



**T**heir aunt Polly was no Hagrid, Nanny McPhee, or even Mary Poppins. She was single and had no children of her own, no sense of humour that Clancy could discover, and she spoke to the girls in a brittle, falsely cheery voice that put their nerves on edge.

‘We’re just people, you know?’ complained Tash, privately, in the cramped spare room they were sharing.

‘Not alien life forms,’ agreed Clancy.

It was clear that their aunt was just as uncomfortable with them as they were with her. Polly rushed off early in the morning to her work as an orthodontist (‘Teeth don’t take holidays!’ she said, in her special bright voice) and rushed back home in the evening with bags of takeaway food.

She smiled nervously at them over Thai green curry, showing her own brilliantly white and even teeth. ‘Are you having a good time, girls? Not too bored? Why don’t you go to the movies tomorrow? Or the arboretum?’

Tash looked up. ‘The aquarium?’

‘No, no!’ Polly tittered. ‘That’s fish. The arboretum is a tree collection.’

‘So, a park?’ Tash rolled her eyes. ‘That sounds fascinating.’

‘Of course, you’re right, that was a silly idea,’ agreed Polly. ‘Sorry.’

They lapsed into silence. Clancy pushed her food around her plate.

‘Is it all right? Too spicy? We can try the other restaurant next time. Unless...you do like Thai, don’t you?’

Clancy muttered, ‘It’s fine.’

Tash said, ‘Clancy hates curry. She hates everything, pretty much, except cereal.’

‘Oh! I didn’t realise...But you know, cereal is not good for your teeth...I’ll pick some up tomorrow.’

‘It’s *fine*.’ Clancy scowled at Tash and scooped up a forkful of plain rice. Of course Tash would eat anything. Tash loved spices. Tash would try any bizarre culinary experiment that Tim served up – eel or brussels sprouts or blue cheese sauce, food that any normal person would gag at.

At least the food Polly provided wasn’t as weird as that. In fact, Clancy didn’t mind being at Polly’s too much, as she had good wi-fi. Lucky Clancy had remembered to bring the iPad. She lay on the couch in Polly’s neat, dim, apparently-never-used living room, mildly bored, watching videos for hours, while Tash prowled

the hot streets outside like a tiger on the loose, hunting for entertainment. The *couple of days* that Harriet and Tim had promised to be away stretched into three, then four.

By Wednesday night, Polly had become almost as restless as Tash. At last, reluctantly, guiltily, their aunt confessed that she had plans of her own. She had booked a trip to Sydney, weeks ago, to spend a few days with friends. 'I'm supposed to leave tomorrow... But of course I can't go while you're still here, can I?'

*Polly has friends?* thought Clancy in genuine surprise.

'You should totally go,' said Tash immediately. 'Don't worry about us.'

'Is there any chance your parents might be back by tomorrow night? Or even Friday might be all right, I suppose...?'

'Definitely,' said Tash promptly. 'Last night Dad said the end of the week, for sure.'

'I don't want them to rush back because of me. I did promise to look after you.'

'You'd only be leaving us for one night, tops.'

'Are you sure you'd be okay?' It felt as if Polly were begging for their permission. 'I don't get away very often, and I was looking forward to it...'

Clancy said nothing, but she didn't want Polly to leave them all alone, not even for one night.

'I promise I won't throw a party or anything,' said Tash.

'Oh! I didn't even think of that!' Polly screwed up

her face anxiously. 'But I know I can trust you. If you're *absolutely* sure...'

'Absolutely,' said Tash.

And Polly went.

'I can't believe she actually did that,' marvelled Clancy later, still shocked, even long after everything that happened next.

'Maybe not her best call,' agreed Tash.

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Early on Thursday morning, just before Polly dived into her Uber to the airport, she said, 'Will you do me a favour, girls, if you get a chance? Go and visit your grandfather. I usually pop in before work on a Thursday.'

Tash was offended. 'I was going to visit Pa anyway. I've already been. Twice.'

'Clancy?' Polly hovered with one foot in the car. 'I know Pa would love to see you.'

Clancy squirmed. 'Yeah, okay,' she muttered.

The car door slammed, and Polly was driven away.

Tash threw her arms in the air. 'Free at last!' She pointed at Clancy. 'And you're coming to visit Pa today. You promised.'

'Can't I stay here?' pleaded Clancy.

'If you don't come, maybe I will throw that party after all—'

'Tash! You wouldn't!'

'Not if you come and see Pa.'

‘Okay, okay.’

Clancy slumped against the doorway while Tash stalked inside. It was so early that a single star still lingered low in the dawn sky. Was it the same star she’d seen before, the night Tim left them here? *It must be Venus*, thought Clancy, the morning star that was actually not a star at all, but a planet...Morning star, evening star, a steady silver light that would become invisible when the sun rose.

But of course Venus would still be there. It struck Clancy for the first time, with a pleased, private sense of discovery, that the stars didn’t really ‘come out’ when night fell; they were there all the time. It was just that the sun’s light was so bright that you couldn’t see them anymore.

It made Clancy wonder what else might be lurking around, invisible to the eye. Just because you couldn’t see something didn’t prove it didn’t exist. You couldn’t see gravity, but that was real...so maybe all kinds of things like ghosts and magic and UFOs were real, too...

A prickle ran down Clancy’s spine, and she hurried inside after her sister.