

CHAPTER ONE

“I know you’re in there, Belle.” Although her mother’s voice was teasing, it also had a prickly quality. At the first of three knuckle-sharp raps, the girl’s head jolted, colliding with the shelf above her, more startling than painful. “It’s time to come out of the cupboard and say goodbye to Uncle Sergei.”

Curled horizontally, peering out through slanted wooden slats, Belinda could see the rippling silk hem of her mother’s turquoise dressing gown. It was the one Mummy called a kimono. She had bought it from a Chinese market before she gave up travelling and made her home in a place called Worlds End, sandwiched, not on a cliff’s edge with the roar of the ocean below, or next to the flag at the North Pole, but just beyond the snake in the King’s Road where the bus service was excellent. Her mother had christened the estate ‘The Land Architecture Forgot’, but there weren’t too many buildings you could learn about hexagons from, so that had to mean something.

Two pairs of shoes stood side by side: one towering, blister-forming; the other, sensible brown lace-ups. Hand-stitched, a little scuffed at the toes. The type Belinda would later recognise in the windows of old-fashioned men’s outfitters and think, *He must have been nice*.

Having accumulated all the wisdom and secret worries that being six can afford, Belinda understood that by insisting she called her friend ‘Uncle’, Mummy was suggesting he was trustworthy. As opposed to, say, the undercover abductors she was warned lurked outside school gates, elbows poking out of drivers’ windows, concealed cameras, a tempting selection of sweets spilling onto the dashboard (Fruity Frogs, Freaky Fish, and so on), ready to pounce the moment your mother’s back was turned. For someone with so few known blood relatives, Belinda had acquired a number of uncles.

“Bye, Uncle Sergei,” she murmured unenthusiastically, nestling deeper into the spare duvet (second-best, synthetic).

“She’s locked herself in!” The door was rattled, tentatively at first.

Children and long-haired cats - strays especially - weren’t supposed to lock themselves in the airing cupboard. Whether this rule had been dreamt up by their landlord, Mummy or the prime minister was unclear. No matter: at this moment neither cat nor child cared much for rules. “Don’t want to,” she muttered.

“Belinda!” Using her full name was intended to ruffle. At home, the girl was usually Belle, only ever Belinda (the name she preferred under friendlier circumstances) when offence had been caused. She wasn’t fooled by the sing-song tone of her mother’s, “You don’t want Uncle Sergei to think you’re rude, do you?”

It was a question there was no sensible answer to (at least none that could be made without crossing your fingers behind your back). As far as Belinda could work out - and that was as far as tellings-off suggested - despite everything adults told you, despite promises that you’d *never* be punished for telling the truth, *nothing* was more likely to get you into trouble.

Boys were bad enough, but grown men were even worse. Belinda had been avoiding men

ever since Emily's mother's boyfriend had swooped down and kissed her. She had managed to resist the almost overwhelming urge to scrub the kiss off until he'd left the room. She could feel the detestable prickle of it clinging, even after two baby wipes.

"I *know!*" Emily had said, handing her another. "He does it to me *all* the time. And they're *always* doing it."

Few people kissed as reluctantly as Belinda, barely a brush, and then at the furthest point from a mouth that she could reach.

None of her mother's friends ever stayed for tea or sleep-overs, thank goodness - not like Emily's mummy's horrible bristly boyfriend, who transformed breakfast into a circus of broken eggshell and tossed pancakes, leaving washing-up piled high in the sink after he had basked in applause.

The fact was, Belinda couldn't care less what impression she made on Mummy's friends. If they thought she was rude, well then, she thought most of them were fat, loud and full of themselves. They carried strange smells - concoctions of beer and aftershave - into the flat and *breathed* them as they bent towards her. Somehow she didn't think, "I don't want to come out, because your yucky friend might try to kiss me," was going to earn her many gold stars for her good behaviour chart.

"Come out of there, Belinda!"

She crossed the fingers of both hands, making a *d* and a *b*. "I can't."

"Are you stuck?" Rattle, rattle.

"No. I'm - I'm busy."

"Busy? Doing *what?*"

Her rumbling stomach betrayed her. In desperation, Belinda turned to consult the coiled cat, the co-conspirator she had christened Ink. Ink was old and not remotely pretty, the point of one ear shredded through too many back-alley encounters, and a permanent bald patch on one thigh owing to a scar. But he had caught her attention by mewling urgently, desperate to communicate something of great importance whenever she passed the garages.

"That one No Good Ca'," their downstairs neighbour, Mr Oo, had observed from the concrete step of his kitchen, tempura batter popping fiercely in the background. She liked Mr Oo, and not just for his name (which she used as often as possible). "You shoot be friends wi' him."

Perhaps Mr Oo had been right. A fat lot of good Ink's Buddha-like expression was now. Whatever wisdom he had been blessed with he selfishly kept to himself. Belinda's nose wrinkled involuntarily, the way it always did when she was bending facts. "Thinking," she answered, feeling inspired - at least it had the advantage of sounding important.

"You can carry on thinking after Uncle Sergei has left."

"Really, it doesn't matter." His softly-lilting voice was tinged with sadness. "I enjoy a little thinking-time myself..."

The inside mechanism of the lock revolved. "Belinda, I'm going to count to three and I want you to come out: one, two -"

Her mother bent facts, too. So much for "This is the *girls' house*. We *girls* have to stick together.' After her chest rose and fell, anger erupted from Belinda's throat. "He's not *my* friend: he's yours! I don't see why I have to -" Ambushed by her own outburst, one of Belinda's hands flew to her mouth. She clamped it in place with the other. Too late. She had broken her own rule: think whatever you like but don't *say* anything.

"*Don't* raise your voice, Belinda! I'm *so* sorry, Sergei," her mother gushed, always more

apologetic on account of others than she ever was for herself. (Come to think of it, Belinda couldn't remember ever having heard her mother apologise.)

"I should leave. She'll come out after I've gone."

Startling in their proximity, fingertips alighted on a nearby slat, manicured square nails, unmistakably masculine. A pair of unseeing eyes widened with effort as they appeared directly opposite hers, peering into the semi-dark, with much the same success that Belinda experienced when she once tried looking inside a letter box.

"Goodbye, Belinda. Another time, maybe."

Quietly, she offered up an expression of misery, a half-moan, imagining he would probably be too deaf to hear her whimper, "I have a tummy ache."

"Try rubbing it," the voice whispered back. "That always works for me." The marble eyes blinked; the fingernails slipped away.

Her mother was crooning, "I'll see you out."

"One moment," she heard him reply, then his voice was warm and close by: "Psst. Don't tell anyone, but I have dog who only speaks Russian."

Belinda heard her own sharp intake of breath. The possibility of a talking dog wasn't a stretch for her imagination, but *Russian?* Actual *Russian?* Like submarines and baddies? Meanwhile, the brown shoes pivoted away and the light was flicked off, plunging her hideaway into darkness. The kind where it made no difference if your eyes were open or shut.

Footsteps paused on the narrow staircase and there was her mother's breezy laughter, voices retreating.

"Your tie's crooked. Here, let me."

The soft low tone of his: "Oh, thank you. You know, I used to hate being paraded by my parents. They forced me to recite poetry for visitors."

The exaggerated enthusiasm of her mother's: "Poetry?"

Up on one elbow, eyes open but unseeing, Belinda hoped her mother wasn't getting any funny ideas. She had never seen the fact that they had so few books, and no space for bookcases, as an advantage. There was rarely even a made-up bedtime story now that Belinda could read and had her library books for practice. But her mother knew one poem off by heart. *Her* poem, the one she had been named after: *The Tale of Custard the Dragon*. She had been lulled to sleep by its rhythms, soothed by the cadences in her mother's voice. There was excitement, too, in the later verses. The prospect of adventure. Once a worrier, always a worrier: Belinda was afraid that, unlike Custard, she wouldn't be ready when bravery was required. And then, from watching *The Wizard of Oz*, she'd learned that the lion who thought he'd lost his courage discovered that all he had needed was a medal. There had never been any doubt that it was Belinda's destiny the poem described. And when they moved to a flat with quite so many stairs - stairs designed for chasing lions down - Belinda was pleased by how neatly everything was falling into place. Soon there would be pirates. But, when pressed, her mother now claimed not to remember anything beyond the fifth verse. Perhaps Uncle Sergei, who had been forced to recite poetry, would know what it was the vile pirate gulped from his pocket flagon!

"- or play violin."

Not interested in violins, she settled back down in the dark and experimented with different methods of rubbing her stomach. Up and down, side to side, small circles. It certainly seemed to help.

"You didn't tell me you played an *instrument!*"

"You didn't tell me you played an instrument!" she mouthed, pulling faces, safe in the knowledge that there were no witnesses who might tell tales.

"Oh, not for a long, long time. And I was never terribly good."

"I bet you were."

"No, really. I wasn't."

"Well." During the pause, cold air wafted in. "Just say when!"

"Go upstairs and rescue your daughter."

"I'll probably end up having to take the cupboard door off its hinges!"

He laughed (it was a nice laugh).

Belinda listened to the slam of the door, the sound of the lock being drawn, the rush of her mother's footsteps, not stopping, but going all the way up to the top-floor landing. Mummy always showered and changed immediately after visitors left, even if she had only showered and changed half an hour before they arrived. She was very big on saving her nice clothes for best. Most of the time, Mummy wore jeans teamed with a white blouse and, when they went out, she added her pair of enormous sunglasses, which made people wonder if she was a film star.

Belinda waited for the heavy downpour of the shower before she risked unlatching the cupboard door. It swung outwards, allowing dusk to seep in.

Locating the cat's lazy flank with her feet, she flexed her legs. "We've got two minutes, Ink!" He dug his claws into the duvet. "Don't be such a stubborn so and so."

Humming mingled with the sound of running water, then both sounds stopped abruptly, as if the tap controlled dual functions.

"Budge!" Belle kicked the cat's dead weight off the shelf, heard a thump, then clambered down in pursuit - hands in the slats of the upper shelf, one socked foot reaching down, searching, until it came into contact with a lower shelf - to see what damage she'd done. Ink was a black shadow, apparently in one piece. Crouching like you had to when you were in goal, she was ready to shepherd him back on course if he made a dash for the kitchen. He trotted down the staircase, an old-fashioned slope-walking toy, then tucked his head low to tackle the plastic cat-flap, the previous tenants' legacy, which Belinda had secretly unlocked.

No sooner had the plastic cat-flap flapped its statutory three flaps, her mother's voice was behind her. "So, you've decided to come out, have you?"

Belinda span, a gasp lodged in her throat. Adopting a pose of innocence, her eyes were especially wide and her smile wavered uncertainly. Her mother was coming down the stairs, fluffy-slippered once again. "And the Oscar for best actress goes to... Belinda Brabbage." Her mother, she knew, felt entitled to be cross. Even now, towel-drying the ends of her hair, Mummy crossed the landing with an elegance an uncoordinated six-year-old could only envy. Then Mummy froze as if they were in the middle of a game of statues. "What's that you've got all over your school uniform?"

Following the direction of her mother's gaze, Belinda scanned the zip of her grey pinafore dress. Tell-tale black fuzz stood out. Mouth gaping, she looked back up at her mother's make-up-free face as it was transformed.

"You haven't had that flea-ridden moggie indoors, have you?"

It was a mistake to glance towards the airing cupboard.

"Don't tell me..." The little girl winced as her mother turned to open the door. "You know how allergic I am!"

Mummy certainly didn't *like* cats, never stooped to scratch behind their ears, wasn't even

that keen to circle around black ones to herd them across her path for luck. “I -” But if an allergy had ever been mentioned, it had slipped Belinda’s mind.

“I don’t believe it: you have!” Tugging at the spare duvet as if she were a bird and it was a worm she was trying to pull out from hard soil, her mother said, “Fetch me a bin liner, please. Quickly!”

Belinda returned from the kitchen flapping a white plastic bag at arm’s length. Surrender was snatched from her, examined and discarded as hopelessly inadequate.

“How am I supposed to fit this great big thing in there? Fetch me one of the black sacks!”

“I don’t know where they live,” she whimpered.

“Of course you do. They’re in the cupboard under the sink.”

Hot tears sprung to Belinda’s eyes.

The duvet was captured. Dispatching a series of perfectly pronounced sneezes that anyone might have been forgiven for thinking were fake, Mummy pushed the sack downstairs. Without even pausing to watch the avalanche, she began furiously casting pillowcases and sheets onto the floor behind her. The frantic activity was unsettling. Was anything safe? Backing towards the top of the staircase, Belinda watched as tea towels and a table cloth she couldn’t remember having seen before were strewn about.

“I can’t wash your uniform. It’ll never dry in time for school tomorrow.”

Her mother cranked the dial of the washing machine to sixty degrees, ignoring the fact that they were supposed to be saving the planet. Only when the sound of gushing water filled the room did Mummy’s hands find time to return to her hips. Head-scratching, she cast her eyes about for a solution - “You and your thinking!” - opening and closing drawers, extracting everything from plastic spatulas to paperclips.

“Sellotape!” she declared at last. “Right. Let’s have you standing over here with your arms out.”

Rotating the roll, an enquiring thumbnail located the invisible end and prised up a corner. Kneeling on the floor, accompanied by the sharp sound of ripping, Mummy bared her teeth to bite off a strip. For a moment Belinda, who had recently unearthed the Egyptians, wondered if she was going to be mummified. Instead, applying the sticky side to her tunic, her mother pulled the Sellotape away - press, pull away, press, pull away, press, pull away - surveying the bald patch on the material with satisfaction. Hair - human or cat - was quite acceptable while attached. Discarded, the matted strips of tape littering the kitchen floor seemed gummy.

Downwards progress was made, towards the crease of the taken-down hem. After a while, her mother forced air out through her nose. “This dress is getting too short for you,” she said.

Gazing solemnly, Belinda sensed something else she might be held accountable for. Among her many infuriating habits, growing - and the resultant expense she put her mother to - was her most consistent. Mummy had been furious when she caught Belinda eating an unauthorised bag of prawn crackers. Other people had front doors leading onto streets, but Belinda and her neighbours had only back doors leading to the garages and bin sheds. In the absence of gardens, people took pride in their back steps, decorating them with potted passion flowers trained up short runs of trellis, and concrete sculptures, mainly of the tortoise and frog variety. Wind chimes, strings of sea-shells and hanging baskets overflowing with pansies were suspended from stray nails. Finding Mummy’s arrangement lacking, Belinda had contributed her plastic windmill and a helium balloon (rescued after its escape from a careless street-seller), its silver and pink foil now slack.

“Where did you get those?”

Belinda had bent protectively over the paper bag nestling in her lap, so that the crater-like crackers couldn't be snatched away. “Mr Oo gave them to me.”

The commotion brought Mr Oo scurrying to his back door, wearing a white hairnet, his face a grid through the wire in the glass. “Oh, Mrs Brabbage,” he appealed, highly respectful as always. “Only broken bits. Mostly air.”

“I'd rather you didn't feed my daughter. I don't want her eating between meals!”

To Belinda, it seemed that her mother rarely ate. At least not meals you could identify as breakfast, lunch or dinner. But she would watch over Belinda, making sure she finished every last pea. It wasn't like that at Emily's house, where you could leave your vegetables and still get a pot of chocolate mousse for afters.

“I understand. Las' time.” The expression on Mr Oo's face was genuinely sorrowful when he looked at Belinda before returning to his bubbling cauldron: *What can I do? If she says I can't, I can't.*

Now her mother was sighing. “You're getting so tall.”

Experience had taught Belinda it was better not to respond. She had stuck to her mother's no-eating-between-meals rule, even though the constant smell of sweet and sour pork rumbled her tummy, and she had still grown. In contrast, her mother's neat figure was unchanging. Mummy boasted that she owned dresses that were older than Belinda. She had seen them hanging in the wardrobe on one of the rare occasions she had been allowed in the ‘grown-up bedroom’, with its big bed and slippery sheets; where nothing was for touching and spare eyelashes were kept in white plastic boxes.

Now her mother cocked her head to one side, tearing a strip of Sellotape away: “This is a bit like waxing my legs.”

The pile of discarded strips had grown into a nest. “Why would you want to wax your legs?”

“To keep them nice and smooth.”

It hadn't occurred to the child that her own legs were anything other than smooth. “By polishing them?”

“No, silly. You pull the hairs out.”

Thinking of the horrible tugging that occurred when a knot became trapped in the teeth of a comb, Belinda opened her mouth, but before she could ask any more questions her mother stole the conversation. “You know what my mummy would have said to me if I pulled a stunt like you did today?” Then she did a deep voice. *“Wait till your father gets home!”*

Belinda held her breath at the sound of the Forbidden Word.

“And my daddy would get home from work, exhausted and starving hungry, and be expected to deal with me before he was allowed to sit down to dinner. But he was never really up to the job, so he would frog-march me to my room and say, *‘I take it your mother's already given you a good ticking off?’* and I'd say, ‘Yes,’ and he would sigh and say, *‘Usual drill.’* Then he'd work himself up for five minutes or so, and every time he shouted, *‘Do I make myself clear?’* I'd say, ‘Yes Daddy.’ Then he'd say, *‘Right, let's go and eat - and, for God's sake, pretend to look sorry.’* One time, we had sat down at the table and my mummy complained, ‘You didn't wait to hear what Alison did.’ For a moment, Daddy looked as if he was the one who'd been caught misbehaving, then he trumped her. *‘She upset you, love. That was good enough for me.’*”

This wasn't the cue for Belinda to ask about Mummy's parents. Once before, she had commented, “Your daddy sounds nice,” only to have her mother snap, “Yes? Well, he wasn't!”

Having discarded her own family quite happily, Mummy seemed to think she could dispel the girl's curiosity with a swift, "Believe me, you don't want to know." But with gruesome secrets hinted at, it had been disappointing to learn that her grandparents were on the list of people who should never be mentioned. Too old to fall for all that sugar-and-spice nonsense, Belinda clung to the smallest nuggets of information, knowing they were vital parts of her flat-pack assembly kit, for which the instructions would arrive any day now, and then she could be complete.

Instead, wondering what her mother was building up to, she asked, "Are you going to shout at me?"

Her mother did the thing where she held both of Belinda's hands, pulled her closer and looked straight into her eyes. It was a position that seemed to have been designed to make it impossible to answer back. "I'm not sure I've got the energy. But, Belinda, you have to understand that Mummy was very worried. I didn't know where you were, and then, when I eventually found you, you'd locked yourself in the airing cupboard -" The sentence trailed off, as if the rest should have been obvious.

The cupboard in the hall was Belinda's nice safe cage. Somewhere warm, where she could be assured of being left alone. Since her mother hadn't asked a question, there was no need to give an answer. So far, she hadn't specifically been banned from the airing cupboard, only from locking herself inside it. The problem was that the door wouldn't stay closed unless you locked it and, without a door, it wasn't much of a cupboard at all. It was really more like shelves. And why would anyone want to lie on a shelf?

"Would you do something else for me?"

Belinda swallowed: a big question was coming. She tried to look willing. An outright ban from her nice safe cage would make things very difficult.

"Would you please *try* to be a little bit nicer to our visitors?" Relieved, Belinda allowed her nose to be tweaked, even though it was one of her least favourite things. Trying was something she could safely agree to. People felt sorry for you if you failed at something, but looked all sad and said, "But I tried *really* hard!"

"You want people to like you, don't you?"

"Yes?" she ventured, trying to give the appropriate answer.

"We can't afford for you to behave quite so... so... eccentrically." Sitting back on her heels, her mother bit off another strip of tape.

A safe subject. "What's behaving eggs, eggcent, eggcentric -?"

"Eccentrically. Well, it's locking yourself in cupboards for starters!"

"There's a special word for that?"

"That's just an example. It's the way you're allowed to behave when you're very rich or very famous. Or perhaps very old. But definitely not when you're six years old and live above a bloody Chinese takeaway." Noticing her own slip-up, Mummy bit her bottom lip and looked almost ready to say she was sorry.

With so little idea of who she was, Belinda was unsure how she was supposed to behave. Seeing her mother so sad, she offered a snippet of hope. "I won't be able to fit in the cupboard much longer. I almost don't fit now."

A nod, eyes that glanced away, the twitch of a smile. "That's something to look forward to, then. Come here. I need a hug." Pulled close, damp hair tickled Belinda's nose. "What are you?"

She recited the answer she knew would please, although it was never very clear why. "I'm not perfect, but I'll do."

“Did I ever tell you about a man called John Christie?”

Belinda barely dared to move as she spoke over the top of her mother’s shoulder, towards the churning washing machine. “I don’t think so.” She tried the name combined with hers: Belinda *Christie*. An improvement on Brabbage, but it didn’t feel quite right as she rolled it around her mouth.

“He was sitting next to the Queen one evening at dinner” - a story, only a story, not her daddy - “when he took out his glass eye and polished it with his hanky. When he’d finished cleaning it, he popped it back, turned to the Queen and asked, ‘Is it in straight, Ma’am?’ *That’s* what you call eccentric. Perhaps I should be grateful you only hide in airing cupboards!”

It was taken for granted that Belinda would know some people had glass eyes. As far as she was concerned, the most important aspect of the story was completely glossed over while the Queen stole centre stage. As it turned out, the children’s librarian from their local library - the second most important person in Belinda’s world - was able to supply details of a variety of ways in which eyes could be lost. A collector of useful facts, the girl wrote them down in her notebook, which said *Don’t Forget* on the front. (She could do joined-up, especially ‘g’s and ‘y’s.) Previously, Belinda had never dreamed that she needed to worry about bottles of Coca Cola exploding, things called brain tumours and ‘friendly fights’. (Not *that* friendly, she would think.)

“Sammy Davis Junior.” The Librarian was impressed with one of the names that appeared on the list of ten famous people who had glass eyes. “I used to love him!”

“Were you married to him?”

“No!” She burst out laughing. “That really would have made me a child bride! He was a famous singer when I was a very little girl. He acted, too. I saw his films quite a while after they were made.”

“How did he lose his eye?”

“Let’s see. It says here that he lost it in a car accident.”

Belinda had never seen *not* having a car as an advantage before. That was the good thing about facts. If you knew what you were up against, you could stay clear of danger.

While her mother stamped on the pedal of the bin and the lid clanged open, she chased the more elusive strips of Sellotape.

“We could knit a whole new cat from that!”

“Mummy?”

Her “Mmmmm?” was perhaps intended to suggest that it was time for Belinda to say she was sorry.

“What sort of a name is Sergei?”

Rearranging her narrow shoulders as if she’d been bitten by one of the fleas she imagined Ink was infested with, her mother said, “A scratchy name.”

“He talks funny.”

“That’s because he’s Russian. Now, run upstairs and put your jim-jams on. It’s nearly bedtime.”

Finding her brow had wrinkled, she re-wound the conversation. “He called you Alicia.”

“Wasn’t that silly of him?” Her mother had extracted a screwdriver from another kitchen drawer.

“Why would he do that? Your name’s Alison.” Even though she didn’t like men, Belinda rather hoped Mummy would get married before long. Not for the dress that would be bought without thought of expense (Evie Ambrose had worn a really pretty bridesmaid’s dress at *her*

mother's wedding). She would be happy to wear jeans if she could have a new surname that didn't rhyme with cabbage. Even one that rhymed with another vegetable would do.

Brushed past, Belinda watched as her mother examined the inside of the door to the airing cupboard.

"Perhaps it's how they say Alison in Russia."

Timidly, she padded forwards. "Mummy?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do with that screwdriver?"

"I'm going to get rid of this stupid lock."

"But -"

"One of these days, you'll get stuck inside the cupboard and I'll have to call the fire brigade to get you out. Arghhh!"

Seeing her mother's face crimson, Belinda held her breath waiting to see what would follow.

"Someone's only gone and painted the screw in place. There are layers and layers of the stuff!"

'Lick of paint'll fix that,' was their landlord's favourite saying. Biting her lip in an attempt to hide her delight, it seemed that Belinda's smile was intent on escaping the grip of her teeth.

"What are you still doing here? I thought I asked you to put your jim-jams on!"

Belinda could be as brave as a barrel full of bears now she knew her hiding space was safe, at least until she outgrew it. "Yes, Mummy."

"And don't forget to brush your teeth!"