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Chapter Two

“Bye, Tracy. Remember and phone when you get there,” her mum shouted.

“Okay. I promise I will,” Tracy called back.

Then it was ten o'clock, and the train pulled out of the station. Tracy leaned back in her seat. It had a 'reserved' ticket on it, and this made her feel more confident. Only four stops to go past, and then I get off at the fifth, she said to herself. She pulled a small writing pad out of her zipped shoulder bag, and checked the names of the stations. Yes, she was familiar with them all; but it was good to have them written down like this when she was travelling alone. She had promised mum that she would send a text at each station, and then she would know she was fine. She was sure that was a good idea. She liked sending texts to mum. She had her mobile in her bag, and she kept the long strap of the bag safely over her head. That way there would be no risk of accidentally leaving it behind on the train. She was rather proud of this bag, it was made of dark blue denim that was an exact match to her favourite jeans, and it was decorated with some strips of strong brightly multicoloured ribbons in a central panel on one side of it.

She was sitting in one of those seats a bit like the ones on planes. Not that she had been on planes very often, but she had been on them enough to be familiar with them. She noticed that there was a reservation ticket on the seat next to her, but there was no one in sight so far. Mum had stowed her larger bag on the shelf above her head. That one had all her clothes in it. She and mum had chosen it together at the sports shop. It was lightweight, and was made of a tough red nylon material. She was a bit worried about how to get it down again, but she had practised by standing on the seat while mum was still with her, and seemed to manage all right.

She was just beginning to enjoy the feeling of being settled in her seat, watching through the window at the trees and houses flashing by, when she realised someone was in the aisle, next to the vacant seat. She turned and saw a large woman with a strangely shaped box, a bulging leather handbag, and a suitcase on wheels. The woman dumped the box and the handbag on the seat next to Tracy, and proceeded to telescope the handle of the suitcase to its shortest length. There was a scuffle as a man insisted on helping her to stow in a space between the backs of seats on the opposite side, and then the woman lifted the strange box up onto the luggage shelf next to Tracy's bag. After that, she wedged herself into the seat beside Tracy.

Tracy found this uncomfortable and she felt hemmed in. The woman was the size of at least one and a half seats, and her warm flesh protruded under the armrest, and jammed itself against Tracy's thigh. She began to wish the journey would be over soon, when it had only just begun.

The woman sighed loudly, and then turned to Tracy and said, “How far are you going, love?”

“Just a few stations,” Tracy replied, slightly evasively.

“Well, I'll be getting off at the one after next,” said the woman. “Are you off on holiday somewhere?”

Tracy nodded her head, and the woman went on. “I'm going to a wedding. You might have noticed the hatbox I put up on the shelf. It's my hat for the wedding.”

Tracy felt intrigued, and wished she felt free to ask to see the hat; but she had always been taught never to get into conversation with strangers, men or women, and she stuck to what she had been taught. It was all right to say a polite 'yes' or 'no', but it wasn't all right to encourage a conversation. That's what she had been taught, and from everything she knew, it was safer to stick to it.

The woman was speaking again. “I can see the food trolley coming along. Do you want anything?”

“No, thanks very much,” said Tracy.

“Are you sure? I’m going to have a pack of sandwiches.”

Tracy shook her head in as polite a way as she could. The woman turned towards the aisle, and Tracy heard her ask for a pack of egg mayonnaise ones. Oh, no, my favourite! she thought, and her mouth started to water. She unzipped her shoulder bag again and pulled out some chewing gum, which she quickly fed into her mouth and started to chew as unobtrusively as possible.

The woman was soon munching contentedly, and Tracy was able to return to her study of the passing scenery until the first station came into view, and she could send a text to her mum to let her know where she was. A text came back almost straight away. Tracy was glad she had put the settings to ‘mute’, as she didn’t want the large woman to notice what she was doing.

“Tell you what, love,” said the woman between chews. “I’ll stand up before we get to the next station, and I’ll let you have a look at my hat.”

“Oh,” said Tracy, unguardedly, “I’d really like that.” She clapped her hand to her mouth, realising her mistake.

“Don’t worry, love,” said the woman. “I’m not about to do you any harm. There’s some right rum people about these days, but I’m not one of them. I wouldn’t harm a flea.”

Tracy thought for a moment how, if there was a flea on a seat where that woman was about to sit down, it wouldn’t have a chance; but then, she realised, that would be true whoever was sitting on something so small, be it a large person or a small one. She waited, looking forward to seeing the hat.

The sandwiches finished, the woman stood up and put the wrapper in the bin. Then she put her handbag on the seat once more, and reached up to her hatbox.

“Here, love,” she said, placing it on Tracy’s knee. “Open it up and have a look inside.”

Tracy opened the fastenings, and lifted the lid. Inside the box was an amazing creation of feathers. In fact, it looked not unlike a bird, except that it had no head, beak or legs.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“Yes, it’s beautiful, isn’t it,” said the woman, proudly. “Belonged to my aunt, it did.”

Tracy stared at the iridescent colours of the central feathers, surrounded by the many hues of brown in the surrounding feathers that framed them. She couldn’t really work out which bit of it all would sit on the woman’s head, but she decided that didn’t actually matter. She would have liked to have asked which birds the feathers had come from, but not only was that outside minimal politeness, but also the train was slowing down as it approached the next station.

“I’d better shut it up,” said Tracy. “Here’s your station.”

Thankfully, she closed the lid and refastened it, while the woman collected her suitcase on wheels and extended the handle. She would feel relieved once the woman was off the train, not because she was in any way unpleasant, but it would remove the conflict Tracy felt about whether to speak to her or not, and if she spoke, what to say.

“Thanks for showing me,” said Tracy, as she handed the box across.

“Nice to meet you, love,” replied the woman. “Bye.” And she pushed her way along the aisle to the automatic sliding door, which obligingly let her through to where the door out of the carriage onto the platform stood open.

Tracy took out her mobile once more, and sent a text to her mother including the name of the station. She added an abbreviated sentence about the woman and the hatbox, and her mother sent her a reply saying, “Well done.” Tracy relaxed back into her seat and took a deep breath.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. The train was not busy, and no one else came to sit next to her. She sent texts to her mother at the next two stations, and then prepared to leave the train at the one after that. A young man in a railway uniform was making his way along the carriage, checking tickets, and as he saw her struggle slightly with her red bag, he reached up and lifted it down for her.

“Thanks,” she said, as she steadied herself, and prepared to make for the sliding door through which the large woman had left.

The train drew up at the platform, and she could see Flora waiting under a clock, exactly as had been arranged. She was taller than Tracy had remembered, but then, it was a year since she had seen her. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and seemed to be even fairer than it had been before. She was wearing a blue T-shirt, and denim jeans that looked not unlike the pair Tracy herself was wearing.

Tracy made her way out of the carriage onto the platform and greeted her. "Hi!" she said, a little uncertainly.

"Oh, hi..." Flora replied. "Sorry, I didn't see you getting off, although you were right in front of me."

"Never mind," said Tracy, as she put her red bag down for a moment to swing her shoulder bag round, so the back of her neck no longer took its weight.

"I could take one of the handles of this," Flora offered.

"Thanks," replied Tracy, relieved to be getting help with it. Although it wasn't too heavy, it was quite bulky and banged against her leg as she walked. Carrying it by taking a handle each would certainly improve things a lot.

"Mum's at the Cash and Carry, buying in all the breakfast cereals and cleaning things at the moment," said Flora, as they made their way along the platform. She went on. "This is a working holiday for you, you know. It's the busy season, and Mum's run off her feet she says. I've helped out before, of course. Last year and the year before it was just a few small jobs - carrying things around, and that kind of thing; but this year, Mum's paying me to work four hours a day. I usually do seven thirty to twelve, with a break of half an hour."

She tossed her head confidently as she imparted this information.

"When Mum said Auntie May would be busy I had hoped I would be able to do something to help," said Tracy. "In fact, I've been looking forward a lot to coming; and it's because I'd like to learn as much as I can about the bed and breakfast business, as well as having some time with you. I expect you know that dad was ill for quite a long time this year, and couldn't go to work. It's made me think a lot more about how I'll have to earn my own living when I'm grown up."

Flora took in this information. "That's fine, then," she said. "By the way, you'll be sharing a room with me. I'm up in the attic for the summer - that's so Mum can let out my room. We'll have plenty of space, because it's just one big room. I had to carry all my stuff up the stairs. It took me ages. But I've made it look quite nice," she finished proudly.

By this time, they had passed through the station barrier and were walking along the road to a bus stop.

"It's only a few stops," said Flora, "but we may as well take the bus while we've got your bag."

When they reached the stop, they both dumped the bag gratefully on the ground while they waited for the bus to come.

"What have you got in here, anyway?" asked Flora. "A few bricks, perhaps?"

Tracy blushed. "No...o," she stammered. "I've just got some changes of clothes, my nightclothes and..."

Flora butted in. "I was just winding you up! You don't have to go through it all. Right!? Look, here comes the number seven. We'll get on this one."

They grabbed the handles of the red bag and climbed on the bus together; then Flora paid the driver, and they found a seat near the exit door.

A few minutes later, they alighted just outside a large church.

"This is St Peter's," Flora remarked, despite the large board that stated this fact in bold lettering. She went on. "I don't much like church, but I do like the Youth Club they have here. I usually go on a Friday evening. You can come along if you want. It's okay to bring a guest."

"Thanks," said Tracy. "What sort of things do they do?"

"In the summer we usually go out. There's a putting green that some of us like. We can have a laugh there. One of the group leaders belongs to the golf club and sometimes takes us in to teach us a bit, and shows us how to practise shots. If it's wet, we stay in and have a discussion group. You know... talk about things like drugs, and how to help old people... that kind of thing. It's much better than soc. ed. at school." She shuddered.

"What's that?" asked Tracy.

"Social education," Flora explained. "We get Mr Roberts. He's *so boring!* I think he must learn it all out of a book and then spout it at us." She groaned loudly. "It's *so bad!*"

Tracy giggled. The image of Mr Roberts spouting at a group of bored pupils who would be trying not to pull faces was too much for her. She noticed that this expression of her mirth led to quite a change in Flora. Although she had not been unfriendly before, Tracy had picked up a sense that Flora had not exactly been looking forward to her visit, and that she'd had reservations about

having to spend much time with her. But after Tracy's unconcealed outburst of amusement, Flora relaxed, and turned towards her, smiling openly.

"Hey!" she said. "We could have quite a good time together while you're here. "

In the knowledge of this, Tracy skipped a few steps.

"Hang on a minute," said Flora, loudly. She had been taken by surprise, and the handle of the bag was nearly jerked out of her hand. "It's the next road on the right. "

"Yes, I remember," replied Tracy.

The two turned right and then almost immediately through a gate on the left hand side of the road into the short drive of a brick-built semi-detached house. It was the one on the left of the first pair. What had been the front garden had been turned into a patch of concrete for car parking. A signboard stood just to the side of the low wall that divided this area from the neighbouring house, and it bore the words Welcome Home - Bed and Breakfast. The house and its sign were well placed, because both were clearly visible from the main road the girls had just left, a situation that mostly certainly was of potential benefit to the business.