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Handbags and Gladrags

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Extract

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Chapter One

1959

Coming out from under the railway arch and into a quiet and familiar cobbled turning which led out onto a main road, shy and sensitive thirteen-year-old Nathan Cohen screwed up his eyes against the glare of the bright July sunshine. He pushed his round, loose National Health glasses up onto the bridge of his nose and did his best to focus on a small group of lads who attended the same school as he – lads who were known as bullies. In the midst of them was not one but two local ruffians who loved to pick on boys who were loners through no fault of their own, and who unintentionally invited humiliation of one sort or another any day of the week.

Too late to turn around and make a cautious retreat. Nathan, who was overweight and a touch short for his age, felt a rush of fear sweep through him as he realised that he was already the focus of the gang's attention. His lips beginning to quiver, he felt his throat go dry. The boys were forming a kind of human chain across the worn cobblestones and each one, arms folded, was grinning at him – bar one, who hunched his shoulders and splayed his arms, palms upwards, as if to mimic a

distinguishing posture of an East End Jewish elder. Clearly, he was mocking Nathan's grandparents, who ran a small local grocery shop-cum-Jewish delicatessen in a back turning.

Nathan knew from experience that it would be folly even to try and retrace his steps, never mind run for his life as he had done before, only to be chased and caught. It was certain that there was going to be no escape from humiliation of one sort or another, perhaps a good thrashing, for they saw only that he was faint-hearted and fat and an easy target. So, trying to act natural and friendly even though beads of sweat were breaking out on his forehead, Nathan did his best to keep an easy pace as he strolled closer to his five would-be tormentors, who were at a loss to do much else with their time other than taunt those weaker than themselves.

On his way to visit his grandparents who lived close by, Nathan was in his faded spinach-green school blazer and an open-necked cotton shirt tucked into his grey school trousers. These were the clothes he wore day in day out, come rain or shine. His only pair of stout black shoes was a touch shabby but, as ever, had been highly polished by himself that very morning while his mother, Lilly, was at work in the local umbrella factory. Nathan's father Jacob, an accomplished tailor, worked in a small sweatshop in the back and beyond of old Aldgate East and had done for several years. Jacob had always taught his three sons and his only daughter that they should make the best of whatever talent they had and work hard so as to achieve

a more comfortable way of life. He had also drummed into them the most important thing of all – that they should take pride in having been born Jewish.

Nathan's elder brothers had taken their father's lessons to heart. They had gone into the print business together some years back, and had managed to climb the ladder of success. They both now lived in Golders Green on the border of Hampstead, and only came into the East End to be with their parents and younger brother for Sabbath on a Friday afternoon or evening, depending on the time of the year. Of course they would then stay overnight because of the strict rule of no travelling after the sun had set. These close-knit family gatherings were part and parcel of the Orthodox Jewish way of life, as was the written law of not working on a Saturday. Their observance was also something that rewarded Jacob and Lilly for having been good parents.

Sadly for Nathan, his sister was no longer a part of the gatherings. Jacky Cohen had married an American Jew when she was only eighteen and had gone to live in the States. Nathan had missed her so much at first that he had cried into his pillow night after night, but now, six years later, he had learned to live without her. She had left the country in 1953 when he was seven years old and just before he and his family had joined in the street parties on the day that a princess had been crowned Queen Elizabeth II. It was a day when there had been a national celebration the like of which had not been seen since VE day. Had it not been for his close friend Charlotte, who lived in the same block as

himself, Nathan would not have joined in the celebrations. Charlotte was his one and only best friend and it was she who had got him to join in the spirit of national unity, when Union Jacks decorated every street, every child was given a Coronation mug, and schoolgirls – rich and poor alike – wore red, white and blue ribbons in their hair. Together they had watched the Coronation on a small black and white television set in his living room with his parents, and had sat next to each other at the street party later. The second of June 1953 had been a day to remember always, despite the rain that came down on the spectacle.

Nathan's dad was a young unmarried man during the battle of Cable Street in London's East End in 1936. He joined Jews, and other groups such as communists, in protest against a march by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, the Blackshirts. That experience taught him a lesson which he now passed on to his son, that he would be better served if he kept his eyes lowered when approaching a group of lads who were not of the same beliefs as himself. And that, even though he should always return a smile, to be on the safe side, he should never invite one.

Good though Jacob's advice was, Nathan knew that it wasn't of much use when a gang such as he was approaching was bored and looking for a bit of fun. The small menacing group was now spreading across the cobbled back turning, which was hemmed in by lock-up storage space beneath the railway line on one side and black iron railings and a park on the other. There

really was no choice for the thirteen-year-old in this deserted street other than to turn around and run or steel himself for their goading and then a beating – unless an adult happened to come by.

The sweat trickling down his forehead had all but plastered his black wavy hair flat and his spectacles were more steamed up than usual, but he knew this was no time to take them off and dry them with the big white handkerchief that he kept in his trouser pocket. It was no more than seventy degrees that day, but to Nathan, who had never been good in heat, it felt like a hundred. A worried frown creased his forehead but he forced a nervous smile and he nodded hello to the intimidators, who smirked sarcastically.

'Here he comes, the fat Jew boy who's in the A-stream class wiv all the other fucking clever dicks,' said the leader of the pack as his lips parted in a detestable smile. 'Don't he make yer feel sick. Look at him. Fat 'n' Jewish and he stinks of herrings. And he's in the fucking clever A-stream.' He looked from his followers to Nathan. 'I bet you he still ends up in a suit factory what's run by Jews. *You want a good suit?*' He mimicked the lad's father, Jacob Cohen, by hunching his shoulders and splaying his hand. '*If you want a beautiful suit then go see the boy's father. He makes such a beautiful suit you couldn't believe it.*' The boys laughed as Nathan flushed with humiliation and suppressed anger. Still doing his utmost to appear unruffled, Nathan could see the louts closing in with the same menacing look he had seen before. Tears welled behind his eyes and he could feel his heart beating so rapidly that he was afraid they

would hear it. Taking a deep breath, he forced back the tears and waited for the assault that would no doubt begin with him being forced to the ground and end with a good kicking, accompanied by insults to do with his religion or his weight.

This was not the first time he had stepped into their realm, only to receive a hiding. From experience Nathan knew that all he could do was clench his fists, close his eyes tightly, and take whatever came. But luck was on his side this afternoon because suddenly another person had caught the attention of Kenny, the ginger-haired leader of the pack. He now peered over Nathan's shoulder with a different kind of smile on his face, and an expression now much softer and, for the moment, quite normal, even warm.

Following his gaze, one of the others – the tallest youth – licked his lips and then quietly chuckled. 'Lucky day . . . see what the wind's blown our way.'

'Charlotte the virgin,' sneered another. 'Charlotte who likes to hang around with weirdos. Given 'er one yet, 'ave yer, Jew boy?'

'Watch your mouth,' said Kenny, glaring at his mate. 'I wanna keep this girl sweet. I've marked 'er out. I fancy 'er rotten.'

Knowing when to keep quiet, Nathan chose to ignore the comment about his best friend. At least the immediate attention was off him and he could breathe a sigh of relief even though he had every intention of staying right where he was. Reaching the gang, thirteen-year-old Charlotte, with her lovely natural blonde hair cut into the new urchin look, narrowed her wide blue

eyes as she summed up the situation. She then winked at Kenny, who was wearing his brother's hand-me-down black leather biker's jacket.

'How hot is your blood today, Kenny?' she said, doing her utmost to behave as if she hadn't picked up on what was going on.

'At boiling point, and hot enough for you any day of the week, babe,' was the cool reply.

'Good. Because the leader of the Roman Road gang and a few of his crowd are on their way. You've been a naughty boy and gone and upset them from what I heard.'

Chuckling, and looking from her to the lads and back again, Kenny raised his eyebrows in derision. 'The Roman Road gang? Do me a favour. We saw 'em off wiv a good kicking weeks ago. They know not to come onto our patch.'

'I just did you a favour by telling you, but it's up to you whether you believe it or not. Your mum wasn't best pleased to see them on her doorstep – not from what I could hear from the stairs on my way down from our flat.'

'Listen to it.' The lad with the ginger crew-cut chuckled. 'On my doorstep? No way! They wouldn't dare step on Bethnal Green territory.'

'Please yourself,' said Charlotte, 'but don't say I didn't warn yer.' With that the slim, shapely girl, who was tall for her age, slipped her arm through Nathan's and gave a gentle tug. 'Come on you or we'll be late. Move yerself.'

Kenny was by now too preoccupied with what

Charlotte had told him to care about his victim any more. 'So, Charlie, where are they now then, the cretins?'

'Looking for you lot. And especially *you*. And my name is Charlotte to people I don't like. You'd best get home and find out what's what.' She then pulled on Nathan's arm, saying again, 'Come on, we'll be late.'

Staring into her face with a hint of fear in his eyes, Nathan slowly nodded as the penny dropped. 'Time waits for no man,' he said, relieved that he had an escape route. Charlotte had sidetracked the gang with her fib about them having to be somewhere else and he was off the hook. This time . . . Talking over her shoulder as she walked away, she boldly advised the lads to keep a low profile for a day or so. The couple hadn't got far when Kenny's voice pierced through the air.

'If that was a lie and you did it to get the fat Jew off the hook, Charlie, I'll find you and I'll take yer while the others hold the Jew nice and tight. He can watch the free show. I reckon he'd like not having to *pay* for a ticket!'

Charlotte stopped in her tracks and glared at him. 'Go fall in the cut, Ginger! And watch your vile tongue or I'll start telling tales. Your dad's fitting carpet in our front room next week. You wouldn't want me to tell him about your strange hobbies, would you?'

'Hobbies? What fucking hobbies? I live on the outside,' said the bully, going pink in the face. 'I hang out in the snooker clubs and on street corners—'

'Whatever you say, Ginger. Whatever you say!' She

then quickened her pace, whispering to Nathan to do the same. 'Don't look back,' she said. 'Just keep on walking.'

'I fully intend to,' said her friend, embarrassed at the way she had stood up to one of the most notorious bullies around, making her braver than he was. 'Tell me about his strange hobbies later.'

'I made that up, but from what I heard from the girls at school most lads have the same one. But we won't go into that. He did go red in the face though, didn't he.' She giggled. 'So perhaps I pressed the right button.'

Looking sideways at Nathan, Charlotte could see that he was blushing. 'It's all right,' she teased. 'Just so long as you don't do it in public.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said, a touch haughtily, and then changed the subject. 'Ginger's no more than a little boy in a big boy's jacket.'

'Maybe, but you should try and stay out of his way all the same.'

Nathan shook his head with a jerk. 'I can't believe that you said that to him. The bit about his strange hobbies.'

'Everyone's got a secret. Especially lads of his age.'

Still blushing a little, he nodded. 'Yes I suppose so.' He glanced over his shoulder and drew breath. 'Shit. They're following us.'

'It's all right,' said Charlotte, squeezing his arm. 'We'll be fine once we're out on the main road and by the entrance to the park.' She looked back to see that the boys were now milling around their leader, who stood all macho with his hands on his hips.

'See you in the classroom, schoolboys!' Charlotte called back to them.

'Oh for fuck's sake, Charlie. You shouldn't have said that, you're asking for trouble. I learned long ago not to rise to their bait. It's not a game of tease and chase. I used to have to hide in the boys' toilets. That lot can be right bastards when they want. You should watch your tongue.'

'Don't be mad. I'm a girl! It wouldn't wash if Ginger Kenny were to lift a hand to me. He'd lose too many Boy Scout points.'

Still perturbed by her lack of respect for a gang with a reputation, Nathan glanced over his shoulder again and saw that they were half loitering, half inclining towards them. 'They're gonna come after us.'

The boy then took a grip on himself and encouraged her to step up the pace. 'You shouldn't antagonise that kind of person,' he said, slipping his arm out of hers and taking off his glasses at last to give them a wipe and dab his perspiring forehead.

Charlotte tenderly punched him on the arm. She could tell by the look on his face just how scared he was. 'They're wastrels, Nathan. Nothing but loud-mouthers.'

'I know that, but they take pleasure in beating me up. You don't know how hard it is for me to stop myself from running but I know that would be worse than anything.'

'Oh come on, you know that I know that. Why do you think I just dragged you out of that little trap?

You've got to stop trying to get on their side. They won't let you in so don't even *try* and be their friend.'

He looked back nervously once more. He could still see the lads, but at least the space between them was growing. 'I don't think they *are* going to follow us,' he said, in a tone of relief.

'Seems not.' Nathan looked as if he had just escaped a fate worse than death, and quite possibly he had. Charlotte slipped her arm into his again and they walked slowly along the path. 'I wish they would all move out of our neighbourhood.'

'Me too.' Nathan just about managed to smile at her. 'They were only loitering because they've got nothing else to do.'

'Exactly. Whereas you've always got somewhere to go because of your relatives being close-knit. And anyway one day you'll be able to jump all the hurdles that they'll baulk at.'

Nudging his spectacles back into place, the lad drew himself to full height, took a deep breath, and pushed his shoulders back. He wanted to walk proudly beside his friend, who was not only pretty, but everything that any boy could wish for in a girlfriend. She was all that his honeyed dreams were made of, but he had never said so – and never would, because he felt that they would only ever be friends. He was shorter than she, he was fat, and he was Jewish. Mixing religion when it came to marriage wouldn't go down well with his parents, never mind hers. He had felt warm and brotherly love towards her since they first got to know each other at the age of five, when his family moved

into the block of flats where Charlotte was already living. On the first day that he started at the same school as she, they had partnered each other when forming a queue to move from their classroom to the art room. It was one of her favourite places; there, they were allowed to use primary colour powder paints and were given their own paintbrushes to clean and keep in their school desks.

Aware that he now had sweating armpits, Nathan slipped his hands into his trouser pockets and kept his arms straight and close to his sides to try and hide the damp patches on his cotton shirt. Certain that the gang really had gone, it was with a thankful sigh that he strolled with Charlotte in the park. They rested for a while on a park bench.

'We're very lucky to have these gardens, Charlie,' he murmured. 'Who would have thought it? A beautiful place like this in the heart of the most feared and dreaded East End.' He quietly chuckled. 'That's what others from better parts of our city think, you know? That here we live as if it's still Dickensian land, but look at our surroundings. What more could you ask for?'

'A pair of slingback shoes and a matching handbag.'

'Oh, not that again. If your parents think you're too young for that kind of thing then that's all there is to it.'

'Others in my school year have got them. I've seen them all done up on a Friday night, going to the local dance halls. Dad doesn't seem to realise that I'm a teenager, he still treats me as if I'm his baby girl and I'm not even allowed to wear stockings. Mum said she'd buy me some, and a pretty suspender belt to hold them

up once I've turned fourteen, but that's nearly a year away.'

'I'm not interested in girls' fashion fads, Charlie,' said Nathan, a touch self-conscious to hear her talk about her underwear. 'And anyway, you shouldn't walk through the back streets by yourself at night and you would have to if you were going to any of the youth clubs that hold dances. It's dangerous. Especially in old Bethnal Green, around by the old Jago.'

'The old Jago? I wouldn't go there anyway. It's all old factories and workshops now. But it's all right where my great-aunt and uncle used to live. Broadbent Road is okay, and there's a smashing dance hall for young people close by. I went there one summer evening to see what the girls at school were getting excited about.'

'And was it any good?' he asked.

'From what I could see from the doorway it was fantastic,' Charlotte replied. 'It was dark, with red and blue light over the dance floor, and there was a stage where a band was playing and singing songs from the hit parade.'

'Why didn't you go inside?' he said, his elbows now resting on his podgy knees and his hands cupping his face.

'Because I was wearing my gingham check frock with the white Peter Pan collar that would suit a six-year-old. My parents just won't accept that I'm a teenager. That's what comes of being an only child, I s'pose, but I *will* get my slingbacks even if I have to get a Saturday job and buy the shoes myself.'

Charlotte turned her head towards the open gateway

to the park, and felt an icy chill shoot through her: the boys were coming their way. 'We might be through the gates, Nathan, but we're not out of the woods, as my grandparents would say. They're still hanging around. Let's head for the park-keeper's little wooden hut and hide in there. Come on.'

'Won't he mind? The park-keeper?'

'I doubt he'll be in there on a sunny day like this. And anyway, no, he won't mind, he's nice. I often sit with him when he's in Queen Victoria's open-fronted shelter.'

Nathan laughed. 'Queen Victoria? I doubt she ever sat in our park.'

'Course she didn't, but it was built to commemorate her coronation so the adults have always referred to it as her shelter.'

'I know that. I know my local history.'

'So you should. Come on.' They made their way to the little tucked-away place where the kindly man in his uniform and peaked cap usually sat when having his packed lunch or taking a tea break. They passed through heavenly flowerbeds where scented roses, ranging from pale apricot to deep velvety red, were in bloom. They could see that the hut door was open but there was no sign of the keeper.

Charlotte turned and looked to the entrance again. She could just see through the shrubbery and the iron railings that the gang was either about to enter the park, or carry on across the main road that led to the Mile End Gate. Whatever the case they were hovering, and

clearly looking for something – or someone – with which to kill time.

Not wishing to risk any trouble for Nathan, she turned her attention to her friend, who was now sitting on the bench inside the hut. He was in full view of any passers-by, and she quickly went to him, pulling at his arm and ordering him to get behind the shed and duck down behind the thick foliage. The thicket, with its leafy screen, had always been a favourite of Charlotte's when she was a child playing hide and seek with friends.

Doing as he was told and once hidden, Nathan didn't move a muscle as they watched from their hiding place. The gang were now sauntering along in their direction and Charlotte's own heart was beginning to beat faster. She clasped her hands together and silently prayed to God to make the boys turn back or walk by without searching for them. They were now sitting targets and it had been she that had led them into this corner. Nathan, realising that this could be the lull before the storm, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes but gave nothing of his terror away, and Charlotte couldn't make out from his expression whether he was troubled or not.

But she *could* see the lads were looking about them and sniggering at a tall, upright man with greying black hair slicked back. Definitely a gentleman, he was wearing a shabby, old-fashioned suit, frayed at the edges, with a gold fob watch and chain in his waistcoat pocket. He had the air of a man who had once had money, but it was impossible to tell if he was from a posh or poor background. Linking arms with him was a woman of

similar age; her thinning, almost transparent, blue-rinsed hair shone in the glow of the afternoon sun. The boys did no more than snigger at the couple, and Charlotte could see that Kenny was peering in their direction but, fortunately, didn't spot them through the screen of foliage. 'I think they're going to turn around,' she whispered.

Nathan wiped his brow with the back of his hand and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Yes, I think so too.' The boys sauntered away, going back through the open gateway and leaving the park with an air of despondency. This patch of greenery was not one they could be bothered with.

'The trouble with that lot is they're now finding out about the birds and the bees at school and it's messed up their thinking. They don't know what to do with themselves now that they're meant to be thinking about the facts of life,' said Charlotte.

'What are you talking about? I don't understand.'

'Well, up until recently any talk about sex at home just didn't happen, but not any more. Our parents are being encouraged to talk to us about things, aren't they.'

'I don't know,' said Nathan, 'but then my dad never held back where sex was concerned. I know most of what I need to know already.'

'Perhaps Jewish families are more open about that kind of thing. But now that we've got this education at school, these boys don't know whether they're supposed to be kicking a football or kissing a girl. Before now we were brought up to be ashamed of puberty. My

mum still hides her box of sanitary towels even though I'll soon be starting my periods.'

Nathan was aghast at the thought. 'Urrgghh. You're making me feel sick. For God's sake, shut up.'

'Why? We shouldn't be ashamed. I read an article about it in a girl magazine. It all made sense so my fivepence wasn't wasted.'

'My grandmother once told me that I was never to have anything to do with girls and I passed out when she explained what she meant and why she had said it.'

Charlotte laughed. She could see that Nathan was embarrassed and tried to think of something to change the subject. But then, all of a sudden, there came from the overgrowth a pattering of warm raindrops that had settled on broad leaves earlier on after a light July shower. Laughing as they came out into the open to shake off the rain, they dusted themselves down then strolled through the grounds towards the public library. There, a glass of welfare orange juice and a biscuit were served at this time of the day to school children, pensioners and tramps.

'I really wish I didn't have to hide from those fucking bastards,' said Nathan, pulling both hands into tight fists. 'It's bloody well getting on my nerves. I'm sick of them calling me a fat Jew boy and then putting the boot in.' He looked sideways at Charlotte to see that she was trapping laughter.

'Well, three cheers that you find it so amusing.'

'Oh shut up. Of course I don't. I'm just relieved that they've gone and you've got away without a kicking. It's when you swear that makes me want to laugh. I

can't help it. You're just like your dad when he sounds off at you sometimes. And something else – I think you should tell your parents what's going on with the bullies.'

'There's no point. I think if I told Mum she might feel that I was making up stories and if I told Dad he would want to go up the school and let them know what's going on, and I don't want that.'

'I don't know about your dad, but your mum would never think you were making it up. She's not like that.'

'I don't care what you say, I don't want them to interfere. And as for swearing, my dad hardly ever says fuck in front of me and would go mad if he heard me saying it. He only does it when my brothers come. They sit and talk in the kitchen and swear. My mother would go potty if she heard what I hear at times.'

'Men always do that when they're together with no women about. You hear it going on all over the place. It's the way it's said I s'pose. Not angry but just part of the language.' She smiled. 'You did remind me of your dad though when you said it.'

'Well, I'm *bound* to, Charlotte! I'm his son! The only difference is that I'm a young Jew and he's an old one.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake! Will you let go of all of that Jew boy stuff? And it's not because you're Jewish that *they* start on you, it's because you react as if *that is* what they're doing. I remember right back to when we were six and you had a row with one of the boys in the playground. He called you a fat Jew boy and you went berserk in front of all the other kids watching. You ranted that if anyone else called you that you would

pulverise him or her. So what did they do? They all chanted fat Jew boy. Remember?'

Nathan sniffed. 'I don't recall that. You must be thinking of someone else, it wasn't me.'

'Yes it was. And it was your own fault that they did it more and more. That lot behave like big kids and you should walk the other way when you see them. You should turn around and leave. They'll soon get bored with trying to lure you in. We've all turned thirteen going on fourteen, Nathan. We're not kids any more.'

'Tell me about it. I've not long since been through my barmitzvah.' He held up his hand. 'Don't ask!'

'I wasn't going to. And listen . . . I'm not gonna say it again after this. Right?'

'Whatever,' said Nathan, fed up with it all.

'You can't do anything about your religion but—'

'I don't *want* to do anything about it, thank you,' he snapped. 'I like being Jewish. All right?'

Looking into his face she could see that he was grinding his back teeth and her heart went out to him. 'Of course you do. Why wouldn't you? But you don't like being fat, so do something about that. Every time I see you at school, in the playground or whatever, you're putting something into your mouth – a sandwich, sweets, crisps. You and a bag of chips go hand in hand.'

'That's *my* expression. You shouldn't steal other people's expressions.'

'Hand in hand?'

'Yes.'

'My grandparents have always said it. Don't change the subject.'

'I didn't know that your grandparents also said it. So you think I eat too much?'

'You *know* you do. And I've seen you hiding behind the caretaker's shed at school.'

'What if I was having a pee?'

'The boys' toilets are closer to the school than the caretaker's shed is. And before you make any excuses about the boys teasing you in there being the reason for you not using it, I've seen you go in and out lots of times.'

'So you've been spying on me then? Thanks. And if you really want to know, I would rather die than go on a diet. My mother keeps saying I should and my dad tells her to leave it be. He says that once I shoot upwards I'll be lean like him.'

'Well, it's up to you, it's your body. But I'll help you if you want me to.'

'You don't have to worry over me. You're not responsible for my welfare. It's not as if we're boy and girlfriend, is it?' He glanced slyly at her face hoping that she might blush, which would give him a little hope.

'We're mates, Nathan. Good friends. We go to the same school and we live in the same block and that makes us neighbours as well as best friends. Just because we're the opposite sex it doesn't mean to say that we've got to be going out together.'

'Who said it did? Did I say that?' Shaking his head in despair Nathan then gently laughed, and said, 'You are *so* old-fashioned at times. I can't believe that you just

said that. You watch too many free films at the cinema where your aunty works. Complimentary tickets might be your downfall.'

'Well, you don't turn down an "entrance free" when I get a spare one, do you?'

'That's true, but it's because I need to study all aspects of drama. I would rather your aunty worked in a local theatre that she could get free tickets for. But we can't have everything go our way.'

'Oh, not that again.'

'I can't help it. I've dreamt of being part of that world ever since I helped put on a children's show for parents at our Stepney Jewish club. You know that. I loved it. I was assistant stage manager, don't forget. My dad said that that was quite an achievement for an eleven-year-old.'

'Maybe it was, but rather than harp on about it why don't you join a young people's theatre group? They run something like that at a disused church hall in Wapping.'

'We'll see,' said Nathan, 'we'll see.' He then broke into quiet laughter and said, 'Going out together? You and me? As if . . .' He gave Charlotte another sideways look, then, trying to make light of it, he fooled around by holding his arms out to her and singing loudly, 'Let me call you Sweetheart.' This was a line from a song that his father liked to sing to his mother now and then when larking around in the kitchen while she was cooking.

'You're mad, Nathan. Do you know that? Stark

raving bonkers, and what's more I've got something to tell you.'

He waved a theatrical arm and said, 'I am all ears, your majesty . . .'

She gently took hold of his hand and smiled warmly. Then, swallowing against a lump in her throat said, 'It's a secret that my mum and dad don't want to get out. Not yet anyway. It's all to do with my grandparents and aunts who might start shouting the odds, saying that family should live where their roots are.'

Nathan showed a puzzled expression. 'Are you mad or what? Who gives a shit about roots? Especially those around this way. We live in a dump, Charlie.'

'It's not a dump but I'm glad you're okay about it.'

'About what? What are you talking about?'

Charlotte sucked on her bottom lip and then said, 'In a fortnight's time we're moving. Out of the East End. We're going to Norfolk. To live in a small country town called Bridgeford.'

'Norfolk? Bridgeford? Where in God's name is that?'

'I just told you. In the countryside, miles away, where they've built brand new council estates for Londoners. And from what I saw of the stuff they sent about it, cheap private houses are planned for people who want to buy their own property.'

Nathan slowly shook his head. 'Bridgeford? It's not even on the map.'

'Yes it is.' She stood looking at him as a few leaves swirled in the warm breeze. 'Mum and Dad are over the moon about it so I'm trying my best not to be down. I won't be going back to our school next term.'

After a horrible silence the two best friends looked at each other while a desperate thought ran through Nathan's mind. *What will I do without her?* 'If the piper calls,' he finally said, speaking in a quiet and croaky voice, 'then the troupe must follow.' He couldn't believe that the same thing could happen to him twice. The only other girl that he had cared about was his elder sister, Jacky, who had left him as well. He had missed her so badly it hurt. Now all that he could hope was that the old-fashioned saying where love was concerned – *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* – was a load of rubbish.

'Some friends of my parents are doing the selfsame thing,' he murmured. 'Except that they're going to Suffolk. To a town called Bury St Edmunds.'

'Well, that's not far from where we'll be living. Dad mentioned it more than once in the past because the firm where he works as an electrician will have a branch there too. Dad reckons that he'll get a bit of private work as well. Because of the new estates that are being built. He wants to work for himself eventually. We're going in for a transfer from our borough to Norfolk, so we'll be on a brand spanking new council estate. Can't be bad, can it?'

'No. My parents' friends will be living on a small quiet estate in a terraced house. They'll be getting a mortgage and all of that stuff. Barratt Homes I think is what my dad said. Maybe your parents should talk to them about where they'll be going?'

'There won't be time, Nathan. There's so much to do and arrange.'

Holding out his hand so as to shake his best friend's, he only just managed to say, 'I hope you'll find it over the rainbow. The pot of gold.'

Charlotte pulled back and narrowed her eyes. 'I'm not gonna shake your hand, you daft sod. We're friends not business people. But promise that you'll get yourself on a train and come to visit me?'

'I won't make promises. I hate it when people do that. Make them, and then break them.' He pinched his lips together and tried his best to smile as tears welled behind his eyes. With a broken voice he just managed to say, 'God go with you and your family.'

'And I wish the same to you and yours.'

'I think I'm going to need it,' he all but whispered as the recurring thought rolled across his mind. How could he possibly live each day without her being there? 'Will I see you before you leave?'

'Of course you will. We're not doing a moonlight flit. I just wanted you to know before the other neighbours. Mum will only have to tell her friend from next door and it will be all round the block.' She looked into his big, round and doleful warm brown eyes. 'Don't tell anyone though. Because of our relations.'

'I won't say a word. Although I might get the local paper to broadcast it.' He felt like crying but laughed a touch nervously instead.

'I'll write to you. You don't have to write back if you don't feel like it. I won't be offended.'

'I'm pleased to hear it because I won't write back. Old people send letters, not the likes of us. I will jump on a train and come visit you though.' He looked into

her face again and pinched his lips together. 'It'll be a nice trip out for me. A few hours in the countryside. That I *can* cope with. Just.' He pushed his hands into his pockets and looked down at the ground as he slowly walked onwards.

'You realise that you'll be leaving all of your old friends behind, Charlie,' he murmured, 'and so will your parents be. But I'm sure they must have considered all of this.'

'Probably, but I'd rather not think about it. I've always hated change of any kind. They plan to get rid of Trinity Square you know. Knock down my aunt Sheila's house.' Her gaze fell to the ground. 'They're going to pull all the lovely old almshouses down to make room for another small council estate.'

'There's nothing wrong with that. It's called progress. We all have to move with the times. As a matter of fact, I'm going to join the local drama group next week, so in a sense I'll be taking a step forward. I've always fancied the idea of being somebody else on stage.'

'I didn't know that – why didn't you say earlier when I suggested it? I think it's a great idea. You'll make new friends.'

'Maybe.'

The two of them went quiet and little else was said as they made their way towards the library, each of them immersed in their own thoughts. Thoughts of how it was becoming a scary and fast-changing world. More importantly, where Nathan was concerned, very soon he would only be able to murmur Charlotte's name to

himself because she would be gone. And while he was thinking this, she was trying not to think about the sad fact that she was going miles away – and not just for a fortnight or so, but for ever.

A silence hung in the air until she spoke in a quiet husky voice. 'I can't say that I won't cry because I will. I'll miss all of this, Nathan. I'll miss you as well.'

Too gutted to think straight he held firmly onto the only bit of bravery that he could muster. 'Everything, with the exception of a ring, comes to an end at some point. None of us will be in this area for always I don't suppose.' He slipped his hands into his pockets and looked anywhere but at her face. 'And we're all bound to miss each other. You'll be gone for too long but there's nothing we can do about that. You'll be gone for ever in fact.'

'Maybe. But I might not like living in the sticks very much.'

'You're bound to like it.' The lad pushed a hand through his short black curly hair and forced back the tears. 'Write me a letter as soon as you get there.'

'Of course. I'll write straight away. You're my best friend.' Her lips parted in a smile, and Nathan wasn't sure whether this was purely from friendship or whether the expression might possibly be laced with love. But the look on *his* face as they observed each other said it all. He worshipped her.

'The only good thing to come out of this is that Mum whispered to me that if I was good and didn't make a fuss and kept the secret then she would buy me some slingback shoes and a handbag to match – once

we've settled into the new house. But what good will they be then? I'd look daft walking along country lanes and rivers all done up with nowhere to go.'

'You don't have to go. You could live with your grandparents, you know how fond you are of them. And you never know . . . when you leave . . . it might be the last time you'll see them alive.'

'They're only in their early sixties. That's not old.'

'Well, maybe not, but you won't be seeing much of them, will you? Not with all of those miles in between. It stands to reason.'

'You don't have to tell me. I already know it. I'm just gonna have to make the most of things. Mum and Dad can't wait to go. I've never seen them as happy as this before, so if they think it's a brilliant thing to do it must be . . . mustn't it?'

'If you say so.' He shrugged exactly the way his father did. 'Then it must be. But don't abandon me altogether.'

Charlotte could see that he was crushed by the whole idea of her not being there for him. She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to say goodbye to any of it. She didn't want to have to get used to different grocery shops and markets and a baker who probably wouldn't be Jewish so there would be no beigels for tea. No more beigels and no more going into the local sweet shop with the wooden floor that she had been in and out of since she could walk with reins. She could hardly bear the thought of it, but she was going to have to. It was now set in stone.

'You make sure you join that drama group like

you said. You love being in the school plays and the Christmas shows.'

'That's true. And it's what the drama teacher keeps on saying as well. Maybe that's what I'll do. Act my way through life.'

Charlotte laughed fondly at him. 'No. Act your way through plays on the stage and live your life the way you want to.'