

Chapter One

1935

‘Will you look at that!’ Ruby exclaimed, directing her remark to the girl standing near her. She too was staring, mouth agape at the sight of a man being dragged from the Hampstead swimming pond.

‘Is he dead?’ the second girl asked with a tremor in her voice.

‘I reckon so. They ain’t even tryin’ to bring him round.’

It was early April, just after Easter, and although a sunny day, it was cold. Apart from the two girls there were only a few other people watching – in the main, adult dog walkers.

The girls watched in silence as the two burly policemen continued to haul the sodden body up on to the path beside the pond, and then on to a stretcher manned by two ambulance men.

There were three swimming ponds on the heath: one mixed bathing, and the other two for single sex only. All three were surrounded by thick bushes and trees, and fenced in. The ladies’ pond was almost impossible to see into as the foliage was so dense. But the drowned man had chosen the mixed pond, and as a section of hedging had been cut back to enable a fence repair, the girls could see very clearly.

Ruby felt an odd little stab of emotion as she saw the ambulance man cover the drowned man's face. It was the first dead person she'd ever seen, and although she was some thirty yards away and had not known the man, it still felt like a loss.

'I wonder who he is?' the second girl asked. 'And if he's got a wife and children? S'pose we'll have to wait till it's in the newspapers to find out,' she added sadly.

Ruby sensed that this girl felt as she did, and so she turned to look at her properly. She guessed she was a bit younger than her, perhaps twelve or thirteen, her long blonde hair held back off her face by a blue velvet band. She had a posh voice and her clothes were expensive; Ruby was usually invisible to such girls.

'They'll only write about 'im if 'e was rich or important, no one cares why poor people die,' she said with authority. 'D'you live round 'ere? I ain't seen you afore.'

'I live the other side of Hampstead Village, down near Swiss Cottage,' the blonde said. 'I don't normally come up on the heath on my own; Mother thinks murderers prowl up here.'

Ruby liked the way she said that, like she was scoffing at her mother's opinion. 'Do murderers prowl looking for people to kill?' she asked, grinning because she liked the image. 'Don't they usually kill someone they know? Anyway, what's yer name and 'ow old are you?' she asked.

'Verity Wood, and I'm thirteen. How about you?'

'Ruby Taylor, and I'm fourteen. I live in Kentish Town and it ain't nice like round here, 'spect your ma would 'ave a fit if she knew you was talking to the likes of me!'

'I don't much care what she thinks.' Verity tossed her

head and her shiny hair flicked back over the shoulder of her coat. ‘Where do you think they’ll take that man’s body? Will the police find out where he comes from?’

Ruby liked that this posh girl didn’t seem to feel it was beneath her to speak to what most people would call a ‘ragamuffin’. She was also thrilled that her opinion was being asked.

‘They’ll take ’im down the morgue, that’s the place they cut up dead people to see why they died. If ’e’s got stuff in ’is pockets that says who ’e is and where ’e lives, the police go round there to tell ’is family, and make one of ’em go and identify ’im.’

‘Fancy you knowing such things,’ Verity exclaimed.

Ruby shrugged. ‘Mrs Briggs what lives downstairs to me and my ma, she had the police call to say ’er old man was found dead in Camden Town with his ’ead smashed in. My ma went with ’er to identify him. They was both sick cos ’e looked so bad. But when the doctor cut ’im open they found ’e never died from the wound on his ’ead, he’d had a bleedin’ ’eart attack and fallen over and smashed his bonce on the kerb.’

‘Gosh,’ Verity said reverently, looking admiringly at Ruby. ‘What a lot you know!’

They fell silent as the ambulance drove away with the drowned man, and watched as four policemen spread out to examine the ground around the pond.

‘They’ll be looking for sommat to tell ’em whether the man fell or waded in all alone. But if they find other foot-prints or sommat, they may think someone pushed him in, or even killed ’im first and dumped his body in the water,’ Ruby said knowledgeably. ‘I reckon ’e was killed

and they dumped 'im in there last night, after the pond closed.'

Ruby was very interested in detective work. Coming from rough, slummy Kentish Town she was used to seeing policemen searching for evidence after a crime. She'd often been questioned about whether she'd seen this or that person, and just as often she questioned the young constables about the incidents they were investigating. She'd learned from the moment she could talk that she should never 'grass' on anyone, and she wouldn't – but there was no law, written or unwritten, against gathering information for her own satisfaction.

The girls watched for a little longer, but seeing nothing further of interest they began to walk away, towards Whitestone Pond and Hampstead Village.

'You got any bruvvers or sisters?' Ruby asked, keen to hold this posh girl's interest for as long as she could.

'No, I wish I had, it can be very lonely being the only one,' Verity replied.

Ruby didn't really understand what lonely meant. Living in one room with her mother, with all the other six rooms in the house holding entire families, there was always noise and people. That was why she'd walked up to the heath today, to have quiet and solitude.

'I likes being alone,' she said with a shrug. 'Well, at least I likes quiet – don't get it where I live – but I likes being with you. You ain't rowdy, and you're real pretty.'

'Well, thank you,' Verity said and turned to face Ruby. The girl had curly red hair which, although it needed a good comb, was a lovely colour, and her green eyes enhanced it. 'You are pretty too, I like your hair, and I like

being with you because you know so much. The girls from school are all so dull and prissy, all they can do is giggle and talk about frocks.'

'I can't talk about frocks cos I've only got this one,' Ruby said. It was a rough brown cotton one that fitted where it touched and was very grubby. Over the top she wore a boy's tweed jacket. Her mother had found it on the way home from the pub one night and would have worn it herself but it was too small. 'But I'm glad you like my 'air, most people call it carrots.'

'It isn't a carrot red, it's more copper and very lovely,' Verity said. 'Though I think you should try combing it now and again.'

Ruby didn't really know how to respond to that. Verity obviously came from the kind of home Ruby had only ever glimpsed at the pictures. A place where brushes and combs sat on a dressing table, where a hot bath could be run any time, and someone picked up her dirty clothes and washed and ironed them for her.

Ruby knew Verity wouldn't have any idea what it was like to live in one small room with a mother who was always in a drunken stupor when she was home, or where washing yourself and your clothes meant hauling a bucket of water up to their room, or choosing to do it down at the communal tap out the back. When Ruby washed her dress she had to watch over it while it dried, wearing only her petticoat with a sack around her shoulders, in case someone even worse off stole it. Even the comb was always going missing.

'If I had a comb, I would,' Ruby said, not taking offence at what Verity had said. She noted the girl's thick navy-blue

coat with a brown fur collar and cuffs, and would do anything to have such a coat. She could see too that Verity's dress which peeked out from under the coat was pink wool. She even had thick stockings to keep her legs warm. 'I'd also like a nice warm coat like yours, and a dinner every day, but as my gran used to say, "If wishes were 'orses, beggars would ride."'

Verity's face fell and she looked embarrassed. 'I've been rude, haven't I? I didn't think. I'm sorry.'

'Nuffin to be sorry for,' Ruby said airily. 'Your sort don't know nuffin about the poor. I bet you don't normally go beyond your own street? You should, though, London is an amazing place.'

Verity's blue eyes sparked with interest and she looked questioningly at Ruby. 'Would you show it to me?' she asked.

Ruby shrugged. She was in fact thrilled that a girl like Verity would even walk across the heath beside her, let alone wish to spend more time with her. 'If you want,' she said, as nonchalantly as she was able. 'My school's on 'oliday this week, is yours? We could do sommat tomorrow?'

'Yes, yes!' Verity danced from one foot to the other, smiling broadly. 'That would be wonderful.'

Ruby laughed, such enthusiasm making her forget she was hungry and cold. 'You'll need a bit of money for the underground or the bus, and if you want to eat anything, I ain't got any.' She didn't want to sound like she was begging, but she had to make her situation quite clear.

'That's fine, I've got some money,' Verity beamed. 'Would you like to get something to eat and drink now, and we could talk about where we'll go tomorrow?'

Ruby stiffened. She very much wanted to eat and drink, but she didn't think she'd be welcome in the kind of places Verity was probably used to visiting. 'I'd like that, but –' She broke off, unable to bring herself to say that.

Verity frowned. Then, as if she suddenly understood, she grinned. 'I think I know just the right place. So come on,' she said, and held out her hand to take Ruby's.

The girls ran down Heath Street, hand in hand, laughing because people were looking at them. When they got to the underground station Verity led Ruby down towards Belsize Park and, around five hundred yards further on, turned left into a narrow alley. There were several small shops there – a cobbler's, a haberdasher's and a hat shop – all of which were a bit scruffy, and once past these there was a pie shop. A wonderful smell was coming from it and Ruby's stomach contracted painfully with hunger.

'A maid we had for a while took me in here once,' Verity said. 'She said they make the best pies in London. I couldn't say if that was true as our housekeeper makes lovely ones, but I thought the one from here was really tasty.'

Ruby could see it wasn't an ordinary pie and mash shop because it didn't have one of those big counters to keep the pies hot, and she thought they must sell their pies on to other shops and restaurants. But it did have two small tables for anyone who wanted to eat a pie here.

'If you think it's alright for me to go in, then I'd love one,' Ruby said, finding it hard to form the words because she was salivating so much. 'I'm starving,' she added.

That was no exaggeration as she'd had nothing at all to eat for two days. Her sole reason for coming to Hampstead today had been to steal whatever she could find.

She'd discovered that people here had daily deliveries of bread, milk and other groceries and if they were out the delivery man would often leave them in a porch. But she'd been sidetracked by the activity at the pond as she walked across the heath and had temporarily forgotten her hunger and her purpose in being there.

Verity asked for two meat pies and two cups of tea and within minutes their order arrived at their table.

'Oh, Gawd!' Ruby exclaimed as her nose was assailed by the aroma of steak and kidney beneath the golden pastry. 'I'm so bleedin' 'ungry, I'm gonna show you up gulping that down.'

'Our housekeeper takes it as a compliment if I bolt down food she's cooked, and I expect they will here too.' That was in fact a lie. Miss Parsons would not be impressed by anyone bolting their food, no matter how delicious. She had a big thing about good manners. But Verity wanted Ruby to feel comfortable.

Ruby sensed the lie, but decided it was kindly meant, because she doubted that the woman who had brought the pies to their table would take any pleasure in seeing her eat. It was likely she was out the back right now wondering how to separate a little rich girl with a kind heart from a guttersnipe who was probably planning to rob her. But right now Ruby wasn't concerned with what anyone thought of her, she just wanted to fill her belly.

Ignoring the knife and fork, she lifted the hot pie up to her mouth and took a bite. It was without a doubt the best pie she'd ever tasted, rich and succulent, the meat almost melting in her mouth. As for the pastry, that was flaky and

as light as a butterfly's wing. She closed her eyes, the better to savour the taste and the delicious aroma.

The pie was gone in a flash and she opened her eyes to see Verity toying with hers using a knife and fork. 'That were great,' she said breathlessly, licking her fingers and wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

All at once she became aware just how uncouth she must seem to Verity. She had stuffed the pie into her mouth with dirty hands, and even if Ruby had never watched rich people eat, she knew it wasn't done like that. She was flooded with shame and tempted to run out of the pie shop and back to Kentish Town.

But Ruby was too grateful for the food to want to hurt Verity's feelings still more.

'I'm sorry,' she said, her eyes cast down. 'I ate that like a pig, didn't I? I was just so 'ungry I couldn't 'elp myself. I showed you up, and you eating so daintily.'

Verity just smiled, a real smile that made her blue eyes sparkle. 'You couldn't help it, not if you were really hungry. Eat the rest of mine, I've had sufficient. But don't eat it so fast or you'll get indigestion, that's what Miss Parsons always says.' She pushed her plate, with more than half of her pie remaining, over to Ruby.

Ruby needed no further encouragement, but this time she picked up the knife and fork and tried to copy the way Verity ate.

Outside the pie shop, some ten minutes later, Verity caught hold of Ruby's arm. 'Are you often hungry?' she asked. 'Doesn't your father go to work?'

'I ain't never seen my father,' Ruby said gruffly. ''E were

gone afore I was born. And bein' 'ungry is usual. I come up 'ere today to nick stuff to eat. That's usual too.'

Shock widened Verity's eyes. 'That's dreadful,' she said. 'I mean dreadful that you have to, not that you were dreadful. I wish I could take you home with me and make everything right for you, but I can't.'

'Of course you can't,' Ruby laughed. 'Talking to me and buying me a pie was more than enough. If your folks saw you with me, they'd have fifty fits.'

'But we can be friends, can't we?' Verity asked. 'I like you.'

A warm feeling washed over Ruby, and it wasn't just because she'd eaten and had a cup of tea. 'And I like you too,' she said. 'But if we're gonna be pals, you'll have to teach me some manners.'

'I can do that, and you have to teach me about London,' Verity said. 'Starting tomorrow.'

Verity let herself in the basement door at her home in Daleham Gardens very quietly, hoping she could sidle up the stairs to her bedroom unseen. But luck wasn't on her side, and she ran straight into Miss Parsons the housekeeper coming out of the laundry room.

'Where have you been, child?' she asked in her usual sharp tone.

Verity's heart sank, the housekeeper always reported any misdemeanours. 'I just went for a walk up to the village. I'm sorry, was Mother looking for me?'

Miss Parsons was a small, bony, middle-aged woman who had come to work for the Woods when they first bought this house. Verity had been about three then. That

she came from Cambridge was the limit of Verity's knowledge about her background; she never divulged anything about herself.

Even her mother found the woman chilly. Verity had overheard her talking to a friend about Miss Parsons. She'd said she thought most housekeepers working for a family for so long would become almost like an aunt or a cousin, especially towards a child they'd watched grow up. She was quick to add that Miss Parsons ran the house superbly, and she couldn't manage without her, but she just wished she wasn't so stern and had the ability to chat in a friendly manner.

Verity had ventured up to her room in the attic a few times, when she knew the woman was out for the afternoon, in an effort to discover something more about her. But she was always disappointed. The room was as neat and tidy as the housekeeper was, the white counterpane smoothed as if she'd taken the flat iron to it, her navy-blue uniform dress hung on a hanger behind the door, her stout, highly polished black lace-up shoes tucked beneath the dressing table. Beside her narrow iron bed were a few library books and an alarm clock. Verity hadn't been rude enough to look in drawers or open the wardrobe, but she had hoped to see a few photographs or something which might suggest the woman had family and friends.

'Yes, she was looking for you. She wanted you to accompany her to Selfridges. She wasn't best pleased, Verity,' Miss Parsons said, pursing her lips in disapproval.

Verity knew she would get a lecture later, and it wasn't fair because whenever her mother went to Selfridges she only wanted to look at dresses or try on hats, and her role

was to just stand there and be admiring. There was no point in even trying to get Miss Parsons on her side, she always seemed to relish Verity being in trouble.

‘I’ll go and read in my room,’ she said, and walked quickly up the backstairs to the entrance hall.

Meeting Ruby had made a huge impact on Verity. It wasn’t just that she was from a completely different way of life, however fascinating that was, but it felt as if she’d been intended to meet the girl for some specific reason as yet unknown to her.

That was why she paused in the hall; she was trying to see her home as Ruby might see it. She thought her new friend would be awed by the large semi-detached, three-storey house with a basement. Even from the front gate it looked rather grand, with the manicured front garden, the stone lions on each side of the wide stone steps, and the impressive front door at the top of them.

Once inside, the entrance hall was spacious, the floor tiled black and white like a chequerboard. A glass door opened on to the front veranda, with her father’s study next to it. Then, at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, were the drawing and dining rooms. The staircase was wide with polished wood banisters and a beautiful stained-glass window at the turn of the stairs, halfway up.

At Christmas time her father always had a big tree delivered for the hall, and her mother made garlands of holly and red ribbon to decorate the banisters. All the presents, including those for people who joined them for Christmas Day lunch, would be arranged around the tree. Until last Christmas Verity had thought it a completely magical time, and that she was lucky to have such a wonderful home.

But on Christmas Night something had happened that spoiled that belief for ever. Verity had tried to blot it from her mind, but she couldn't, and she lived in fear of it happening again. Once she wouldn't have dreamed of going out alone, but now outdoors – even alone – seemed a great deal safer, even if she did incur her mother's wrath by going out without permission.

She moved on then, turning to run up the stairs to her bedroom. Like the rest of the house, it was beautiful – a large room overlooking the back garden, and decorated in soft peach and cream. She had a wardrobe full of clothes, a huge doll's house complete with a whole family of dolls living in it. She had hundreds of books, jigsaw puzzles, games, dolls and other toys, all sitting neatly on shelves, yet she hardly touched them now. Something dark and bad had entered this room at Christmas and she could still feel its presence, even in bright sunshine.

Yet it wasn't so obvious today, after meeting Ruby. She knew her parents would be horrified if they knew she'd been fraternizing with what they would call 'a guttersnipe', but Verity had really liked her and, regardless of their opinions, she fully intended to see Ruby again tomorrow.

Cynthia Wood sipped her pre-dinner gin and tonic and looked out on to the garden reflectively, wondering what to do about Verity. It was dusk now, Miss Parsons would be ready to serve dinner soon, and if Cynthia was going to punish her daughter by making her stay in her room without any dinner, then she had to act now.

She really couldn't be bothered with this sort of confrontation, but she knew Miss Parsons was likely to tell

Archie what had taken place when he returned home from his business trip. He would be angry if she hadn't taken a firm line, both with her and Verity.

Archie always seemed to be angry these days, and she seemed to spend a huge amount of time trying to appease him. Once upon a time, she would have sneered at any woman who did that, but the truth was she had become scared of him. Nowadays when he flew into a rage it was like viewing a really dangerous twin brother who was normally locked away.

Cynthia got up from her armchair by the window and looked at herself in the overmantel mirror. She had been a very pretty child – tiny, blonde and blue-eyed – but now, as a woman of forty-two, she could see her features were too sharp and birdlike to be thought of as pretty, and her once pink and white complexion was a little muddy, with many fine lines around her eyes. Other women envied her slender shape, and her dress sense, but in truth she would rather be envied for being fun, or for her intelligence, than for a shape that owed everything to being too nervous to eat much. Besides, anyone could learn good dress sense if they studied fashion magazines and browsed through Selfridges as often as she did.

Sighing deeply, Cynthia left the drawing room just as Miss Parsons was coming up the stairs from the basement.

'I'm going up to tell Verity she'll get no dinner tonight and must stay in her room,' Cynthia told her housekeeper. 'I think I'll have my dinner on a tray in the drawing room, as my husband won't be coming home tonight.'

'Very good, Mrs Wood,' said Miss Parsons. 'I'm glad to

see you being firm with her. Girls of her age do tend to be wilful and disregard parental advice.'

Cynthia was tempted to remind the woman she was a housekeeper, nothing more, and to keep her opinions about how to deal with wayward girls to herself, but she didn't. If Miss Parsons was to leave, or to tell Archie what she'd said, neither outcome would be a happy one. Cynthia needed a housekeeper. Without one, she'd never be able to hold her head up on her bridge nights, as everyone who was anyone in Hampstead or Swiss Cottage had one. As for Archie, he would almost certainly slap her around because he loved Miss Parsons' cooking and claimed his wife couldn't boil an egg without burning it.

Without knocking, Cynthia went straight into Verity's bedroom and found her lying on her stomach on the bed, reading a book.

'No dinner for you tonight,' she said sharply. 'Perhaps being hungry will make you sorry you chose to ignore the fact I'd said we were going out together this afternoon.'

'I'm sorry, Mother,' Verity said, sitting up on her bed. 'I was just walking and forgot the time. I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You know your father doesn't like you wandering around alone,' Cynthia said, irritably. 'There are all kinds of dangers out there for young girls. We just want to keep you safe. Now promise me you won't do it again?'

'I can't promise that, Mother,' Verity retorted. 'Situations just crop up sometimes and change things. But I will promise that in future if you've asked me to go somewhere with you, I will be there.'

Cynthia was quite aware that her daughter hadn't given her the kind of pledge that she'd wanted, but it was enough for now.

'Make sure you do,' she said, and backed out of the room.

Verity smiled with relief as the door closed. It was clear her father wasn't coming home tonight, as her mother hadn't changed for dinner.

Verity couldn't care less about missing dinner. She had no appetite, and she had some biscuits in a tin if she felt hungry later.

She'd got off lightly.

Chapter Two

Verity felt quite relaxed as she left the house the next morning. Mother hadn't told her they were going anywhere today, in fact over breakfast she'd been talking about sorting out her summer clothes in readiness for when the warm weather arrived. Verity had offered to post some letters on the way to the library. Of course there would be trouble when she eventually came home, but Verity had already argued with herself that she wasn't breaking a promise – and anyway, Ruby might be bored with her company within an hour or two so she'd be back by lunchtime.

She had chosen her clothes with care, wanting to make the difference between herself and Ruby less obvious. Last year's navy-blue coat was well worn and too short, earmarked by her mother to send to the next church jumble sale, and the dress beneath it a dull, dark green one which she'd never liked. A navy beret pulled down over her ears completed the picture of a very ordinary girl, and though Miss Parsons had looked a little surprised at her appearance, she'd made no comment.

Verity had only been waiting by Hampstead underground station for a minute or two when Ruby came haring up the road.

'I thought you wouldn't come,' she yelled breathlessly while still fifty yards away. 'But I came just in case you did.'

‘Why didn’t you think I’d come?’ Verity asked once her new friend was beside her.

‘Posh bints like you don’t normally even speak to me,’ Ruby said.

Verity wondered what ‘bints’ meant but she was so pleased to see the delight on Ruby’s face she didn’t ask. ‘I try to keep promises,’ she said. ‘I was in trouble yesterday for not being home in time to go out with Mother; I didn’t get any dinner.’

‘You’re lucky your ma cares where you go. I could stay away for a week and mine wouldn’t even notice I was missing.’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’

‘Cos she’s always drunk,’ Ruby said with a resigned shrug.

Verity had only seen two drunk people in her whole life. One was Uncle Charles two Christmases ago, and the other was their neighbour’s maid. The maid had staggered in through the basement door late one afternoon, mistaking their house for the one where she worked. Verity had been helping Miss Parsons fold up laundry at the time, and she thought the maid was ill, she hadn’t known strong drink made a person wobble about and slur their speech.

Miss Parsons had forcibly ejected the woman while berating her on the evils of drink and what drunkenness could lead a young woman to. Verity had watched and listened open-mouthed, and it had made a lasting impression on her.

As the two girls began to walk down the road towards Chalk Farm, Verity asked what her father thought about her mother’s drinking.

Ruby laughed. 'I told you yesterday I ain't got a dad. Maybe that's what's wrong with me ma. She told me once that 'e was her sweetheart till she told 'im 'e'd got 'er up the spout, and then 'e scarpered.'

'Up the spout?' Verity queried.

'In the family way,' Ruby said.

Verity realized that meant having a baby, but she didn't know babies could come without a couple being married. Until last Christmas she wouldn't have had the least idea of how they got a baby either – or even wondered about it – but because of what had happened to her, she was now fairly sure it was something like that which made babies.

'You seem to know about so much compared with me,' Verity said, deciding that she was never going to learn anything new unless she admitted her ignorance.

'I bet you knows loads of stuff what I don't,' Ruby said with a little grin. 'All about other countries, the kings and queens of England, and what makes a "lady"'

'I suppose I do,' Verity agreed. She had never been able to understand what point there was in being able to recite the list of kings and queens, long turgid poems, or knowing about the mountains in Africa or the longest river in the world. But knowing about how babies came or what the police did when they found a body could be very useful. 'Most of the stuff I've learned at school seems pointless to me, but maybe there are bits that would be good for you.'

'I'd like to talk nice like you,' Ruby said wistfully. 'And to look clean and neat the way you do. Reckon you could make me ladylike?'

Verity looked hard at her new friend for a moment. She

was wearing the same boy's tweed jacket and dirty dress as the day before, but she had made a real effort to look better. Her red hair was combed, she'd even tied it back with a strip of cloth, and her face looked well scrubbed. She wasn't what anyone would call pretty, but there was something very arresting about her. Maybe it was her green eyes that sparkled with mischief, the few freckles across her small nose, or the way her plump mouth turned up at the corners, as if she was smiling constantly. It was certainly a good face.

Verity knew that a properly fitting jacket, dress and shoes would transform Ruby. She could easily smuggle these things out of the house for her, but she was reluctant to offer them in case she embarrassed her.

'I'd love to help.' She reached forward and took Ruby's hand. 'If you'd allow it, I'd bring you some clothes and some ribbons for your hair next time we meet, but I'm afraid that might make you feel bad.'

To her surprise Ruby laughed. 'It wouldn't make me feel bad, but if I went 'ome with new togs, ma would 'ave 'em down uncle's soon as look at you.'

'Why take them to your uncle's?' Verity asked.

Ruby shook her head, as if amused at the question. 'E ain't my uncle, it's what we call the pawnshop. Don't suppose you know about that neither. We get money there by taking in things of value. We pay more to get 'em out again.'

'You take clothes into such a place?' Verity was horrified.

'People like me ma that needs a drink do,' Ruby said. 'I'll show you one today, if you like.'

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An hour or two later, Verity had learned about a great many more new things, including pie and eel shops, music halls, and potato and hop picking in Kent. Jellied eels sounded disgusting, but she would like to go to a music hall, and Ruby had made potato and hop picking sound like fun. She'd also peered through a very dusty window of a pawnshop and seen men's suits, polished boots, a trumpet and assorted jewellery amongst mountains of clothing, bedding and books inside.

Some of the more conventional sights Ruby had shown her – Trafalgar Square, Buckingham Palace, and the statue of Eros in Piccadilly – she'd seen many times before. Also, some of the theatres Ruby pointed out, speaking excitedly about the actors and actresses who had performed there, were ones where Verity had seen plays or shows with her parents. But she got a different perspective by hearing Ruby's thoughts on them.

'I loves to stand outside theatres and watch the toffs arriving,' she said outside the Haymarket Theatre. 'I ain't never bin in a car or a cab. Fancy being rich enough to go everywhere in one! Or being rich enough to 'ave a fur coat, or a diamond necklace! Just the price of a ticket for up in the gods would buy me food for a week.'

For Verity it was commonplace to go about town in either her father's car or in a cab. Her mother had both diamonds and a fur coat, and it certainly had never occurred to her that a theatre ticket cost as much as a week's food for some people. Suddenly she felt ashamed that she had so much and Ruby so little. It wasn't fair at all.

At home she had dresses she'd only worn two or three times before they were too small for her, and each

mealtime there was so much food left uneaten. Granted that sometimes this was made into a meal for the following day, but mostly it went straight in the dustbin.

But as shocking as the inequality between her and Ruby was, it was nothing compared to discovering what Ruby's mother did for a living.

They were sitting on a bench in St James's Park, looking at the ducks on the pond, when Ruby said she often went through her mother's pockets when she was asleep to get money to pay the rent and buy food. She said if she didn't do this, it would only be spent on drink.

'So how does she earn the money?' Verity asked.

'Selling herself, of course,' Ruby replied.

'But how? What way?' Verity asked in bewilderment.

'She lets men fuck her.'

Verity was so shocked she could only gape at her new friend. She'd been told that word at school just a few weeks ago; the girl who told her said, though it was mostly used as a very bad swear word, it also meant the sex act.

'You mustn't say that word, it's a really bad one,' Verity protested.

'Round where I live folk use it all the time,' Ruby said defiantly. 'Besides, it's what ma does. And it ain't no good you looking like that at me, all big eyes and stuff, cos you don't know how 'ard it is to get respectable work when you've got a kid in tow. When I was born it was either that or the work'ouse. I'd 'ave bin taken off her and she didn't want that. She did what she did cos of me, and I know she only drinks to forget what she's become.'

As shocked as Verity was, she was also touched by Ruby's understanding of her mother's predicament and

her loyalty to her. There was no bitterness at all, and it made Verity realize that she had no business to complain about her own home life.

To be told something like that was quite enough of a shock for one day, but then Ruby took her to Soho, and showed her where prostitutes lived.

‘There ain’t much to see during the day,’ Ruby explained as they walked through narrow streets and alleyways. It was a grubby, mixed sort of area, with very old buildings and some very seedy-looking shops, but there were proper businesses there too – printers, garment manufacturers, bookshops and haberdashers – and the streets were teeming with normal working people. ‘But come seven in the evening, it’s all change. There’s pros on street corners and in doorways looking for business, their pimps and other villains arrive to do their mischief, and there’s nobs too what come for the restaurants and nightclubs.’

‘Really?’ Verity was astounded to think that rich people would want to go slumming.

Ruby chuckled. ‘Folks is always surprised by that! They say some of the best food in London is served round ’ere. I wouldn’t know that for certain, seeing as I ain’t got two farthings to rub together, but they say there’s good music in the nightclubs an’ all.’

‘Gosh!’ Verity said, feeling like she knew nothing about anything. ‘I’ve learned so much today.’

‘Time you taught me sommat, then,’ Ruby laughed. ‘‘Ow’s about you take me in a caff and teach me ’ow to eat like a lady? It don’t ’ave to be a fancy place, I don’t want to show you up.’

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Verity chose a place that was marginally smarter than a working man's café. It had red and white checked tablecloths and a menu with standard dishes.

Ruby picked up the menu almost as soon as they'd sat down at a corner table. Verity noticed she was running a finger along the words and her lips were moving as though she was trying to sound them out.

'The light is awful here. Shall I tell you what the choices are?' she offered, wanting to spare her friend the indignity of admitting she couldn't read very well. 'There's sausage and mash, liver and bacon, steak and kidney pie, shepherd's pie.'

'Shepherd's pie,' Ruby exclaimed. 'I love that.'

Verity smiled. 'First thing,' she began, 'keep your voice low, we don't want everyone in here looking round at us. I'll order for us.'

Verity duly ordered shepherd's pie for both of them, and a glass of water each.

'I likes tea,' Ruby said, once the waitress had gone. She had looked very hard at Ruby as if tempted to ask her to leave.

'Yes, I'm sure you do, but it's more correct to have tea or coffee after the meal,' Verity said quietly. 'Now when the food arrives, don't attack it like you haven't eaten for a month. And hold your knife and fork correctly, like this.' She picked hers up to give a demonstration. 'You mustn't turn your fork up the other way to shovel the food in; you push it on to the back of your fork with the knife.'

She wanted to laugh at Ruby's baffled expression. She guessed that Ruby would normally use a spoon, unless the meal required a knife to cut it up. 'Just do what I do,' she

suggested. ‘Now put your napkin on your lap in readiness.’

Ruby did very well with her meal; she struggled a bit with the knife and fork, and had to be reminded not to chew with her mouth open, but she didn’t bolt it down or use her fingers. In no time at all her plate was clean. ‘Put your knife and fork together neatly,’ Verity instructed. ‘Even if you can’t eat it all, that’s a signal to the waiter that you’ve finished.’

‘What a palaver!’ Ruby said. ‘But it were lovely.’

‘Was lovely,’ Verity corrected her. ‘But we’ll save speech correction for another day.’

They had treacle tart and custard, and a cup of tea to follow. Verity had to stop Ruby when she was just going to pour some tea into the saucer with the intention of cooling it down and pouring it back into her cup.

‘That is not done,’ she said firmly. ‘Just wait until it’s cooler.’

But once outside the cafe, Verity praised her friend. ‘You did very well, you learn quickly. But I’d better go home now, or I’ll be in big trouble.’

‘I ain’t never ’ad a pal like you afore,’ Ruby said, looking a little embarrassed.

‘Nor me,’ Verity replied, and she felt a prickling of tears at the back of her eyes. ‘But I don’t know when I can see you again; once my father comes home it can be difficult to get out.’

Ruby frowned. ‘I’ll come to ’Ampstead tomorrow about ’alf two. If you can’t get there then, send a note to me at the Red Lion at Camden Town. I wash up glasses there most nights, and they’ll give it to me. But if you want to

meet, make it a couple of days ahead cos I might not get the note straight off.'

Ruby led Verity to the bus stop to get her to Swiss Cottage.

As the bus drew up Verity pressed a shilling into Ruby's hand. 'For your fare home,' she said. 'And thank you for a wonderful day.'

Verity went upstairs on the bus and looked back at Ruby. She was just standing in the middle of the pavement, seemingly unaware of the people going past on either side of her. She looked terribly sad and alone. It occurred to Verity that she felt the same. She wasn't alone, of course; she had family, an aunt and good neighbours. If she compared her life with Ruby's, she lived in paradise.

Yet it didn't feel that way.

She was so very lonely.

Chapter Three

‘So you got away?’ Ruby said when Verity met her the following afternoon and they began to walk up to the heath.

‘Yes, but something a bit strange is going on at home. Mother didn’t even ask why I’d been so long at the library yesterday, or why I didn’t come back for lunch. It was like she wasn’t even aware of me.’

‘Sure she wasn’t drinking? That’s how my ma is all the time.’

Verity smiled. ‘No, she doesn’t ever drink more than a couple of sherries, and then only just before dinner. I think she must have got some upsetting news while I was out. She told me to have my lunch with Miss Parsons in the kitchen and she went to her room. I asked Miss Parsons if she was ill, but she said Mother had things on her mind. What can that mean?’

‘I dunno, maybe it’s sommat to do with your father?’

‘What, though? He’s found another lady? He’s dropped dead? What?’

Ruby shrugged. ‘Would you like it to be one of those?’

Verity immediately felt ashamed of herself. ‘No, of course not. But the only thing which would make her act like this is if there was something wrong with him.’

They didn’t speak again until they were up on the heath and had sat down on a bench by Whitestone Pond.

‘You don’t like your pa, do you?’ Ruby said suddenly.

‘What makes you say that?’

Ruby shrugged. ‘I dunno exactly. Just a feeling.’

Verity didn’t respond. She very much wanted to admit how horrible her father could be, the way he belittled her, scoffed at anything she said, and shouted at her for nothing. But most of all she wanted to talk about what had happened at Christmas. She felt Ruby would offer some advice about it. But she couldn’t bring herself to, and so she just sat in silence watching some small boys sailing a boat on the pond.

‘I’ve got to do something near ’ere,’ Ruby said after a few minutes. ‘You can stay ’ere and wait for me, I won’t be long.’

‘What is it?’

‘Best you know nuffin,’ Ruby said, getting to her feet. ‘If I’m running when I come back, pretend you don’t know me. Just walk on down Heath Street and if I can, I’ll join you.’

She walked swiftly away before Verity could ask her anything else, and disappeared behind Queen Mary’s Maternity Home.

Verity remembered that when they first met, Ruby had said she came up to Hampstead to steal food and milk left on doorsteps, so maybe that was what she was doing. Yet by three in the afternoon surely anything left earlier would have been taken in? But she had to be planning to do something bad or she wouldn’t anticipate being chased.

Verity waited, and waited. Half an hour passed, then another, and she was just getting to her feet to go home when Ruby came haring round the corner with a tall, dark man in hot pursuit. Verity could see that he was gaining on her friend and at any moment he was going to grab her.

Despite having been told to go if Ruby was being chased, Verity couldn't. Instead she walked towards them, with a vague idea forming of somehow getting in between them.

Ruby made a little 'get away' gesture with her hands, but Verity took no notice and walked right into her friend's path. She didn't dare call out for fear of alerting the man to the fact that she knew Ruby, but she hoped her friend would guess what she was trying to do.

She was less than five yards from Ruby, and the man was stretching out to catch her shoulders when Verity made her move. She stepped sideways to let Ruby pass, then quickly regained her old path so that the man would bump into her.

Verity wasn't able to see if her ruse had been a success because the force of the man's body crashing into her knocked her over. As she fell she must have clutched at him, because he fell too.

'I'm so sorry, sir,' she said breathlessly, still on the floor and not daring to look round to see if Ruby had got away. 'I didn't see you.'

The tall man disengaged himself from her, got to his feet and glowered down at her. 'I know perfectly well you are in it together,' he panted out. Glancing over his shoulder at some people watching, he yelled for someone to get the police.

'Whatever do you mean?' she said with all the indignation she could muster. She sat up and dusted off her clothes. 'In what together? I have no idea what you are blaming me for. All I did was avoid that girl who was running down here, and somehow I banged into you. I couldn't help it. And you've hurt me, I'm not sure I can even get up.'

She could hear a murmur from the bystanders, which she hoped was sympathy, but to her dismay she saw a policeman coming. Her heart began to hammer with fright but she forced herself to get up slowly, making a big display of being hurt.

The police officer was just a few yards away now, and the dark man made a gesture for him to grab Verity. ‘She is in league with the girl who stole a valuable carriage clock from my house,’ he bellowed for the whole world to hear. ‘Officer, arrest her, please! And send some of your men to catch her accomplice. She has red hair.’

‘That girl has already been caught,’ the policeman said. ‘She’s back there in Heath Street, held by the officer I was with. We saw her drop the clock, and I came on up here to see what people were looking at.’

Before Verity could gather her wits the policeman had caught hold of her arm, and he said he was taking her to the police station.

Verity was suddenly really scared. Everything had happened so quickly, and to find herself being led away by a policeman, as if she was a common criminal, was too shocking for words.

As she was being taken into the police station she saw Ruby fleetingly, but Ruby didn’t acknowledge her in any way, not a smile, nod or wink. Verity felt that was her way of trying to make out they didn’t know one another so the police didn’t think they were in it together.

The only thing she was asked was her name. Then she was put into a tiny box-like room, with just two chairs and a metal table. It smelled of cigarettes and stale sweat. The

policeman left, and she heard him locking the door behind him. Then there was nothing. No one came in, she could hear nothing outside the door; it was as if she'd been forgotten.

Fear engulfed her and she began to cry. All she had done was try to stop the tall man catching her friend. Surely that wasn't a crime? Or was it?

She had no idea what the time was, but it had to be after five o'clock by now. If she wasn't home soon, Mother would be angry. What if the police went to her home?

But they hadn't asked her where she lived, only her name. She prayed silently that Ruby would tell the truth and say she acted alone, and perhaps make out she didn't know Verity at all.

Finally, just as she felt she'd go out of her mind in that room, the door opened and an older man in a dark suit came in. He was perhaps fifty, stout, with a narrow moustache and thin, greying hair. He introduced himself as Detective Inspector Charmers.

'How old are you, Verity?' he asked.

'Thirteen, sir,' she responded.

'Old enough to know the difference between right and wrong?'

'Well, yes,' she said. 'And this is wrong keeping me here all this time. I haven't done anything, and my mother will be frantic.'

'You may not have taken part in the actual robbery, but you are an accomplice.'

'How can I be? I didn't know that girl, I just walked into her.'

'But you do know her,' Charmers smirked. 'We have a

witness who saw you sitting together and talking on a bench at Whitestone Pond sometime earlier.’

Verity knew she’d been caught out. If he hadn’t said where she’d been seen with Ruby, she might have thought it was a bluff. But to say the bench at the pond proved he really did have a witness.

‘You see?’ he grinned. ‘You can’t get out of that one, Miss Wood, you were spotted. And do you want to know why anyone would remember?’

Verity shrugged.

‘Because you were total opposites. Our witness wondered what a well-dressed girl like you could be doing with such a guttersnipe.’

‘Yes, I was there, but I don’t know that girl. We just got into conversation,’ Verity lied. ‘I don’t know anything about her, we only talked for a few minutes and she said she had to go. Next thing I saw her running with that man after her. So I tried to help her! For all I knew he might have been trying to attack her. I didn’t know she’d done something bad.’

Charmers looked at her long and hard, and she wilted under his stare.

‘You’ve been a silly goose,’ he said eventually. ‘I can guess why a nicely brought up girl like you would be curious about someone from a different way of life. But believe me, a girl like Ruby Taylor would only drag you down to her level. Now it’s time to take you home.’

Verity’s stomach lurched. She knew there was no point in refusing to say where she lived. The police were clever, they would find out eventually, and it would only make her look more guilty. But she was so scared of what her

parents were going to say. She couldn't hope this would be brushed away.

'Can't I go home alone?' she begged. 'My mother will have fifty fits, and it's cruel to upset her just over me talking to that girl.'

Charmers reached out and took her arm, drawing her to her feet. 'If I let this go, I would be failing your parents,' he said. 'They need to know what their daughter gets up to when she is away from home.'

Another policeman drove Charmers and Verity to Daleham Gardens. She sensed Charmers had already spoken to her mother on the telephone, because the new man didn't even ask her address. That would make it worse for her, as her mother would have had time to consider what Verity might have been up to.

Miss Parsons opened the front door, her face as frosty as usual. 'Mr and Mrs Wood will see you in the drawing room,' she said curtly. So she clearly knew what was going on.

Verity's heart plummeted on hearing her father was home. But as she and Charmers walked into the drawing room she knew it was going to be even worse than she had feared.

Archie Wood was a very intimidating man. He was tall – well over six foot – and well built. He rarely laughed, smiled or looked as if he had any interest in her at all. With dark, slicked-back hair, a swarthy complexion and a dark moustache which he oiled and tweaked out, she often thought he had the look of a Hollywood villain.

Over meals he would speak to her, ask her about school and such things, but it always sounded to her as if it was

just polite behaviour, not real interest. His eyes were very dark, and there never seemed to be any light or expression in them – the same as the dead fish on the marble slab at the fishmonger’s. He had never picked her up and cuddled her when she was little; she couldn’t remember ever sitting on his lap, or even being given a piggy-back ride. That was what had made him coming into her bedroom at Christmas so alarming; he said he wanted to kiss her goodnight, but he’d never done such a thing before. As it turned out, it certainly wasn’t a kiss that he wanted. She couldn’t bear to dwell on what he had made her do to him.

And now, as she saw his angry expression, she quaked. He looked like he despised her.

‘Just tell me, what could be the attraction of fraternizing with riff-raff?’ he asked.

‘I wasn’t fraternizing with her,’ Verity said. ‘She just said something about a boy sailing his boat on the pond and I replied. I didn’t know her, it was just a little chat with a girl who was about the same age as me. Was I supposed to ignore her, to get up and walk away like I’m too grand to speak to ordinary people?’

His hand shot out and slapped her face hard. ‘Don’t take that attitude with me,’ he snarled. ‘I know you went out to meet her and that you have been with her before. Don’t lie to me.’

Verity put her hand on her cheek; it was burning from his slap. And in that second, rage welled up inside her at the injustice.

‘I lie because you and Mother don’t allow me to go out

and meet friends. I can never invite them here either. Shall I tell the policeman what you did to me at Christmas?’ The second that last angry retort had left her lips she regretted it, because she saw her mother’s eyes widen in alarm.

Charmers looked curious.

She didn’t want to tell anyone really, it was far too disgusting. But at the same time she wanted to hurt her father, as he had so often hurt her. She didn’t dare look at her father to see his reaction.

‘I think Verity understands now that it wasn’t wise to involve herself with a street urchin,’ Charmers said quickly. He sounded as if he was just trying to smooth things out so he could leave. ‘There is no evidence to support her being this girl’s accomplice. All Verity is guilty of is being a bit gullible and headstrong. I’m sure the time she spent at the police station will make her more careful about who she speaks to in future.’

With that, he backed towards the door and left hastily without even a goodbye.

For a second there was complete silence in the room. Her father stood by the fireplace, one hand on the mantelpiece, and glowered at her. Mother was perched on the arm of the settee; she had her hand up to her throat, as if she was struggling to breathe.

‘I cannot believe my daughter was involved in something like this and had to be questioned by the police,’ her father eventually barked at her. ‘Get to your room now and I will come and deal with you in a minute.’

That order terrified her. At best it would be a severe beating, the worst was a repeat of what he had made her

do to him at Christmas. She rushed out into the hall and was just on the first stair when she heard her mother speak.

‘How convenient this is for you, Archie. I suppose you think it will distract me from what you’ve done.’

Verity paused to listen further.

‘I’m not best pleased that my daughter chooses to mix with ragamuffins,’ her mother continued. ‘But compared with her father embezzling funds, that is nothing.’

Verity didn’t know what ‘embezzling’ meant, but it sounded bad.

‘Don’t take that high-and-mighty tone with me,’ her father snapped back. ‘You’ve been happily living off the proceeds for years.’

‘I believed every penny that came into this house had been earned,’ her mother’s voice rose to a shriek of indignation. ‘If you were struggling and had told me, I would have made reductions in the household expenditure, I would even have agreed to move to a smaller house. This has been the worst day of my life. Mr Gladstone told me they are taking legal action against you and that you will go to prison. Where is that going to leave me?’

‘That’s right, as always, only thinking of yourself,’ he retorted. ‘Don’t spare a thought for where I’ll be.’

‘And what did Verity mean when she said something happened at Christmas?’

‘That girl is as stupid and hysterical as you,’ he said. ‘It was nothing. She was trying to distract you and that policeman. I must go and deal with her now, I’ll speak to you later.’

Verity moved swiftly up the stairs then; he would beat her even harder if he caught her eavesdropping.

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Her father came barging into her room seconds later. His face was flushed and his eyes blazing. Verity shook with terror, she'd never seen him as angry as this before.

'You touch me and I'll go to the police,' she warned him, hoping attack was the best form of defence.

'Do you think they give a damn about a stupid girl like you?' he snarled. 'You more than deserve a good hiding, trying to make trouble for me.'

He pulled at the leather belt slotted into loops on his trousers. When he'd got it all out, he wound it tightly around his fist, leaving the end with the buckle free to beat her with.

'Bend over the bed,' he ordered her.

Verity was frozen with fear and so he grabbed her by the neck and forced her down on to the bed. Still holding her there, he hit her with the belt once. That hardly hurt at all, as he hadn't been able to swing his arm, but he soon rectified that by standing up straight and raining blows down on her back and buttocks.

Normally when he beat her it was four or five strokes at the most, and not that hard – but even so, it stung like mad – but this was frenzied, almost as if she was responsible for all his misfortunes. The pain was red hot and searing. Despite wearing a dress, petticoat, knickers and a liberty bodice, it felt like the belt was biting into her bare flesh.

She could hear him ranting at her as he hit her, but over her screaming she couldn't hear what he was saying. She thought fleetingly that no one could be beaten this hard and survive, and then she stopped screaming and prayed that she would pass out with the next blow.

Maybe her prayers were answered because, through what felt like a thick fog, she heard her mother's voice, ordering him to stop. Then Miss Parsons' voice joined in, and suddenly the blows stopped.

But not the pain.

That was like a fiery blanket on her back, bottom and legs.

Chapter Four

‘Oh, Verity, what has he done to you?’

Verity heard her mother’s horrified question through what seemed to be a thick red mist. But she was in too much pain to open her eyes or reply.

‘I’ll get clean linen, she’s had an accident.’ Miss Parsons’ voice came from close by her.

Verity realized then that it was the housekeeper’s hands that were gently examining her – not her mother’s – and unusually for Miss Parsons, her voice was soft and concerned. ‘I can’t believe a father would inflict such injuries on his child!’ she said. ‘I’ll get water, a cloth and some soothing cream to try and make her more comfortable.’

‘If he wasn’t about to be arrested for embezzlement, I’d call the police to him now,’ her mother said, her voice tight with anger. ‘Has he got up and slunk away yet?’

Verity heard the sound of the door opening. ‘No. He’s still out there on the landing, where I dragged him to.’ Miss Parsons sounded angry now. ‘He’s trying to get up, though, so I didn’t kill him. More’s the pity!’

Much later that evening, Verity learned that her beating had ended abruptly because Miss Parsons ran upstairs armed with a golf club and hit her employer over the head with it, knocking him unconscious. Then she took his feet and dragged him out of Verity’s bedroom on to the landing. That in itself was astounding; she had never imagined

Miss Parsons could attack or defend anyone. But clearly this woman, who had always seemed so chilly and uncaring, did have tender feelings for Verity. From the first examination of her back till several hours later, when she gave Verity a herbal sedative to help her sleep, she was unbelievably kind and concerned.

Those hours were filled with searing agony. It was hardly surprising Verity had lost control of her bladder; her clothes were torn to ribbons with the force of the beating and her whole body, from her shoulders down to her knees, was lacerated and bloody. She could only lie on her stomach – there was no question of being able to turn over, or sit up.

Miss Parsons did all of the nursing, bathing the wounds and applying some healing cream. As she worked, Verity's mother merely sat on a chair and went on and on incessantly about her husband's crime.

'I wish I was dead,' she exclaimed at one point. 'The shame of it! I can't even begin to imagine what our neighbours and friends will say about it. It seems he not only robbed the company but many small investors too. I wouldn't blame them if they came here to lynch him. I'll have to move away,' she said repeatedly. 'They'll take this house and all our fine furniture anyway. I'll have nothing.'

Verity did try to rally herself to reach out a hand towards her mother.

'You'll have me,' she croaked out. 'We can make a new life together.'

But her mother didn't take her hand or even acknowledge what she'd said.

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It transpired that her father left the house that night, running away from what he'd done. Verity wasn't aware of it until the next morning when she heard a commotion downstairs. It was the police looking for him. Not the local officers she'd seen in Hampstead police station but special detectives who dealt with serious crime. She heard her mother insisting to them that she had no idea where her husband had gone, or even what time he'd left the house the previous night, because she'd shut herself away in her bedroom.

'They are going to search the house, and they may come in here,' Miss Parsons said to Verity as she put more cream on her wounds and covered them with dressings.

She had helped her out of bed to walk gingerly to the lavatory that morning, brushed her hair and washed her face, and Verity had drunk tea and eaten a bowl of porridge, standing up. But the act of walking hurt, and sitting down was impossible, so Verity had got back into bed to lie on her stomach.

'They are working their way through the downstairs rooms now, but don't be afraid if they come in here, they are just doing their job, looking for evidence.'

'What will happen to us?' Verity asked her.

For the first time Verity ever remembered, Miss Parsons showed some emotion. Her eyes filled with tears as she took Verity's hand between hers.

'I think you two will go to stay with your Aunt Hazel,' she said. 'I shall have to find another job.'

By late afternoon Verity was feeling very sorry for herself. She hurt all over, her mother hadn't seen fit to come and

reassure her about anything, and until an hour ago the police had been rampaging around the house like a herd of elephants. When two constables came into her room, she told them her father had beaten her the night before, but they made no comment, merely shook their heads and left her room after a brief search. Clearly embezzlement was a far greater crime than hurting a young girl.

She didn't care where her father had gone, she hoped the police would lock him up for the rest of his life, but the prospect of living at Aunt Hazel's was just terrible.

Aunt Hazel was six years older than her mother. She had never married and had stayed in the family home in Lewisham to look after their widowed mother. Grandmother had been a fierce, spiteful woman who was famous for not having a good word to say about anyone. She had died a year ago and Aunt Hazel had inherited the house. She also appeared to have inherited her mother's nature, as she too was mean-spirited and cold.

Verity recalled at the funeral there being angry words between the sisters about the legacy. Mother thought the property should have been left to both of them. But Aunt Hazel got angry and said Cynthia had a husband to take care of her and lived in some style, whereas she had never had the opportunity to marry because she'd been forced to deal with their cantankerous and incontinent mother for years. She said she deserved the house – and anyway, it was hardly palatial.

Verity hadn't been to her grandmother's house very often – only twice in the last three years – and it had always given her the creeps. The dark, cold and smelly Victorian terraced house was small with only a tiny back garden. It

was also in a very working-class part of London. She'd noticed on previous visits that boys played football in the street and old people sat on their doorsteps. It didn't bear thinking about what a huge step down it would be to live there. And she doubted Aunt Hazel would welcome them, as the sisters had never been close. In fact it was difficult to believe they were related. Aunt Hazel was quite common, and made curtains for a living. Cynthia looked, dressed and sounded like she'd been brought up in Hampstead.

What would happen about school now? At present she went to a private girls' school in Belsize Park; obviously, she wouldn't be able to continue there. Even if the money could be found, the journey from Lewisham would be impossible.

She wished she could talk to Ruby about all this, but in all likelihood she was on her way to wherever judges sent fourteen-year-olds caught in the act of burglary. Did they go to prison like grown-ups? Or was there some other place for girls like her?

Father's crime was in all the newspapers on the second day. Verity wasn't told but Miss Parsons had a copy under her arm and she'd caught a glimpse of a photograph of her father and part of the headline. It said: 'Twenty Thousand Pounds Embezzled'. She overheard Miss Parsons say to her mother that he couldn't run for ever and the police wouldn't give up until they'd found him.

Lying in her bed, still terribly sore and unable to sit up, Verity pondered over that huge sum of money. Had it all gone? What had her father spent it on? To a girl who had

never held more than a pound note in her hand it seemed inconceivable that so much money could ever be spent.

She wondered too what the difference was between theft and embezzlement, and why her father hadn't run away the moment he knew he was found out? Why did he come back to the house, if he knew his wife had been told what he'd done? He couldn't have expected her to be sympathetic, surely? Or did he have some of the money tucked away here and needed to get it? Stranger still that he delayed his departure to beat his daughter! Was that pure spite, because she'd hinted that he'd done something bad to her at Christmas? Or just that he was so angry at being caught that he had to take it out on someone?

Whatever was in his mind, whatever he'd come back here for, Verity felt very glad that Miss Parsons had hit him. She hoped the police would catch him quickly, she wouldn't even care if they shot him. Though she didn't think English policemen ever had guns.

She worried too about Ruby. Where would she have been sent by the police? Would she think Verity didn't care about her, as she hadn't come looking for her? Or might she have seen the newspaper and realized her father was a swindler?

In the seemingly endless days that followed, Verity's injuries slowly healed. The first time she ventured hesitantly down the stairs and out into the garden, she was unable to imagine herself ever getting back to normal. But the sight of spring flowers opening up in the garden, the sun a little warmer, was always a hint that better times were coming, and it cheered her. The following day, she

sat in a chair to read for a couple of hours. And on the day after, she dressed herself, even if it was only in a loose smock dress that wouldn't rub anywhere. Each day from then on, she hurt a little less and when she finally was healed enough to have a bath, she knew she really was on the mend.

During this time the police called again and again; it seemed they didn't believe Archie Wood wouldn't try to see his wife and daughter.

'Do you really believe I would give him the time of day after what he's done?' Verity's mother exclaimed indignantly to a policeman one day. 'I'm waiting now to hear when I've got to give up my home and furniture. Our daughter is still recovering from a beating he gave her, and I've got nothing to live on. My neighbours give me pitying looks and all my friends have deserted me.'

Verity didn't actually think her mother had any real friends, just ladies she played bridge with. Not one of them had telephoned or called round to offer sympathy or help.

But perhaps they knew they wouldn't be welcomed or appreciated, because each time Verity had tried to comfort her mother she was so prickly and nasty she wished she hadn't tried. But hearing her mother say she had nothing to live on – and aware that Miss Parsons was feeding them out of the contents of the store cupboard, rather than going shopping for fresh food – Verity felt she had to try again.

Catching her mother in the drawing room listlessly picking out a tune on the piano, she decided this was the moment.

'If you think someone is going to come and take your

things away, why don't you pawn some of the smaller valuable bits, like your jewellery and the silver, before they get here?'

'Pawn!' her mother exclaimed, her eyes wide with surprise. 'I don't know what you mean.'

Verity hadn't known the word until Ruby told her, but she was astounded her mother didn't know. She had thought adults knew everything.

'Pawnshops are places you take valuables and they give you money for them,' she said. 'They have three brass balls above the shop sign to let you know that's what they do. Mostly people just use them to borrow a bit until they can pay it back, but I think they buy stuff too.'

'I can't imagine how you'd know such a thing,' her mother sniffed disapprovingly. 'Where are these places, for goodness' sake?'

'Mostly where poorer people live, I don't think there's one in Hampstead. But I have seen one in the Finchley Road. That's far enough away from here that we wouldn't be spotted going in there by anyone we know.'

'I couldn't go into such a place,' her mother replied, clutching nervously at her throat. 'But maybe you and Miss Parsons could go.'

Verity felt very adult in finding a solution to their immediate problems. 'Maybe we should just take a few small trinkets first,' she suggested. 'But we ought to find a hiding place for all the other precious things, so they don't get taken away with the house. Then we could sell them as and when you need money.'

For the first time Verity ever remembered, her mother looked at her in real admiration. 'I hadn't realized you'd

grown up so much,' she said. 'Thank you, Verity, for the suggestion, I think I'll start making a list and try to think of somewhere to store things.'

'It would have to be away from here,' Verity reminded her. 'Maybe at Aunt Hazel's?'

Verity went with Miss Parsons to the pawnshop the next day. They took a diamond brooch, a pearl necklace and her father's gold cufflinks and tie pin. Mother had said she hoped for at least thirty pounds. But they must accept whatever they were offered, as there was no money to pay the milkman, baker or butcher.

'Don't be surprised at anything I say to the man,' Miss Parsons said as they hurried up the Finchley Road. 'At times like this you have to use all the wiles you possess, and you must look stricken with grief so he feels sorry for us.'

Verity saw a completely different side of the housekeeper once they were in the dusty pawnbroker's. She wasn't starchy at all; in fact she was so sweet and charming to the owner, a man called Cohen, that Verity barely recognized her. She held a lace-trimmed handkerchief in her hand and kept dabbing her eyes as she told the man her widower brother had just died leaving her with all the bills to pay and his child to take care of.

'I knew he had become a little disorganized since he lost his wife,' she said with a catch in her voice that sounded like she was going to break down. 'But I didn't realize that he'd squandered so much money and that he didn't have any savings or insurance. I feel so humiliated, having to sell jewellery he gave me, but this child has to be taken care of.'

Mr Cohen was bearded, thin and small with a slight