

'UTTERLY THRILLING.'
Abi Elphinstone

'MAGICAL.'
Katya Balen

'AN ABSOLUTE CRACKER.'
Hilary McKay

EMMA CARROLL



THE HOUDINI INHERITANCE



1

It was three minutes to eleven on a blustery summer morning, and Harry Houdini was about to jump. All along the seafront gaudy posters promised a ‘death-defying stunt’, which, by the looks of what was happening at the end of our pier, was, for once, no exaggeration. We’d nudged through the crowds, my pal Dennis and me, and positioned ourselves so close to Mr Houdini we were currently able to watch the great man flexing his toes in preparation. For someone so famous he seemed surprisingly small, yet wide and strong like a beer barrel.

‘He doesn’t even look nervous,’ I hissed to Dennis, who should’ve been the one giving *me* the running commentary since he was Harry Houdini’s biggest fan, and had worn his favourite gold-striped waistcoat to mark the occasion.

Unlike Dennis, whose wardrobe was decidedly theatrical, I wore anything my elder sister had grown

out of: today, a sailor-style frock on to which, owing to an argument at the breakfast table, I'd already dripped egg yolk, though I didn't suppose Houdini would notice. Dennis and I were two mere specks in the ocean of people who'd turned up to witness his performance. In every direction the seafront was swarming with summer frocks and eager, sunburnt faces. Most tourists visited Sidford-by-the-Sea for our gritty cockles or a ride on a bad-tempered donkey: it wasn't every day a world-class showman came to town.

Excited as I was, I still had doubts the stunt was humanly possible and had bet Dennis a bag of gobstoppers Mr Houdini wouldn't manage it. The drop from the end of our pier into the grey-blue sea was forty stomach-churning feet. Wearing only swimming trunks and locked in more chains than a dangerous prisoner, Mr Houdini was going to jump in, then free himself in under four minutes. It was, so Dennis had informed me, one of the escapologist's well-known acts.

'Oh, Glory,' he'd said, as if my lack of faith in his hero was to be pitied. 'He's jumped off bridges in Boston and New York loads of times. The man's a genius. 'Course he'll manage it.'

Maybe, but I was a questioner by nature. So we spat on our palms and shook hands to seal the bet.

‘Looking forward to those gobstoppers, Glor,’ Dennis reminded me now, with a playful nudge.

‘You honestly reckon he’ll do it in four minutes, when I’d enough trouble getting out of my bedroom window?’ I answered, showing Dennis the scrape on my elbow to prove it.

It was lucky I’d made it to the seafront at all this morning. When Mum went off to work the summer in New York’s Coney Island with Dennis’s mum Shula, we’d been left under the watchful eyes of his gran and my elder sister Effie. At breakfast, mid boiled egg, Effie had banished me to my room for being ‘sneaky and irresponsible’. It was hardly my fault she noticed the puppy weeing on the floor before I had the chance to explain what it was doing in our kitchen. Especially when I’d been told countless times that I couldn’t have a dog. I’d have to face the music later, but was trying my best to forget it for now.

Meanwhile, on the pier, Houdini’s toes uncurled. It seemed to be a signal to his assistants, who rushed forward to do a last-minute check of his equipment. The chains circling his wrists and ankles were secured by a padlock the size of a football, which must’ve pinched and poked like fury. Houdini didn’t flinch.

‘A minute to go, ladies and gents! Time to shut your

traps!’ hollered local rough Sammy Sykes, who’d been hired to keep control of our part of the crowd.

Dennis and I shared an excited grimace. The crowd’s babbling dropped to a murmur. As Houdini climbed nimbly over the pier’s safety railings, oblivious to the ‘no diving’ notices, I guessed I’d already lost the bet. The patch of water Houdini was aiming for was uncannily deep, and even in summer, swimming there would turn your lips blue and your fingers as white as fish fillets, but he seemed fearless.

The town clock chimed eleven. I tensed. Dennis grinned.

‘Four minutes is an awful long time,’ I reminded him.

‘Not if you’ve trained properly. Divers in the South Pacific can hold their breath for ages,’ he replied knowingly. ‘They make their lungs as small as oranges.’

The thought made me slightly breathless.

‘If anyone can cheat death it’s Houdini, don’t you worry,’ Dennis assured me.

Bets aside, I hoped he was right. A hush fell over the crowd as Mr Houdini began to speak.

‘If . . . I . . . die . . .’ he declared, delivering each word slowly, powerfully, like an actor on the stage. ‘It will be fate and my own foolishness that is to blame.’

A coldness crept over me. Did Houdini expect to die,

then? Dennis didn't think it possible, yet all along the seafront the crowd had fallen eerily silent, as if everyone suddenly realised just how dangerous the trick was. The loudest noise now was the slow slap of water against the pier and the chains clinking as Houdini flexed his arms. He gave a small nod to the two men holding on to him. One of them called out 'Mrs Houdini!' and a tiny woman in a cloche hat appeared, carrying a lap dog under her arm.

'That's his wife, right?' I whispered.

'Yup, Beatrice, Bessie for short.'

'And the dog?'

A glare from Sammy Sykes silenced us before Dennis could reply. I was certain he'd know, though. Dennis's mum was a singer and had many delicious stories about the famous acts who'd crossed her path. When the movie star Rudolph Valentino died suddenly, she knew why and where and how much blood was involved, which was a fat lot more than the newspapers did.

On the seafront the excitement had become electric. I gripped the railings with clammy hands as Mrs Houdini began to count.

'FIVE . . . FOUR . . . THREE . . .' The voice coming out of her tiny frame was surprisingly deep, almost growly.

Mr Houdini flexed his shoulders.

‘TWO.’

The breeze lifted a lock of hair off his face.

‘ONE.’

The men holding Houdini’s arms released their grip. For a split second, he didn’t move. Then all it took was a slight tipping of his upper body and he fell forward, hitting the sea with a great crack.

‘Ouch! Bet that hurt,’ I muttered under my breath.

The water swirled white, fizzing and hissing and swallowing Houdini before turning grey-blue again.

He was gone. Dennis and I leaned a little further over the railings to see where and when Houdini would appear. Twenty . . . thirty . . . I tried counting in my head, but it seemed ages before the man keeping time declared:

‘ONE MINUTE!’

The more I stared at the sea beneath the pier, the more my eyes started to play tricks on me, turning every ripple, every dip and swell into Houdini’s wet head emerging. I began feeling uneasy when he still didn’t surface.

‘TWO MINUTES!’

Now Dennis looked nervous too.

‘TWO MINUTES THIRTY SECONDS!’

It felt like years. I kept picturing the thick chains criss-crossing Houdini’s body, running from his wrists

to his ankles, everything held in place by that enormous padlock. And his tiny, orange-sized lungs screaming out for air.

‘Shouldn’t he have done it by now?’ I whispered.

‘Depends.’

‘On *what*?’ The frown on Dennis’s face filled me with dread. Much as I wanted to win our argument, I didn’t want Mr Houdini to die.

‘THREE MINUTES!’

The crowd hadn’t moved. It was as if we were all holding our breath alongside Houdini. I felt dizzy and tight in my chest.

The next second, Mrs Houdini was rushing to the pier’s edge, the people around her shouting orders, throwing ropes into the water, readying blankets and – I noted ominously – a stretcher. Everyone was pointing down at the sea. Mrs Houdini ran from one side of the pier to the other.

Something must’ve happened just out of sight because the entire seafront then erupted into a roaring cheer.

‘Hoorah!’

‘He’s done it!’

‘Unbelievable!’

Houdini, it seemed, had succeeded in getting free.

Relieved, I took a huge gulp of air. Dennis flashed me a winner's grin.

Yet to our frustration, all we could see were hats being hurled into the sky. Directly in front of us we faced a wall of shoulders as people surged forward for a view down on to the beach.

'Excuse me!' I cried, desperate to see. When no one moved, I groaned loudly. 'Ugh, watch out! I'm about to be sick—' and like magic, a path opened up before us.

It was enough to see a figure staggering across the wet sand, dragging behind him a train of ropes and chains. His assistants surrounded him. Members of the public who tried to climb down on to the beach were instructed, very firmly, to keep back, to give Houdini space. One person who did manage to get a little too close was pushed roughly to the ground and promptly sat on. Houdini's assistants meant business.

As we watched it all, eyes on stalks, the town band struck up a dizzyingly fast version of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. Another great cheer went up as Mrs Houdini, dog still under her arm, tottered on to the beach to congratulate her husband, who was on his knees, coughing up goodness knows what. My own chest squeezed in sympathy.

‘Mrs Houdini’s dog is *so* cute,’ I murmured as we watched.

Dennis laughed. ‘You’ve just witnessed the most amazing escape act, and all you think about is the *dog*?!’

‘True, he was brilliant – Houdini, I mean. Can’t imagine how he did it.’

‘He probably got free straight away, then stayed underwater to make it more dramatic,’ said Dennis, virtually swooning in admiration. ‘He’ll have trained for months to get it right.’

I shuddered. No amount of training would make me stay underwater that long. Nor did it explain how the trick was done. And this was what intrigued me.

‘Do you think he keeps the key in his mouth?’ I wondered.

Dennis shook his head. ‘You heard him speak at the start.’

‘He must pick the lock, then, mustn’t he?’

‘That, Glory, is the million-dollar question.’

‘You mean you don’t know?’

‘No one does, though not for want of trying. It’s all top secret.’

‘You must have *some* idea, Den, a superfan like you,’ I remarked.

‘I think it’s probably magic,’ he confessed. ‘Stuff no one else could do if they tried.’

‘Hmmm.’ I wasn’t convinced. But without proof, and not wanting to offend Dennis, I kept quiet.

Now the show was over, the crowd began to move towards the tea shops and amusement kiosks that lined the promenade. I had a lost bet to honour, but on checking my pocket, found only a couple of pennies and a dog biscuit.

‘It might not be a whole bag of gobstoppers,’ I warned as we approached the sweet shop.

‘That’s all right.’ Dennis tucked his arm through mine. ‘You know, Glory, the satisfaction of winning is the *best* prize.’

I laughed. ‘You’re a chump, you are.’

I was glad to see Dennis back in good spirits. These past few weeks we’d both been a bit lost without our mums, Dennis especially. If I had a complaint about him it would be his tendency to be *too* cheerful, especially early in the mornings. But without Shula he’d been as gloomy as I’d ever seen him. His closeness with his mum was, I confess, something I was envious of. Yet though my mum wasn’t as showy with her affections, I did miss her – not least because she was good at keeping my bossy sister in check. Having Effie in charge was like being in

school detention every day *before* you'd done anything wrong. Admittedly, this morning's business with the puppy probably hadn't helped, and I realised now that bringing a dog home before I'd asked permission wouldn't change my family's no to a yes.

Still, I told myself firmly, if Houdini could defy death, then I could certainly face my sister.



2

We lived in a part of town called Herringsgate which, though only a pebble's throw from the seafront, was an entirely different world. Whereas the seafront smelled of candyfloss and ices, Herringsgate's aroma was of bad drains mixed with oil paint and goat curry. To broad-minded folks it was the 'colourful' side of town, where the cottages that once housed fishermen were now home to artists, dancers, singers. Others said Herringsgate dwellers walked the 'tightrope of respectability' – whatever that meant.

To me, India's Inks tattoo parlour, with its curtained alcoves and draughty windows, meant home, especially when Mum was there. Yes, she worked long hours so Effie and I were used to looking after ourselves, but when we had Mum's full attention it was like standing in sunshine. Though I did wish she was keener on dogs.

'What exactly *did* you say to Effie about the puppy?'

Dennis asked, because when we turned into our street, my feet began to drag.

‘That Mrs Wilson had a notice up in the post office,’ I said guiltily. ‘Where, by the way, I’d nipped out to post *her* letter to Mum. Which made Effie partly responsible, though she didn’t see it like that.’

Dennis rolled his gobstopper thoughtfully against his teeth. ‘You didn’t honestly expect her to let you keep it, did you, Glor, when your mum’s already said no to a dog – how many times is it now?’

I shrugged: I’d actually lost count. ‘You know Effie marched the pup straight back to Mrs Wilson. She didn’t trust me to do it.’

‘She’s proper strict, your Effie,’ agreed Dennis.

I looked at him with pleading eyes. ‘But it was such a cute little pup, Den – brown and white with bushy eyebrows. It could easily have been my late birthday present.’ Which, incidentally, seemed to be another touchy subject in my family.

My birthday had been a month ago – June 21, to be exact – the very day our mothers had left for America. It might’ve been a coincidence that she chose that day to leave, though it occurred to me that she’d been in a similar mood last year, and the year before that too – all my birthdays, in fact.

‘I just wish my family realised that we’d *all* be happier with a dog,’ I said, with a sigh.

We turned the corner and there was Effie. She was in our shop doorway in conversation with Dennis’s gran, which was probably as much due to our dire lack of customers as her determination to collar me. Since they’d been left in charge of us they’d become unlikely friends. My sister wore men’s trousers and braces, Dennis’s gran dressed in black crêpe worn in memory of her beloved husband, who died thirty years ago.

‘Sidford might rather forget that a white woman married a Jamaican man,’ she told us. ‘But it’s my mission to keep Jack’s memory alive.’

There was talent in Dennis’s family. His grandad, the Jamaican trombonist Jack ‘Raggs’ Miller, had passed on his musical skills to his daughter Shula. Dennis, determined to follow the family tradition, had yet to discover a talent of his own beyond knowing every show tune and dance step going.

‘Here.’ Dennis offered me another gobstopper as we approached. ‘For strength.’

‘Thanks.’ I took one and pocketed it because if my sister imprisoned me again I’d need sustenance.

When Effie saw us, her face froze and her hands went to her hips. I groaned inwardly.

‘I can explain—’ I began.

‘Funny,’ Effie interrupted me. ‘But I could’ve sworn there’s a girl who looks just like you upstairs in her bedroom, who I told to stay there until teatime.’

Miraculously, it was Dennis’s gran – nicknamed ‘Granny Vic’ because her mourning garb was very Victorian – who saved my skin.

‘Good was he, Harry Houdini?’ Granny Vic asked, eyes a-twinkle. ‘We were so far from the front we couldn’t see a sausage. Glad he didn’t drown, mind you.’

It was typical of Granny Vic to dwell on the death part of things. But Effie’s interest was also snared, thankfully, which made her forget me for a moment. She’d wanted to see Houdini herself, and only hadn’t because a customer booked in for what she’d hoped was going to be a commission. There was no sign of that customer currently, I noted.

‘Course Houdini didn’t drown, Gran,’ Dennis scoffed. He took criticism of his idol extremely seriously.

‘Though he did mention he *might* in his little speech,’ I pointed out.

At which, predictably, Dennis leapt to Houdini’s defence. ‘Ah, that’s all for show, so we believe what he’s about to do is proper dangerous.’

‘Well, it *is*,’ Granny Vic insisted. ‘Any normal person would drown in an instant.’

‘But he’s not normal, Gran. He’s the best escapologist in the world.’

‘I want to know how he did it,’ I confessed. ‘Apart from making his lungs the size of oranges –’ the thought of which still made me uncomfortable.

‘Why anyone would care to put themselves through such a performance is beyond me,’ remarked Granny Vic.

‘Money,’ Effie said simply.

With Mum in America, she was responsible for keeping the tattoo business ticking over. Though it was late July, trade hadn’t yet picked up, and I’d a sense Effie was almost relieved. She could do simple flowers and love hearts, but her artistic passion was fine art, not ink, and she was happiest left alone with her sketchbook. Or chatting with her sweetheart Nancy, who sold candyfloss on the seafront. Effie was *unhappiest*, it seemed, when left in charge of me.

‘Your Mr Houdini will be raking it in now,’ said Granny Vic, folding her arms like she did when she’d a tasty bit of news to share.

‘For the stunt on the pier?’ I asked.

‘That, and for the extra show he’s putting on tomorrow night.’

Dennis's jaw hit the pavement. 'What extra show?'
'At the Alhambra.'

Dennis and I shared a wild-eyed look. My friend, I knew, would *die* to see his hero in action again. And I had QUESTIONS about Mr Houdini's act that still buzzed in my brain like bees.

'Who told you there would be another show?' demanded Dennis.

'Oh, you know . . .' Granny Vic tried to sound vague, but we all knew most of her news came via Mrs Dyers, who ran the Many Hands public house on Windmill Street. 'Apparently he likes it here so much he changed his travel plans at the last minute.'

Effie rubbed her fingers together in the way that meant money. 'Likes the size of the crowds, more like.'

The Alhambra, Sidford's only theatre, was glamorous in a faded kind of way, and little bigger than our school hall. I couldn't imagine the extra show would generate much in terms of ticket sales, yet it would allow the lucky audience a much closer view of Houdini in action. In a front-row seat, I'd get a chance to see how he did his tricks. Dennis and I simply *had* to go, no question.

'Don't get any ideas, you're still in trouble,' Effie reminded me, as if she could read my thoughts.

‘And the tickets will sell like hot cakes,’ warned Granny Vic, who had an infuriating knack for whipping up your excitement only to deflate it again in the next breath. ‘They’re going on sale just before the show,’ she added. ‘Apparently they want to vet who goes in, just in case.’

I frowned. ‘Of what?’

‘Security matters, I suppose. He’s made some enemies, has Mr Houdini. He’s not shy about sharing his opinions.’

‘About mediums, mostly,’ Dennis muttered to me, because I must’ve looked confused. ‘He says they’re frauds for making people believe they can contact the dead.’

‘Well, he’s right, isn’t he?’ I replied. From what I’d heard, mediums were a bit like fortune tellers, only instead of a crystal ball, their messages came from dead people. It seemed strange to me that anyone would pay money to be told things that weren’t really true.

‘Maybe,’ said Dennis, who for once didn’t defend his hero outright. Still, the fact that Houdini had enemies went some way to explaining why no one had been allowed near him on the beach today. It might be the same at the Alhambra tomorrow, I supposed. Though this was no reason to miss out entirely.

And there *was* a way.

Dennis once told me about an act of Houdini's where he'd invite audience members to lock him up in their own equipment. Those who got picked for the challenge were given free tickets.

My brain was now on fire.

'Can Dennis come inside for a sec? He wants to borrow a book,' I lied to Effie.

'I do?' Dennis, momentarily confused, quickly rallied. 'Oh! Yes, that new one about Gatsby someone?'

He was better at lying than me, remembering those little embellishments to make it sound more convincing. Effie, a harder nut than most to crack, wasn't immediately taken in.

'*The Great Gatsby?*' She raised an eyebrow. 'Can't imagine it's your thing, Den.' Then, relenting, said to me, 'Be quick. I'll deal with you afterwards.'

The second we were out of earshot, I shared my idea about the free tickets. '*Because,*' I said determinedly. 'I've got a plan.'

I led Dennis in through the empty tattoo parlour and up the back stairs. It was here, above the shop, in a jumble of rooms, that I lived with Mum and Effie. Our dad had died in the war, at Ypres, when Mum was expecting me. I didn't miss him because I'd never known him like Effie had, but I sometimes wondered how different

life would've been if he had made it home. More often, though, I'd a vague feeling of not being quite complete, as if something was missing. To me, the remedy was obvious, and dog-shaped, though tragically no one else in my family agreed.

Taking Dennis straight to the sitting room we rarely used, I pointed to a trunk which was covered in a patterned shawl and stood in one corner.

'They're in there,' I told him. 'I'm not supposed to touch them.'

The handcuffs were a family heirloom. They had a habit of being tricky to open, which was one reason why Mum insisted they weren't for playing with. The other being that they came from a dark period in our family's history; the mere sight of them made my mother shudder.

'Are they cursed?' I'd asked hopefully when she'd shown them to me.

She sighed. 'They certainly brought bad luck to their previous owner.'

That owner was my grandfather, who, in the last century, had been a prisoner during the Boer War and had to wear them in vile conditions where fever and starvation were rife. My grandfather's job in the prison camp, so the story goes, was to tattoo identification

numbers on to the other prisoners' arms. He'd had to do it the traditional way with a block of wood and a chisel, which was much more painful than the electric needles Mum and Effie used.

It was unusual for Mum to talk about our relatives. All I knew about my father was I'd inherited his dead-straight brown hair. Effie, who'd been five when he died, said her only memory of him was playing football together on the beach. Mum knew I was curious about our family. I was always the same: tell me a half thing, a half-truth, and I'd want the whole answer.

'Do you miss Dad?' I'd asked her.

'Sometimes.' Mum's eyes glistened with rare tears. 'Oh, G, we've all lost people dear to us. At least I've got you girls.'

And when she kissed the top of my head I'd felt so warm, so safe, I'd hardly noticed when she wrapped up the cuffs, put them away and closed the lid. The trunk hadn't been opened since.

With Dennis hovering near the door as a lookout, I removed the scarf from the lid of the trunk and opened it. A smell like cough sweets hit me. Lying on top, wrapped in tissue, was a thick layer of old baby clothes. Effie and I must've been the best-dressed infants in Sidford back then, because there were more tiny outfits

here than either of us had owned since. The handcuffs were underneath, inside a shoebox, and felt pretty heavy as I lifted them out.

They were shaped like two big O's joined together, with a lock on one end and a hinge on the other. Luckily a key was also attached by a loop of string. The lock itself was an ingenious double lock which only worked if you knew to turn the key anticlockwise. When I had a go, it didn't open.

'Don't force it!' Dennis cried.

I eased off and tried again. The key moved slightly to the left, making a horrid grinding sound before giving way. Instantly, the lock pinged open to reveal a corkscrew-like spring inside. I couldn't imagine how Houdini would get free without using the key.

'In full working order, look!' I said, and to prove it I put the cuffs over my wrists. Even on me the fit was tight enough that the metal pressed heavy and cold against my skin.

'They're the business,' Dennis agreed. 'Houdini'll—'
We froze.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

'Quick!' Dennis flapped his hands at me. 'Take 'em off!'

Of course, the blasted cuffs wouldn't come apart. I'd deliberately not locked them, yet the spring wouldn't

activate. The more I struggled the more the metal bands dug into my wrists. Just as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs, the cuffs groaned open. I stuffed them and the key into my skirt pocket, shut the trunk, covered it with the scarf again and managed to grab a book off the shelf.

‘Found it!’ I said, waving it as Effie appeared.

She eyed me suspiciously, knowing full well we were up to something. Once Dennis had gone, I rushed up to my bedroom in the attic and was midway through stuffing the handcuffs inside my pillowcase when I realised Effie had followed me upstairs.

‘Blimey – oh!’ I cried, managing to rid myself of the handcuffs *and* sit on my pillow just in time. ‘Don’t bother knocking, will you?!’

‘It’s a rare honour to catch you in,’ she replied.

To my surprise, she leaned against the door jamb as if settling in for a cosy chat, rather than the telling-off I was due. I tried my best to appear normal, which was no mean feat with the handcuffs digging into me.

‘I take it you climbed out of there to escape earlier?’ she asked, nodding at the open attic window.

I shrugged a yes; it was pointless denying it when the curtains were still swaying in the breeze.

‘You’re lucky you didn’t break your neck,’ she observed. ‘And then what would I tell Mum, eh?’

I winced: Effie knew how to stir up my guilty conscience. Our health was the one thing our mum *was* strict about. You only had to mention a sore throat and she'd be grabbing her big medical book, the pages falling open on horrible diseases like polio and diphtheria.

'You don't have to tell Mum anything,' I muttered dismally.

Effie softened. 'No, I don't. She's not been great at keeping in touch.'

True, she hadn't.

Mum had gone to Coney Island to work with the tattooist who inked Lady Viola, the world-famous painted lady. It was an amazing opportunity. A chance of a lifetime. About a month ago we'd received a telegram from her to say their ship had reached New York. We'd heard nothing since. It wasn't unusual for Mum to forget the rest of the world when she was working hard, but I had hoped she'd keep in touch more often.

'It's good that she's so busy,' Effie reasoned, because our tattoo parlour certainly wasn't.

'Yeah. Must be rushed off her feet,' I agreed, though still wondered why she couldn't find five minutes to write to us. Dennis's mum, who'd been singing with huge names like Ma Rainey and Joe 'King' Oliver, sent him postcards every week.

It was only for the summer, I told myself. She'd be home soon, and everything would be back to how it should be.

'You'd think our customers had followed Mum to America, wouldn't you?' Effie said, looking glum.

'Didn't your customer come today?' I asked, shifting my position. These handcuffs really weren't made for sitting on.

'Yeah, only to say he'd changed his mind. Bet he'd have gone ahead with it if it'd been Mum.'

'But you're good!' I tried telling her.

'*Good*, not great,' she corrected me. 'You know I'd rather be doing my own art, but until Mum comes home I'm stuck here, trying to keep this place afloat.'

Again, I felt guilty. A telling-off would've been easier than hearing my sister pour out her woes.

'You've got Nancy,' I reasoned, though this wasn't without complications either.

It didn't matter to me who my sister's sweetheart was, though I was aware the rest of Sidford saw things differently – especially outside of Herringsgate. Countless times Effie had been called horrible names, and had, once or twice, been threatened. Really, some people had nothing better to do.

'Nancy's *my* business, Glory,' Effie warned. Their

whole courtship had been very secretive so far: I'd not even met Nancy in person.

Still, heeding Effie's flushed cheeks, I changed the subject.

'Look, Mum's not away forever. She'll be home before we know it.'

Effie sighed. 'In the meantime we've food and rent to pay for.'

'Mum's going to send money, though, isn't she?'

'Hmmm.' It wasn't much of an answer. Effie, signalling the end of our talk, pushed herself upright from the door jamb, running an inky hand through her dark curly hair. 'So please, no more puppies or climbing out of windows. We've got the whole summer holidays to get through in one piece, all right?'

I gritted my teeth: sitting on the handcuffs was fast becoming excruciating. Challenging Houdini tomorrow had better be worth it.

'All right?' my sister repeated.

'Yes,' I replied, nodding furiously. 'Absolutely.'

Effie looked at me as if she didn't quite believe me. No wonder: as well as the borrowed family heirloom in my pillowcase, I had my fingers crossed behind my back.