The Cuckoo Child

Katie Flynn

Chapter One

March 1928

'Dot! Aw, c'mon, Dot, I knows you're there!'

The shout came clearly to Dot's ears, echoing slightly through the tin lid of the dustbin in which she was hiding. She could tell that Fizz was in the jigger which ran along behind these yards, but she could also tell that he hadn't got a clue as to where she was. How could he? Everyone was scared of old Rathbone, the butcher, in whose bin she thought she crouched, so the last place Fizz would think of looking would be in Rathbone's yard. She had only gone in there herself because she knew Fizz was hot on her heels.

She cocked her head, listening intently, and heard the patter of Fizz's plimsolls as he trotted along the jigger. She grinned delightedly, hugging herself at the success of her ploy. She had climbed over the wall which separated the yard from the jigger and had dropped down on to the weedy paving stones, meaning to find somewhere to hide, expecting to see a shed or a handcart, or even a pile of old boxes. Instead, she had seen three large galvanised dustbins. She had raised the lid of the foremost of these and had realised at once that it would make an excellent hiding place - if one was not too fussy, that was. But now that she was in the yard, she did not have much choice. Both the other bins were full to bursting, their lids not fitting properly over the mess of refuse within, but the third bin was almost empty. Then, whilst she had hesitated, she had heard a voice, sounding as though it came from the vicinity of Mr Rathbone's back door. It was unbelievably bad luck in one way, because she had thought that the butcher, if this was his bin, would be safely ensconced in his flat above the shop, but it appeared she was wrong.

So she had hopped into the bin, pulled the lid into position as silently as she could, and now waited in the noisome dark for silence to come once more. Then, and only then, would she get out of the bin, scramble over the wall and make for 'home' which, in this particular game of relievio, was the yard of the Old Campfield public house.

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Unfortunately, as the sound of Fizz's flapping plimsolls faded, Dot heard the back door of the shop squeak open and footsteps entering the yard. She felt the hair rise up on the back of her neck; oh, Gawd, if old Rathbone caught her here there would be hell to pay. He hated kids and had a sharp way with them. When Dot's Aunt Myrtle sent her to get the messages, she never bought meat off old Rathbone if she could possibly help it, even though he was the nearest butcher to Lavender Court. Aunt Myrtle said he gave short weight on the cheaper cuts and his better stuff was too expensive, but Dot would not have gone to him in any case. She hated his big square red face, the large yellow teeth which showed on the rare occasions when he smiled, and the mean little eyes, almost hidden in rolls of fat. He was spiteful, too; he would deliberately bang your parcel of meat down on your fingers if you were unwise enough to have a hand on the counter, and if you dared ask for a free bone, or a bit of suet for a pudding, he had been known to grab a child by the shoulders and run it out of the shop, saying as he did so that he weren't a charitable institution and didn't mean to keep bleedin' slummies in luxury, not he.

However, the footsteps stopped just short of the dustbins and Dot heard someone inhale deeply, and then begin to speak. 'Ker-rist, that were a narrow squeak, me old pal. Still, it were a bloody good haul; the best so far, I reckon. We can't do nothing immediate, of course, 'cos the scuffers will be turnin' over every fence for miles around - every known villain, too - but they ain't likely to come to a butcher's shop in search of a grosh of jewellery.' Dot, listening intently, was pretty sure that the speaker was Mr Rathbone himself - so she had been right, this was his yard - and crouched even lower in the bin. 'Yeah, I reckon we done pretty well for ourselves.'

'Keep yer voice down,' his companion urged. It was a thin, whiny voice, one which Dot did not recognise, but she could imagine the owner. He would be small, skinny and weaselly, with watery eyes and a loose slobbery mouth. In her mind, she could see him clearly: thinning hair, a pink and whiffling nose, and a tiny, sandy moustache. But now the butcher was speaking again.

'Don't be such a fool; who's to hear me? All the other shopkeepers will be in their flats and not hovering about in their yards.' Nevertheless, he dropped his voice. 'No, we're safe enough here, and we can't talk in the flat. It's sheer rotten luck that me old mam came calling. I can't get shot of her before ten or so, or she'll get suspicious. She's not seen you, since she came in through the shop, and that's just as well an' all! She's a rare gossip, so I don't tell her that I've got me fingers in more'n one pie. You know women; she'd blab to some pal or other, an' our goose 'ud be cooked. No, this is strictly between you an' me, Ollie old pal. We both teks the risk an' we teks a half share in the profits an' all. That's what we agreed, ain't it?'

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'Oh aye, I reckon you're right; least said, soonest mended,' the whiner called Ollie said. 'How soon will it be safe to sell 'em on, d'you suppose?'

'If I could take 'em to London, like I means to do, mebbe we'd get away wi' a few weeks,' the butcher said reflectively. 'But mebbe longer if the old feller croaks; you're a might too handy wi' that stick o' yours, Ollie. There was no need to hit him twice, you know.'

The other man gave a whicker of laughter. 'I 'ardly touched 'im,' he protested. 'Skull like bloody paper, that one, but he were comin' round afore we were out the door. You don't want to worry about him; he'll be tellin' everyone how he scared us off before we'd found the safe.'

'I reckon you're right,' the butcher said grudgingly. 'Tell you what, though, we'll have to get rid o' that emerald necklace. It's been the centrepiece of that window ever since I can remember, so everyone who's ever glanced into the shop will reckernise it at once. Besides, it's gorra be paste; stands to reason. If it were real it 'ud be worth a king's ransom an' no insurance company would cover it. I didn't mean to tek it, but then I didn't expect the old feller to pop up from behind the counter like a bleedin' jack-in-the-box. I shoved the rings, the gold chains and the earrings an' that into me pockets when he started to speak and the bleedin' necklace must ha' got snagged on somethin' in me hand, so I just shovelled the whole lot away an' legged it.'

'Yeah, I reckon you're right,' Ollie said, after a thoughtful moment. 'Pity, 'cos it 'ud look good on any woman's neck - 'twouldn't matter if it were paste. I don't see why we need to tek the other stuff to London, when there's fences a lot nearer home, but s'pose you took the necklace down there, though? It 'ud be worth a few quid, I reckon.'

'Didn't you hear what I said?' the butcher snapped, almost crossly. 'Wharr'ave you got for a brain, Ollie? Lard? The scuffers will issue a description of everything we took an' the only thing which really stands out is that bleedin' necklace. Diamond rings, gold chains an' fancy earrings are common to every jeweller in the land, pretty well. Give 'em six months an' they'll sell like hot cakes an' not a question asked. I know what you mean, but we might as well write "robbers" on our foreheads in red ink as try to sell the emerald necklace. It's gorra go, and it's gorra go tonight. And I ain't doin' nothin' clever, like takin' it down to the Mersey, 'cos if I did, some

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interferin' scuffer would either stop me on the way an' search me pockets, or some kid might fish it out o' the mud an' run after me to tell me I'd dropped it.'

'I could take it,' the other said eagerly. 'No scuffer 'ud stop me.'

But the butcher cut across this remark, his voice menacing. 'No you don't, Ollie my son. It ain't that I don't trust you, but wharrever we do, we'll do together. This is goin' in the dustbin. Tomorrer's collection day, and when I dumps the old newspapers in the mornin' I'll put a match to the bin an' the whole lot will go up like a bonfire on Guy Fawkes night. I'll be in the shop early, afore anyone else is about, an' after the fire in the bin has died down I'll rake through the ashes, make sure there's nothin' left to give us away.'

Dot's skin crawled with apprehension, but she stayed still as death; they were, after all, the width of the yard away, which she judged to be about twenty feet. It was only when she heard footsteps coming across the yard towards her, and realised that the butcher must mean to jettison the necklace right away, that she was unable to prevent herself making a quick, involuntary movement, ducking even lower in the bin so that her elbow struck the side with a soft - though quite painful - clunk.

The footsteps stopped abruptly. 'What were that?' the man called Ollie asked suspiciously. 'I reckon someone's hiding behind them bins, for all you said-'

'No one but a midget could hide behind them bins. It were likely a bleedin' rat,' the butcher said dismissively. And as if to prove him right, there was a scuffling, a muffled squeak, and then the butcher's voice, triumphant. 'Told you so. Them bleedin' rats is everywhere. Bloody things is a menace to a butcher. I've had the Public Health round many a time, sayin' me premises ain't clean, but if I gets cats in they grumble about them an' all.' The footsteps began to approach the bin once more, but even as he lifted the lid from Dot's hiding place the butcher continued his grumbling monologue. 'They marches in an' out of me shop as if they owned the place; and them rats is strong too. They shove the lids off the bins an' go rootin' round inside, makin' a terrible mess. Looks like I'll have to borrow a couple o' terriers off mad old Jumbo, what keeps the second-hand bookshop further up Heyworth. They're a mangy-looking lot but they can clear a nest of rats in five minutes flat.'

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The bin lid clattered back on even as Dot felt something cold and slithery fall down the front of her ragged dress. Fortunately, her gasp was muffled by the closing lid and she realised, with great relief, that the men had turned away from the bins and were returning to the back door of the shop.

'We'll 'ave a quick bevvy in the back of the shop, then you'd best be on your way, 'cos it's better if we ain't seen together tonight,' the butcher decided. 'We'll meet Saturday night in the Elephant, on the corner of Stonewall Street, but for now I'll open a couple o' bottles o' Guinness, then we'll split. I don't want me mam pokin' her nose in an' askin' questions about what I've been doin', because you know-'

The back door shut quietly, cutting the sentence in half, but it was a good ten minutes later before Dot dared to so much as move in her smelly prison. Until then, she continued to crouch in the bin, going over what she had heard. There had been a jewel robbery - that was plain enough. The robbers had taken the necklace by mistake and meant to destroy it in the morning; that was clear, too. What was not so clear was how the man called Ollie would leave the premises. Dot remembered that there was a door in the butcher's back wall leading into the jigger, to which Mr Rathbone held the key. The sensible thing, she realised, would be for the man to leave by that route, and you never knew when that would be, so it behoved her to get out of the bin - and the butcher's yard - in the quickest possible time.

Very, very cautiously, Dot straightened up a bit and began to lift the lid above her head, but at that very moment the back door creaked open again. Terrified, Dot actually considered making a dash for it, then realised that this would be an act of sheer madness. The wall was high, not the sort of thing one could scale in a moment, and there were two men and only one of her. What was more, the bin was very deep; it had been quite difficult to climb in, and would be even more difficult to climb out. She would be caught and dragged into the butcher's shop and, she belatedly realised, they would guess she had been in the bin for some while and must have heard every word they had uttered. With the hair rising up on the back of her neck like a dog's hackles, she imagined herself in the grim and bloodstained room behind the shop, where Mr Rathbone jointed the carcasses of the beasts he bought. He would chop her up into little pieces without a second's hesitation, and boil her into a brawn which he would sell off, cheap, to the customers he disliked most. Without so much as glancing towards the back door, Dot lowered the lid with the utmost caution and ducked down into the bin again, pushing her head between her knees and praying to any deity who might be listening that she would not be discovered.

Whether her prayers were heard, or the men had had no intention of investigating the bins, Dot did not know, but she did know that they went straight past her hiding

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place. She heard a key rasp in the lock of the door into the jigger, a murmured 'good night', footsteps pass into the cobbled entry, the door shut and a key rasp again. A heavy tread then went back to the shop, a door opened and closed and Dot was alone.

For a moment, Dot's relief was so great that she simply sat there in the dustbin and thanked her stars that her worst nightmare had receded, if not vanished. She was still not out of the wood, but if she waited another ten or fifteen minutes surely she would be safe enough. Once she was certain there was no one in the vicinity, she could climb quietly out of the bin, scale the wall using various footholds in the crumbling bricks, drop down into the jigger and make her way home.

Not that home was truly home, exactly. Dot's father had been washed overboard and drowned during a storm when Dot was only three, so she could scarcely remember him, save as a tall, redhaired man who breezed into the house a couple of times a year, bringing lovely presents for his wife and small daughter. He had laughed a lot, given her shoulder rides and played boisterous games with her. Then he had died and her mam had become quite a different person, no longer funloving and full of laughter but edgy, weepy, and difficult. They had moved out of the little house which was all the home that Dot had ever known, and into other houses or flats or even lodgings.

By the time she was of an age to go to school, Dot must have lived in a dozen or more different parts of the city and had grown used to never belonging anywhere. But then her mam was taken ill and they moved into Aunt Myrtle's house in Lavender Court. Temporarily, Dot's mam had said, just until she found a decent job and a little home she could afford.

Only it had not been so easy. Her mam, Letty, was unable to find a decent job in Liverpool and had wandered further afield, promising, on her rare visits, to take Dot away with her just as soon as circumstances allowed. Then she had gone after a live-in job down south and had never returned, and Aunt Myrtle suspected that her sister had died. Aunt Myrtle had continued to house her, though Dot knew her aunt regarded her simply as an extra mouth to feed. The real fly in the ointment was Uncle Rupert, who had resented Dot for as long as she could remember. He was neither a good husband nor a good father, and had several times suggested that they should dispatch Dot to an orphanage, where she belonged. This terrified her; gave her nightmares. A friend had once taken her into such a place and the size of it, the coldness, the great bare rooms and the obvious awe, not to say fear, that the children seemed to feel for the adults in charge of them, had made Dot dread such a fate. But as she grew older the threat had receded, for she was useful, and when her aunt was

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out she could make a meal for her boy cousins and her uncle, and she helped with domestic tasks and all the household messages.

Clothing was always a problem since Dot could scarcely wear 'hand-me-downs' from her cousins and there was no way the family could afford new clothes, so when she grew out of a garment Aunt Myrtle took her to Paddy's market. Shoes were such a rare commodity that Dot was even now waiting for Fizz to pass on his dreadful, dilapidated plimsolls, and planning how she would nick a pot of glue from Woolworths to attach sole and uppers together once more.

Her uncle would always dislike and resent her but, Dot reflected, he did not even like his own children very much and anyway, he was not often in the house; working in a factory during the day and spending most evenings in one pub or other, only coming home to sleep.

The chief trouble was, Dot knew, that having one girl in a family of boys made life more difficult for her aunt. When she was small she had slept in the boys' room, but two years previously, when she was ten, her aunt had decided this was no longer right, and had made her up a makeshift bed in the kitchen, the front parlour being sacrosanct so far as her aunt and uncle were concerned. Apart from anything else, it was where Uncle Rupert couched down when he came in late, the worse for drink, and though this had begun to happen less than when she had first moved downstairs to sleep, it still meant that Dot could not have a bed in the parlour.

Having a child sleeping in the kitchen, however, was extremely inconvenient. Although she often fell asleep as soon as she climbed on to the old sofa, she was equally often woken by the rows which followed Uncle Rupert's return from the pub. At first, she had tried to placate the combatants, but very soon realised that this was not wise. When in his cups, Uncle Rupert had once slung her right across the kitchen; she had broken her arm and knocked her head against the dresser, and Aunt Myrtle had been as cross with her as though her wounds had been self-inflicted. 'You mind your own business and don't you ever contradict your uncle again,' she had warned grimly. 'When he's drunk, he's real violent; why, you might have been killed. So when they asks you at the hospital how you got hurt, you're to say you ran downstairs to answer a knock at the door, tripped on your nightdress, and tumbled down the flight, otherwise the hospital will tell the scuffers and that'll make real trouble for us all. Is that clear?'

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It had been; and now, when her uncle came back from the pub, Dot pretended to be asleep even if she was wide awake, and though she had once been forced to crawl under the sofa when Uncle Rupert and Aunt Myrtle came to blows she supposed that No. 6, Lavender Court, was the nearest thing to a home she was ever likely to know.

Now, Dot straightened up once more and gingerly lifted the lid. It was full dark, but because it had been even darker in the bin she was able to ascertain that the yard was empty. With the lid of the bin still in her hands, she stood up, then realised that she would have to lean over the edge of the bin and prop the lid up against its side, since she would need to have both hands free to extricate herself. Climbing in had been relatively easy because she had not been worried about making a noise. She had known the shop was shut and had assumed - wrongly as it happened - that it was also empty. She had climbed on to a full bin, taken the lid off the almost empty one, jumped down into it and pulled the lid back into position. But now, standing up in the bin, she needed all her strength and ingenuity to get out without knocking it over and making the sort of clatter which might easily bring someone running. However, she managed it. Standing in the yard, she replaced the lid of the bin as quietly as she could, climbed up the wall, and was actually sitting astride it when something made her glance up towards where the jigger joined the road. There was a shadow . . . for a moment Dot froze, then changed her mind and slipped down into the jigger. The man, if it was a man, was still some distance off. She would simply pad past him because she had every right, after all, to be in the jigger. Having made up her mind, Dot strolled, nonchalantly, towards him. He was tall - huge, in fact - and heavily built and it wasn't until he was almost upon her that she realised the reason for his unusual height: he was a scuffer and his helmet added a good six inches to his stature. She would have walked past anyway, but the policeman stopped. For a moment, she thought he was going to hit her, but there was a click, and she found herself staring into the beam of a torch. She ducked her head, beginning to protest, and the light swung away from her face to illumine, instead, her small and skinny body, her ragged and dingy dress, and her bare and dirty feet. 'Nah then, nah then, where did you spring from? One minute I thought I was alone and the next minute I weren't. Bin thieving, have you? C'mon, out with it.'

The light had returned to her face and Dot screwed up her eyes and scowled. 'Course I haven't; there ain't nothin' to thieve round here,' she said. 'We were playin' relievio and I were goin' back to me pal's house for me tea and this is a - a short cut, kind of.'

'Short cut?' the policeman said incredulously. 'This here jigger ain't a short cut to anywhere. C'mon now, where was you going?' He reached out a hand, the fingers big as sausages, no doubt intending to grip her shoulder, but Dot knew a trick worth two of that.

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