hadn't explained the real reason for that. Only she was terrified of a certain person getting hold of it.

Well, she was eighteen now, whether anyone acknowledged it with a card or not, officially an adult—and still crying like a child. That had to stop.

Surely things would get better now?

Winifred Parfitt walked slowly up Peppercorn Street, glad of her father's old silver-headed walking stick these days. The houses at the lower end had all been converted into flats now, with ugly dormer extensions poking up to make full use of the attic space. No

one cared two hoots whether the houses looked attractive, only how much money could be wrung out of a property.

Pausing for breath near a newly-renovated house, she watched a woman with grey hair carry a baby inside and behind her a pretty young woman hauled one of those funny, three-wheeled pushchairs up the steps. What did they call them? Oh, yes. Buggies.

The girl didn't look old enough to have a baby. Children grew up too quickly these days, encouraged to act like women before they'd finished school even.

Just past this huddle of mass dwellings near High Street were more flats, but these were of better quality, older houses converted with an eye to street appeal. She sighed, remembering when this was the best street in town. In the old days, these houses had had gardens filled with flowers and lush shrubs then, not these expanses of black tarmac with white lines painted on for the cars to park between.

Halfway up the sloping street Winifred stopped for another rest, because her shopping bag was heavy. She looked to the right at the new group of retirement villas, which were nearly finished. The developer had made a little cul-de-sac off Peppercorn Street and called it Sunset Close. Of course! Everything was 'sunset' as far as old people were concerned. She got sick of the sound of that word.

Over 55s only, the adverts had said. Her nephew had suggested she buy one and sell her home for development. Bradley had mentioned it several times and she was getting irritated by this. Why couldn't he understand that she loved the house she'd lived in all her life, however inconvenient and old-fashioned it was?

The gardens of the villas were tiny and bare as yet. Not big enough for trees, so there would be no shade to sit out under. She sighed, remembering the huge old house that used to stand here and the lad who'd lived in it, a lad who'd asked her father's permission to come courting.

Poor Jack had been killed in a motor car accident and she'd never found another young man to match him. She still kept his photo beside her bed. He looked so proud and handsome in his best suit. She was probably the only one who remembered him now because he'd been an only child. They'd planned to have four children. Now she had none. Just her nephew.

Lately Bradley had started getting impatient with her, going on and on about how she wasn't thinking clearly. Was she losing her grip? She'd made one or two mistakes which he'd pounced on. But everyone made mistakes. Mentally she was as acute as she'd always been. She could still do a crossword quickly and accurately, and answered most of the questions on quiz shows on the television, except for those about pop music and sport, of course.

She started walking again. The houses nearer to hers were semi-detached Edwardian residences with attics. They had large rooms and high ceilings. Most of them had been tastefully refurbished, she'd grant the new generation of owners that much. But these people didn't make good neighbours. They were so busy chasing money and ferrying their children around, they didn't have time to do more than nod at her. She missed having real neighbours to talk to or share a cup of tea with.

She missed having friends, too. Hers had died one by one over the past five years. So sad. The funeral of the final one had been yesterday. She and the lawyer had been the only mourners because poor Emily had been a spinster like her.

The lawyer had asked Winifred to make an appointment to see him about a bequest, so she'd agreed to go in two days' time. Emily had probably left her the books and bookcases, as she'd once promised to do. They'd be very welcome. You couldn't have too many books. They didn't die on you.

Winifred paused at her gate, a little out of breath, and frowned as she looked at the garden. She really ought to get someone in to do the front. Gardening was too much for

her these days, but share values had tumbled and with them her income, so she simply couldn't afford to hire someone and that was that. The best she could manage now was to hoe the weeds along the path.

With a sigh, she pushed open the gate, closed it carefully and walked to the front door. It was dim inside because she kept the front curtains drawn for privacy. She shivered. The front of the house wasn't much warmer than outside. She'd be glad when spring arrived. Even if she'd been able to afford to have full central heating installed, she didn't have the money to run it.

Hanging her coat up carefully on the hallstand, she went through into the kitchen and servants' quarters. She spent most of her time here during winter, because her nephew had found her a small oil-fired Aga second-hand a couple of years ago. He'd said it wasn't good for the house to get damp. It wasn't good for her, either, but he didn't seem to care about that. She was beginning to wonder where Bradley's real interest lay: was it her or the house she'd foolishly told him he'd inherit one day.

Someone had to have the place, though, and he was her closest relative. She'd not bothered to keep in touch with her other relatives and they'd not bothered with her, though one niece sent her a Christmas card every year.

Families didn't stay together like they used to.

Bradley worked off shore but came to see her whenever he was in England. She made lunch for him and he did little repair jobs around the place, joking about keeping it weather-tight.

In winter she now slept in the room off the kitchen, because it was warmer. She still thought of it as Cook's bedroom. She used the tiny servants' bathroom nearby, too. Her mother would have had a fit at that.

Thank goodness it was a huge, old-fashioned kitchen, with room for her favourite armchair as well as a small table and a television! She was very cosy here, really. She

shouldn't complain. There were plenty of people worse off than her.

Pulling her library books out of her shopping bag Winifred debated which to read first, made a pot of tea and ate a piece of cake (home made, she could still do the cooking, thank you very much).

As she settled down in the armchair, she felt guilty at how many romances she read—her father had always called them 'rubbish', though how he knew that with such certainty when he'd never read a single one, she didn't understand. And most of them weren't rubbish. Love was a wonderful thing. It made her feel good every time she saw a couple walking down the street hand in hand, with that luminously happy look on their faces.

Books with happy-ever-after endings had always been her favourites and if you couldn't read what you wanted at the age of eighty-four, it was a poor look-out. Picking up the new historical romance by her favourite author, she opened it and sighed happily at the description of the hero. He sounded just like Jack, so she gave him Jack's face in her mind.

When Millie woke up, Janey changed her nappy, gave her a drink and went out in search of the library and a supermarket. Pushing the buggy slowly along, she studied the High Street shops with interest. Abbots Barton was a smallish town but it seemed to have everything she needed. She'd begged Pam to move her as far away as possible from her old home. It hurt so much when her mother walked past her in the street, behaving as if she didn't exist and not even glancing at Millie.

Even before the woman behind the counter smiled at her, Janey could tell this was a good library. There was a feel to the good ones you simply couldn't mistake. They made you feel welcome, valued.

'Can I help you?'

‘I’ve just moved to the area. I’d like to join the library and I want to find out as much as I can about the town.’

‘Do you have proof of your resident status?’

‘Not yet, but Dawn Potter gave me this.’ She handed over the note just as Millie started to grizzle. ‘I’m sorry. She’s teething. I’ll choose my books quickly, so I won’t disturb you for long.’

The woman glanced at the card. ‘That’s fine. Look, why don’t you put your baby’s buggy in the children’s area, then we’ll take down the membership details. You’ll be able to keep an eye on her as you look for books and she won’t disturb people as much from there.’ She indicated a glass-walled room to one side, filled with bright posters, toys and small chairs.

‘Thank you. That’ll be such a relief. I’m lost without a book.’

‘You should join one of our reading groups.’

‘Maybe I will.’ Janey walked round the library, choosing the four books she was allowed, wishing it was more. Still, this library wasn’t far to walk. She could come here two or three times a week.

As she waited to take out her books, the same woman who’d enrolled her, whose name badge said Nicole, came across with some brochures. ‘I thought these might be useful to help you settle in. You must go and see the abbey ruins when the weather gets warmer. There’s such a sense of peace.’

She pointed. ‘There are some tatty paperbacks in those boxes over there. People bring them in rather than throw them away. You can take one or two each time you come in. Keep them if you like, but if you don’t want them, we’d be grateful if you’d bring them back again.’

‘I don’t have many books yet because I’m just setting up home. Can I really keep them?’

‘Yes, of course.’ She smiled and lowered her voice. ‘Take half a dozen this time, as a welcome to the town present.’

There! Janey thought as she moved across and found two of her favourite novels immediately, I did have a birthday present after all. It seemed like a good omen.

Retrieving Millie, she walked out, feeling considerably cheered up. Now she’d have something to do tonight. You never felt as lonely with a book in your hand. She’d have somewhere to store books too. From now on she’d keep an eye on the cheap books in charity shops. She’d rather eat bread and jam for tea than not have a book to read.

There was a small supermarket on the other side of the street from the library, so she nipped in to buy some food for tonight. She’d do a proper shop tomorrow, make lists, be efficient. How her old home economy teacher would laugh at that! It had been her worst subject.

She was tired but felt hopeful as she trudged home, even though it had started to rain. Her life was starting up again. And Millie was a darling, so she wasn’t alone any more.