Rock a Bye Baby

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Extract

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Chapter One

1965

The woman in the cockle booth sniffed a pinch of snuff from the back of her hand. Once the small tin was tucked away, she turned back to face the promenade. 'Get yer cockles 'ere,' she bellowed. Pulling up a corner of the sack she wore as an apron, she swiped dismissively at a few stray specks beneath her nostril.

Marcie sat with her legs bunched beneath her, her back against the warmth of the old stone wall. She was staring at the cockle woman and wondering, but not about buying cockles – that was the last thing she'd want to do. She was wondering about how the woman had got to being what she was – fat, old, not caring too much about standards. So how had she come to be like that? A deeper thought hovered behind that one: would she herself end up like this woman? She shivered at the harrowing vision. No one wanted to end up like that.

The pungent aroma of malt vinegar and hot food wafted up Marcie's nostrils.

'Chips!' Rita was back. 'Yum, yum.'

Marcie made her self comfortable against the stone wall separating the beach from the promenade and opened up her packet of sandwiches.

Rita slumped down beside her.

Rita licked the Rimmel Pan Stick from her lips and popped a chip in her mouth. She pulled a face. 'Hmm. Needs a little something extra. Think I'll get myself some cockles.' She got to her feet. 'Coming?'

Marcie made a face. 'I can't stand cockles. They look like fishes' eyes.'

'Aw, come on. Keep me company. You don't have to buy any yourself.'

Rita didn't like doing anything by herself. Bloody nuisance at times. But they were best mates, so Marcie did as requested. Holding on to the hem of her skirt, she got up as elegantly as she could. Her mini skirt was mid thigh and if she wasn't careful everyone would be treated to a glimpse of white knickers. As it was, she only flashed her stocking tops and a glimpse of suspenders. Just as well. One of her suspenders was missing a button and a farthing was doing the honours.

Rita was trying to cadge a few more cockles.

'Come on, Gran. Be generous.'

The woman screwed up her eyes and placed hands as speckled as hens' eggs on the counter.

'Cheeky bugger. You'll 'ave what you get. An' don't call me Gran. I'm not your bloody Gran.'

'Don't be like that,' said Rita with a cheeky grin.

'You're Rita Taylor,' said the old girl.

'Yeah, that's me.' Rita giggled, giving Marcie a nudge. 'I'm famous. What do you think of that then?'

'I knew your mother. Used to go up town a lot during the war. Famous for doing war work she was.'

Rita ignored the toothless grin and didn't catch on to what the old girl was saying – really saying.

'What about me? Know my name as well?' said Marcie, determined not to be outdone and nudging Rita as hard as she'd been nudged.

The woman's toothless smile faltered. 'Oh, aye. That I do. I know yer grandmother. Who don't know Rosa Brooks? Famous she is. Knew your mother too, though she's famous for a different reason.'

Marcie swallowed. The woman's comment made her feel uncomfortable. Her mother had disappeared somewhere around Marcie's fifth birthday. She hadn't heard from her since, and her grandmother had made it clear that her mother's name was never to be mentioned. Not questioning why and not saying had become a habit. Her grandmother's words, still flavoured with her Maltese origins, echoed in her brain.

'Gone away with a man. Left me and your father to look after you. Not a good mother to go away and leave her child. Wrong! Very wrong!'

Oh yes, her grandmother was famous alright.

Thank God for friends, Marcie thought to herself.

Rita bubbled like a hot stew on a gas ring. At this moment in time her best and oldest friend had got the old girl to pour the cockles over her chips and added generous splashes of vinegar.

Marcie pretended to vomit. 'Christ, Rita. Don't know how you could.'

'Cockles are lovely.'

'Well, I don't like them. I think they're disgusting!'

'Fab,' said Rita between salty mouthfuls. 'Here,' she said, lowering her voice while her eyes slid sidelong to the cockle seller. 'What was that she was on about? Her reckoning she knew your mother. Must have been a while ago. Your mother's been gone for a long time, ain't she?'

'Yeah. A long time.'

'So you don't remember what she was like?'

Marcie shook her head and turned her face to the breeze sweeping in from the Thames Estuary. She didn't want Rita to see her face just in case she guessed she was lying. Anyway, it wasn't exactly a lie. She'd never heard from her mother in ten years or more. She might be dead. On the other hand she might be alive and living the life of Riley.

Rita glanced at her watch.

'Bloody hell! Late again.'

Marcie finished her sandwich, screwed up the brown paper bag her lunch had been wrapped in and

tossed it into a bin. Determined to eat every chip and every cockle, Rita re-wrapped hers. 'I'll eat it this afternoon. Not wasting good food for nobody.'

Not long out of school, both girls had been taken on selling rock and candy floss in adjoining booths on the edge of the beach at Leysdown. Out of sight in their clapperboard booths, they chatted all afternoon or sang snatches of the latest pop songs.

Marcie had acquired a transistor radio – a present from her father sent via a friend of a friend. At first she'd tuned into Radio Luxembourg, but that didn't come on air until after six. It was only since the arrival last year of the pirate radio station Radio Caroline that they'd had daytime pop songs.

Since the advent of a radio channel that understood the tastes of the younger generation, Marcie had got into the habit of bringing the transistor into work. All in all work wasn't turning out so bad. On a warm day it was pleasant. On a bad day – depending on wind direction – she got soaked through.

They finished at six.

Rita burst into song. 'Hi ho, hi ho . . .' She always sang the tune from *Snow White* at this time of the day.

Marcie interrupted her. 'Coming for a coffee later?'

The off-key singing came to a halt. Rita winked. 'Now which café would we be going to?'

Marcie was good at hiding a guilty expression –

she'd had years of practice living with her grandmother.

'I fancy the Lucky Seven.'

Rita chortled. 'I know what you fancy, and coffee and a bottle of coke got nothing to do with it! Leather jacket and tight denim jeans that shows all a bloke's got – that's what you got in mind. Your gran going to let you out?'

Marcie grinned in a meaningful fashion that Rita knew well. 'If she says no, I'm going to bed early.'

'Out the window and down the drainpipe, you mean.' They both laughed.

A girl they knew from school waved to them from the pavement. She was pushing a pram.

Marcie waved back. 'Hello, Nancy.'

Rita mutely waved. 'Crikey. Look at her. Dropped a kid the minute she got out of school.'

'She's married now, though,' said Marcie who liked Nancy and felt sorry for her. 'She married Gary Champion. Her dad gave him a hiding to make sure he did the right thing. Couldn't have a bastard in the family, he said.'

'Gary Champion? I don't know him,' said Rita. She frowned as she said it. Rita liked to think that she knew everybody.

'You wouldn't want to know him. I saw Nancy close up the other day. She had a massive bruise on her arm, all purple in the middle and yellow around

the edges. According to Nancy he drinks a lot more since they got married. He works on the docks. Mind you, she reckoned she was used to it. Her dad used to hit her about anyway. Half the time he mistook her for her mother. Swine!'

'Glad he's not my dad,' said Rita.

'Glad he's not mine,' Marcie echoed.

Hearing what Nancy's dad was like made her feel grateful that hers was away in London. Every once in a while he sent her a present. Therefore he must care about her, though he'd never actually gone out of his way to show affection. Things would have been really great if he hadn't married Barbara.

If it hadn't been for Barbara with her peroxide hair and her Bridget Bardot lips, she would have been an only child. Barbara had presented Tony Brooks with two sons, two brothers that Marcie would have preferred not to have, and a baby daughter, Annie. All the same, her dad was still a gent compared with Fred Tucker, Nancy's old man.

'My dad's not like that,' said Rita with a tinge of pride in her voice. 'He's a diamond, my dad.'

It was nothing but the truth. Alan Taylor was well off, let her do anything she liked and bought her anything she wanted. Rita probably didn't need to work but for some reason her dad had thought it would be good for her. Though he would have liked her to have a better job than she did and to have

done better at school, but as long as she was happy that was alright by him. Rita's dad owned businesses, and they lived in a nice bungalow with a garage and a gravel drive. He was also a mate of Marcie's dad. But Marcie couldn't let her dad be outdone.

'My dad's great too. I can't fault him.'

'That's because he's never home. You'd find a difference then,' Rita pointed out.

Marcie felt her face turning hot. 'Well, he can't help having to work in London. That's where the money is. He does a lot of work up there. That's how come he's able to send me nice things.' Using just one finger, she swung the transistor radio on its pink leather carrying strap. 'I mean, wouldn't send me presents like this if he was anything else, would he?'

Rita gave a quick nod that could be interpreted as acquiescence. If that was what Marcie believed, it was fine by her. But Sheerness was a small place. The Isle of Sheppey itself was a small place. Word got round, and the word Rita had heard was that her best mate's old man was in Wandsworth, London – the prison. But she wouldn't voice what she'd heard was the truth and upset her best pal. Best friends don't do that. Not unless they fell out, then she'd probably tell all and sundry. If they didn't know already.

Back in the booth and halfway through the afternoon, Rita spread out her newspaper-wrapped chips and swiftly ate the lot.

'All gone,' she said, licking her lips and wiping her greasy fingers down her generous thighs.

The chips were wrapped in two sheets from an upmarket daily. Rita threw the crumpled up top piece into the bin. Marcie began reading the sheet that was left.

'Shame Nancy Tucker didn't read this,' said Marcie.

Rita glanced over her shoulder. 'What's that then?'

Marcie pointed at the headline. 'Government Votes on Abortion'. Rita not being much for reading anything, Marcie contracted the subject matter for her benefit.

'They'd already voted but were asked to think again. If it passes it'll mean if you get knocked up and don't want to marry the bloke, you can get rid of it legally.'

'That's handy,' said Rita blithely.

Marcie frowned. 'That depends.'

Rita shrugged. 'On what?'

Sometimes Rita was great fun to be with. At other times her shallow attitude to serious matters made Marcie wonder whether they should be friends at all.

'It's a baby, Rita. A human being. It can't be that easy.'

'Well, I would if I had to. And so would you.'

The sheet of newspaper was suddenly taken off by a breeze and sent tumbling and fluttering along the beach.

A young couple with four small children came to the booth to buy penny shrimps made from sickly pink rock. Four excited faces turned upwards to choose their wares and hand over their pennies.

'Looks as though you've got your hands full,' Marcie said to their parents, who looked to be still in their twenties. It was obvious from their appearance that they didn't have much money.

Mum and Dad smiled. Mum shook her head. 'At times it's hard to make ends meet, but there, I wouldn't be without them. Not for all the world.'

Chapter Two

Marcie pushed open the front door of the small terraced cottage she shared with the rest of her family. The Brooks family consisted of Gran, her stepmother Barbara, called Babs, half-brothers Archie and Arnold, and baby half-sister Annie. Dad didn't really count because he was seldom there, 'working' in London for a stretch at a time.

The door bounced back against the mass of coats hanging from hooks in the tiny hallway. The smell of her grandmother's version of shepherd's pie wafted out from the kitchen. Gran's shepherd's pie was a little spicier than the English version thanks to the addition of tomato sauce and chopped herbs that she grew in a pot outside the kitchen door.

Her gran's voice sounded from the kitchen. 'That you, Marcie?'

Of course it bloody well was. Who else was it likely to be? But she answered yes anyway, and certainly didn't swear. Most people minded their language in front of Gran. They wouldn't dare otherwise.

'Get our Archie from out the back yard, would you, love?' Babs's voice, throaty with smoking, wheedled

with just the right hint of menace. Marcie gritted her teeth.

Her dad had taken up with Barbara – Babs – only a few months after her mother had gone off. Babs had presented him with three kids – Archie was the eldest, nine years old and a right chip off the old block; Arnold was a year younger.

There was a larger gap between the birth of the boys and that of baby Annie. Tony Brooks had been away for quite a while and had been absent again between Annie's conception and her birth. He'd only seen her once since she was born when Babs had gone on a prison visit.

Marcie went out into the kitchen. An old black range squatted like a fat spider in the fireplace. Two armchairs were placed either side of the fireplace and a dark-green dresser ran the length of one wall. The middle of the room was occupied by a scrubbed pine table and six mismatched chairs.

Gran was smothered in richly smelling steam rising from cabbage, carrots and the giant dish of pie she'd just fetched out of the oven. She looked over her shoulder.

'Wash your hands, Marcie. Your supper's nearly ready.'

Babs was sitting at the table smoking a cigarette and reading a magazine – *True Romance*. She had bleached blonde hair lacquered into a French pleat

at the back of her head. Two kiss curls, stiff with hair lacquer, appeared glued to her cheeks. Her fringe was a series of equally stiff curls hanging like dead caterpillars on her forehead. She seldom offered to help her mother-in-law with getting any meal ready.

'Pass me a drop of water would you, love? I got a bit of a frog in me throat.' Babs had sneaky ways of getting her own way.

Lazy cow!

Marcie was intentionally slow, turning on the tap and pouring herself a cup of water before she did anything. Babs would hate the fact that she didn't jump to it. She could feel her stepmother's eyes boring into the back of her head. Babs liked to boss her around. She never even tried to mother her but had treated her as little more than a skivvy since she'd moved in years before. 'She's a right cow,' Marcie had said to Rita. 'She's not my real mother, so why should I do as she says?'

'Did you hear what I said, our Marcie?'

At the sound of her stepmother's voice, Marcie's fingers tightened around the cup.

'What did your last servant die of?' she muttered, loud enough to be overheard.

Babs looked up from her reading. Her hard look – thick eye make-up, clotted pores above thick pink lips – hardened further. She pointed a threatening finger. 'Less of your bleeding cheek, young lady!'

'Barbara! I do not tolerate swearing in my house.'

Rosa Brooks had black button eyes that glittered when they fixed on you. Babs wilted under her mother-in-law's gaze.

'Sorry, Mum, but I've been at work all day, I have, and I am her stepmother. I do have a right to tell her what to do until she's of an age. Isn't that right, Mum?'

Despite her appearance, Babs was no fool. There was an art to buttering up and Babs was skilled at it. Her problem was that using bad language came naturally. She'd been brought up that way.

Eyes glowing with triumph she turned back to Marcie. 'Now get yer ass out in that yard and tell our Archie his tea's ready!'

Rosa Brooks rolled her eyes. Marcie's mother had had some class. Babs was common.

Marcie's gaze dropped to Babs's finger.

'Crikey, Babs. Your finger's gone all yellow. Disgusting!'

Caught off balance, Babs looked at her fingers. All the red nail polish in the world wouldn't deflect attention from the yellow staining following years of smoking.

The freckled face of Arnold, the youngest of her half-brothers, appeared from under the table. Remains of dried jam encrusted his face and his mouse-brown hair was dirty and dishevelled. His smile revealed a broken front tooth. Arnold was always scrapping. 'It's

in the blood. Your grandfather was the same,' Rosa Brooks had declared.

Unfortunately for young Arnold it was not a milk tooth – he would always have a toothy smile and that mischievous look. He was also bright and curious, always asking questions.

'Mr Ellis's digging a hole. Why's he doin' that, Marcie?'

Marcie couldn't help smiling and was about to tell him the reason, but Babs interrupted.

'Because he's bleeding stupid. That's why! Like that stupid nephew of his – daft buggers the lot of 'em.'

'You shouldn't say that,' Marcie snapped. 'Garth Davies can't help it!' She turned to her grandmother for support. 'He can't help it, can he, Gran. It was God's will, wasn't it?'

Her grandmother, Rosa Brooks, was small but mighty; if she said something was God's will then that was it.

The fierce glower returned. She pointed a warning finger.

'Barbara, you will not say such things. What God has made is good. And you will not use that language in my house. I have told you this before. I will not have it!'

'She riles me,' said Babs, her thick lips pursed into a sulk. Her eyes fell back to the lurid pictures and over-large print of her magazine.

Marcie's surge of triumph was short lived.

'Marcie. Get your brother.' Her grandmother's tone was ripe with authority. Her keen eyes, dark as black beads, missed nothing. Her look said it all. *I'll have no disobedience in this house*.

They were frequently reminded that they lived under her roof. Rosa Brooks made it clear to them all that this was her house bought with her money. Anyone who didn't respect her and her ways could get out. The choice was theirs. But she'd keep the children. She frequently reminded them of that particular fact. 'My blood is my blood, and I have the money.'

No one knew for sure whether she really did have money in the bank or even stuffed under her mattress. But they took it that she did. Gran wouldn't have no prying into her business just as she would have no arguing. The one thing they did know was that the house, a small terraced cottage dating from Nelson's time and within sight of the sea in Blue Town, was hers. She'd bought it with the sum of money she'd brought as a dowry to her marriage. Her husband, Cyril, Marcie's grandfather, had been a sailor in the Royal Navy in the 1920s. He'd met Rosa in Malta, the headquarters of the Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet and hinted to her that he had estates in Kent where hops were produced for the finest brewery in London. It was an outright lie, of course.

All he'd had was a room in a downmarket hotel around the corner from where they lived now. He hadn't even owned an aspidistra in a pot, let alone fields of Kentish hops.

Clinging on to her inheritance, Rosa had had no intention of living in a hotel room for the rest of her days. She had used her money to purchase the little cottage from the landlord. He'd been reluctant to sell at first as the whole terrace had once belonged to his wife's family, but for some reason he'd changed his mind. Nobody quite knew why except that it had something to do with a favour being done by Rosa Brooks.

It was pleasant to be out of the house, away from the smell of home cooking and the liberal stink of nicotine.

The sun bathed the back yard in a rosy glow that made the dusty vegetation look greener, the powdery earth darker. Even the tough marsh grass that hadn't quite been obliterated from its place along the fence looked as though someone had painted it with copper and brass.

A slight hum came from the direction of the cranes and derricks that serviced the docks. So did the smell of metal, marshland and burning oil. It only happened when the wind was blowing in a certain direction. Sometimes all Marcie could smell was the sea. She liked that. 'That's how your grandfather

smelled,' her grandmother had told her when she'd mentioned it. 'Black tobacco, strong rum and the North Sea.'

'Archie?'

Archie was peeing into the chicken run. The chickens looked curious, not sure whether to keep away from the perfect arc of urine or investigate the wormlike spout from which it was streaming.

'They'll think it's a worm and peck it off,' Marcie shouted and couldn't help laughing.

The lean-to lavatory was just outside the back door. She asked him why he hadn't used it.

'Cos Gran's put Chlorus down it. Can't stand the smell of that.'

Marcie sympathised. Gran was a stickler for having things clean and germ free, but was a bit heavy handed on the bleach, and a demon with the scrubbing brush.

Rosa Brooks had standards. The net curtains hanging at the shiny windows were the whitest in the terrace. Her door knocker gleamed and flashed like gold in the sunlight, her path was the best swept and although she admitted to not being a skilled gardener, the tiny square that she called the front garden was tidy.

Except for the pot of growing herbs, the back garden was a different matter, a place of dusty vegetables growing in rows. The chicken run occupied the far end close against the fence and the back lane.

Grandma had kept chickens – mostly cockerels destined for Christmas dinner – for years. The chicks arrived in spring and were slaughtered two weeks before Christmas. Grandma did the slaughtering.

There were also two rabbits in a cage. These belonged to the boys.

'I've got a load of dandelions for Twinkle and Bobby,' Archie said.

He picked up the bundle he'd gathered from down by the railway line. Marcie gave him a hand.

'Here. Let me.'

As they pushed dandelion leaves through the wire mesh of the rabbits' cage, Marcie spotted Mr Ellis from two doors down. He was mopping his very red and sweaty face with a large handkerchief.

'Alright, Mr Ellis?' Marcie shouted by way of greeting.

He shouted back, his loud voice easily carrying over the other gardens.

'Yes, love. Thanks for asking. It's a bit warm for digging, but it has to be done. Sneaky devils, them Russians. You never knows when they're going to invade us, you know. So I'm one that's going to be ready for them.'

Marcie nodded and said, 'I see.' In fact she didn't see at all. She knew the Russians were frightening, but didn't really understand what this Cold War business was all about. More general things were

important to her, things closer to home – like sneaking off to the café tonight, saving up for a new pair of shoes or listening to *Pick of the Pops* at Sunday teatime.

Anyway, how could a war be called cold or hot? What did it mean?

The sound of a radio and a news bulletin sounded from two doors up in the other direction, just beyond a row of runner-bean canes. Something similar came from the television set that the old couple next door had on too loud.

Marcie ignored both sets of news, concentrating instead on the song running round inside her head, her current favourite. 'Things We Said Today' by The Beatles. Paul was her favourite.

Humming a snatch of the song she watched Archie's rabbits feeding their faces. Her grandmother interrupted, calling for both of them to come in and eat.

As she walked back to the house Marcie looked up at the back bedroom window. The curtains were closed. Her little half-sister, Annie, was already put to bed.

Annie was the youngest and thus the most demanding. It was obvious to Marcie that Babs had no patience with babies and toddlers. She didn't have much patience with older kids either, but at least they could look after themselves.

Annie got put to bed early whether sleepy or not. It had occurred to her that Babs wasn't as keen on baby girls as she was on boys.

Her thoughts went back to the newspaper article. Would Babs have had an abortion if she'd had the choice? Without the boys and Annie she would have had a bedroom to herself. All the same, while she might have wished them not here more times than she could count, the boys were funny and the baby was sweet. Marcie couldn't help loving them.

Mealtimes in the Brooks household were silent except for the sound of scraping plates and clattering cutlery. Everyone ate at breakneck speed.

'Finished,' exclaimed Archie.

His grandmother caught him in the act of pushing his chair away from the table.

'Stay right where you are, Archie. I have an announcement to make.'

All eyes looked furtively up from their plates.

Rosa Brooks had tried on various occasions to have them say grace at mealtimes – hence the hurry to eat and leave the table. Wary eyes flashed from one sibling to another.

The nut-brown face creased into a wrinkled smile. The dark eyes, as black as the clothes she wore, danced from one family member to another.

'Your grandfather and I have spoken.'

Unseen by her grandmother, Marcie rolled her

eyes. That old thing again! Grandfather coming back and telling her grandmother things!

Marcie was at an age when her grandmother's eccentricities embarrassed her. It was bad enough to be Maltese and foreign. But imagine a woman who claimed she received visits and talked to her dead husband? It was stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Drawing herself up to her full five feet two inches, Rosa Brooks clasped her hands in front of her and pronounced, 'Your grandfather assures me that your father – your husband,' she said with a sideways glance at Babs, 'will be home shortly.'

Babs looked down at her plate so it was impossible to read her reaction.

The boys, however, were over the moon.

'When? When's he coming home, Gran? When?'

Archie's face was bright with excitement. All thoughts about leaving the table before his grandmother could inflict a prayer on him were totally forgotten. His eyes were round as saucers at the news. He missed his dad the most – more than his mother did, that was for sure.

Adopting an attentive expression, though her mind was elsewhere, Marcie fixed her gaze on her grandmother's face. She glanced swiftly at the clock when she thought she could get away with it.

'Soon, Archie,' said Rosa Brooks. 'Sit down and listen.'

Archie sat. So did everyone else, their eyes locked on this diminutive woman dressed in black, her black hair slicked tightly back into a firm bun.

'My son, Antonio, will be home shortly. Your grandfather assures me of this.'

She paused. Nobody said a word. Nobody moved.

Marcie gritted her teeth and hid her clenched fists beneath the table. Like the rest of the family, she'd got used to these pronouncements from her dead grandfather. They were usually about how well or how badly they'd been behaving, or to watch out for a windfall, a dip in fortune or the threat of imminent temptation; the latter pronouncement was usually aimed at Babs who had the reputation of being a bit free and easy with her charms, given half the chance.

But this was different. This was one pronouncement Marcie wanted to believe, that her father was coming home.

The last visit had been seventeen months before and that was only fleeting: Marcie had only seen him for a matter of minutes. The police had been right behind him. Before that he'd been away for five years.

She wanted her father to come home and see her as the young woman she'd become, not the child he'd glimpsed on the run. She told herself that things would be different. He'd say nice things and bring her more presents.

'Just like your mother,' he'd say, while smoothing her naturally blonde hair back from her face. Her blue eyes would look up at him adoringly.

Oh yes. Everything would be wonderful and he'd call her his little princess again. She vaguely remembered him calling her that when she'd been a lot younger.Then he'd gone away too. She'd put on a brave face and although she proclaimed that he was away working, she knew the truth. Sheerness was a small place and rumours travelled quickly. She'd chosen not to acknowledge them. The lie protected her against being hurt.

Her grandmother had her own views. 'It was all a mistake. He is innocent. Your grandfather told me this.'

The Marcie that believed and the one that did not fought in her mind. She gritted her teeth. When she'd been Arnold's age she'd believed it with the same innocence as he was showing. But she was older now and times were changing. It was 1965 and she wasn't a child. She didn't believe in that stuff any more, and yet . . .

She was sorely tempted to ask if this was true and if her father was innocent of inflicting grievous bodily harm on someone, then who had done it? Did her grandfather know that?

The modern, grown-up Marcie argued that this was not going to happen, that her grandmother was

an old woman who only *thought* she could hear or see her dead husband. All the same . . .

Her half-brother did the job for her.

Arnold's hand shot up into the air.

Rosa Brooks looked at him and shook her head.

'Arnold. You are not in school. You do not need to put your hand up in order to ask me a question.'

His brother Archie grinned and slapped him on the head. 'Stupid.'

His mother fetched Archie a clout around the ear. 'Knock it off, you little sod.'

'Barbara!' Calling her daughter-in-law by her full name was a sign that Rosa Brooks meant business. 'When will you learn to curb your language?'

Looking suitably chastised, Babs lit another cigarette, even though the ash from the old one had only just disintegrated into the lid of a pickled onion jar that served as an ashtray.

Marcie's gaze alternated between the clock and her grandmother. Could she get out tonight without having to climb out of the window and shin down the drainpipe?

Rosa Brooks was looking at Arnold.

'What did you want to ask me, Arnold?'

Arnold sat on his hands. 'Tommy Smith's granddad died last week. I told 'im he'd come back and visit his gran. He said I was a liar. That when people is dead, they're dead and buried in the ground and ain't

never comin' back. But I said I wasn't lying and that my granddad comes back to see you. Ain't that right, Gran?'

His grandmother's expression was unchanged. 'Only if she has eyes to see. Not everyone can see those that have passed over. Only people like me can do that.'

Marcie took it all in, but said nothing. The clock ticked on. Could she get out tonight without getting lumbered with babysitting young Annie? She loved the baby best of all her half-siblings, but Johnnie had promised her and she was sure he wouldn't break his promise.

Johnnie came down most Friday nights with the rest of a motorcycle gang from London. He'd made eyes at her a few times but it was only on the last occasion he'd finally spoken to her. He'd promised to buy her a bottle of Pepsi the next time he saw her. She wanted to hold him to that and had already decided what to wear.

The only thing curbing her impatience was that she wanted her grandmother's pronouncement to be true. She wanted to see her father again. It had been so long and although her father had sent her presents – like the transistor radio – she missed him. She wanted at least one parent – one *real* parent in her life.

'We will have to make ready,' Rosa Brooks said to

Babs. 'The boys will move into the attic room. The baby in with you and my son, Antonio. I will share with Marcie until I can get a bed for the box room. Marcie needs a room to herself.'

Although the box room wasn't very big, Marcie was grateful. The boys had been in there for a while so a lick of paint wouldn't come amiss.

'We can start sorting things out tonight,' said her grandmother. She was looking at Babs when she said it.

Babs looked startled. 'Tomorrow would be better. There's a ladies' darts team match . . .'

'That is not important. Your husband is coming home. We need to make ready for his return.'

Marcie said a silent prayer. Thank you, God. No babysitting tonight. It was difficult not to smirk at her stepmother's expense.

Babs grabbed hold of her just as she was emerging from the bathroom.

'Not so fast, you little tart. Sneer at me again and I'll smack it off your face, I will. Get it?'

Marcie shook her off. 'We'll see about that. And don't call me a tart.'

'I will too!'

Eyeing her stepmother's appearance brought a mocking smile to Marcie's face. 'OK. Call me that if you like, but just remember it takes one to know one!'

Babs's slap was well aimed, but Marcie was quick, ducking beneath it and racing for the stairs.

'You wait, Marcie Brooks,' Babs shouted after her. 'I'll cook your goose, my girl. You just see if I don't!'