



I was surprised by how much work we had to do at Heathcote House, and how dreadfully long the days were. I was woken at quarter to six by whisperings and trudging feet. The girls who had already had their babies had to be up at the nursery by six o'clock for feeding time. It seemed a ridiculously early start to the day but it was the rules. One girl, Val, refused to get out of her bed, even when her friends tried to tip her out. Nurse March complained about her to Miss Andrews, and the day after that a social worker came to Heathcote House and left with Val's baby in her arms. Val left soon after, sobbing.

The pregnant girls were allowed to stay in bed until half past six but were expected to be washed and dressed and downstairs for breakfast at seven. It was hard to grab a turn at the washbasins because there were so many of us, and the queues for the few

toilets were dreadful. One girl was hugely pregnant, already three days overdue, and she actually wet herself while she was waiting. I'd have died of embarrassment but she just swore, mopped up the puddle, and then washed herself at a basin, hoiking her nightdress up to her waist.

Breakfast was at seven: cereal, boiled eggs and toast. Then it was chores. We all had to take a turn. The girls who'd had their babies had to soak and boil the nappies, clean and sterilize the bottles, handwash the tiny clothes, then wipe down every surface in the nursery and mop the floor. The girls still waiting had to wash up the breakfast things and put them away, clean the kitchen, do the laundry, make our beds, dust, sweep and polish all the communal areas, and help Marilyn prepare the vegetables for lunch.

I was hopeless at all the chores. I'd always taken it for granted that Mum did all the housework. I'd 'helped' once or twice with the dusting and the carpet sweeper, but that was all. It was a shock having to get down on my knees and scrub the floor. I tried my hardest, my hands turning scarlet in the cold soapy water, but couldn't seem to get the knack. My back started to ache badly. It seemed so unfair to be told to scrub floors while pregnant. The girl with me was so vast her stomach brushed the ground when she knelt, but she cleaned twice as much floor as I did.

When I thought my own patch was almost done I got up

clumsily to stretch, kicked my bucket accidentally, and the dirty water poured all over the clean floor, hers as well as mine.

‘Stupid cow,’ she said, but she wasn’t really angry. She just sighed heavily and started over again, while I babbled apologies.

Lessons started at nine o’clock. They were held in a proper schoolroom with desks, though it was a tight squeeze for girls towards the end of their pregnancy. We had three teachers who doubled up subjects: Mrs Chambers for English and history, Miss Brown for maths and science, and Mr Michaels for French and geography. Mrs Chambers was quite old and Miss Brown was quite young, and they both wore glasses. Mr Michaels caused a flutter of interest as he was the only male who came to Heathcote House apart from visitors, but he was uninspiring. He was bald apart from a wisp of hair at ear level and had a pot belly.

I was surprised by the lessons. They were so easy, the sort of stuff we’d covered in the first year at the Grammar, but the other girls moaned and complained and said it was all far too hard. I didn’t comment, but I couldn’t help putting my hand up a lot to answer. The other girls sighed and started calling me a swot, even Belinda, so I soon shut up.

Belinda and Monica and the other new mothers went upstairs to the nursery at ten o’clock to bathe and feed their babies. Miss Andrews took the rest of us for craft. We had to make a complete set of clothing for our babies – a handsewn embroidered nightdress

with a matching bonnet; or a large crocheted shawl; or a knitted cap, matinee jacket and booties. I didn’t even know how to sew on a button, I couldn’t crochet, and I couldn’t knit properly either, though I’d made long woollen snakes with a Knitting Nancy set when I was little.

‘I can’t really do any of them, Miss Andrews,’ I said helplessly.

‘It doesn’t matter, Laura. I’m here to teach you,’ said Miss Andrews. ‘Don’t look so worried, you’ll soon pick it up.’

She gave me a much-used knitting pattern, a pair of thin steel knitting needles and a ball of soft white wool. The strand I was using quickly became grey as I attempted casting on, and then plain and purl. I had to keep unravelling my attempts. In the end Miss Andrews cast on for me and did the first couple of rows.

‘Your baby will be fourteen by the time you’ve finished its outfit,’ Jeannie remarked. She was surprisingly expert at knitting, and was on her last bootie. ‘Though why I have to make my baby an outfit when it’s going to be adopted I just can’t fathom,’ she said.

‘It’s your gift for your baby. When the time comes for its new mummy and daddy to tell Baby its birth story then it will know just how much you loved it because you took such care over its first outfit,’ said Miss Andrews, in a preachy voice.

‘My baby will think I hated it then,’ I muttered to Jeannie, and she cackled.

She was like Nina. If you stood up to her and said something

funny she stopped being quite so mean. Oh, Nina! It was so strange to think she was at school with Patsy, while I was stuck here. I wondered if she'd tell her what had happened to me. I was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to keep her mouth shut. And Patsy would spread it all around. My cheeks burned, thinking what they might be saying.

We had recreation at eleven o'clock, when we were all together again. We had yet another glass of milk and a biscuit out of a large tin. We weren't supposed to look at what we were taking, so I ended up with a plain digestive, while Belinda and Monica and Jeannie had the sense to grab the chocolate bourbons.

Then we had a maths lesson followed by French. Mr Michaels put on a very fancy French accent, rolling his r's so much his tongue must have got tired. The girls got the giggles, but I was painfully reminded of Léon and felt sick. I felt angry too. He'd be sitting in a proper classroom at some French lycée without a care in the world. He might be boasting to his mates that he'd actually done it with some easy English girl without ever knowing she was now swelling up with his baby.

He probably wouldn't even remember what I looked like. But then my idea of him was very hazy. He was just a fumbled embrace, a stammer of words in a foreign accent. Would the baby inside me share his looks, his habits, his awkward personality? I hoped for a girl now, not a small strange boy who looked like his father.

Mr Michaels' lessons were polluted with the smell of lunch cooking, stews and mince and liver, all of which turned my stomach. There were scoops of mashed potato too, and cabbage one day, carrots the next. If there were too many vegetables left over they reappeared as bubble and squeak at supper time. We had milk puddings, rice or semolina or slimy tapioca, with dollops of cheap red jam to make them more palatable. Miss Andrews and Marilyn poured so much milk into us one way or another they might have had an entire herd of cows lowing in the back garden.

We were supposed to have a half-hour nap after lunch, and then we divided again. Some of the girls went to attend to their babies, while the rest of us did Quiet Reading. It seemed odd terminology. How else could you read? Though there were a couple of girls who had to mutter the words to themselves, pointing with their fingers. There was a small library, but the books all looked very boring – mostly those career novels for teenagers with ridiculous titles like *Doreen is a Dentist* or *Vera is a Vet*. There was no *Sophie is a Schoolgirl Mother*. No one bothered with these. There were some well-thumbed Mills and Boon romances, a few jolly hockey-sticks boarding school stories, and a pile of women's magazines.

I read my own copy of *The World of Suzie Wong*. Jeannie yawned her way through the problem pages of the magazines.

'What's that book you're reading then? The print's ever so tiny. You'll give yourself a headache,' she said, peering over my

shoulder. Then she said, 'Mm! It doesn't look too bad. Can I read it after you?'

'OK, if you want,' I said. 'Though I've promised Belinda she could read it first.'

I hadn't done any such thing, but I wanted to show Jeannie that Belinda was my most important friend.

'Well, she'd better hurry up, as she'll be going soon. I heard they've got a couple all lined up desperate for a fair little boy,' said Jeannie.

'What? No, you've got it wrong, Belinda's keeping little Peter. She's engaged!' I said.

'Rubbish,' said Jeannie.

'No, it's not! Haven't you seen her diamond ring?'

'It's just a glass one from Woolworths, stupid,' said Jeannie.

'Stop it! How can you talk like that about Belinda? She's your friend!' I said, shocked.

'She *is* my friend, but she tells lies like all the others. Like you, going on about this Daniel,' she said. 'I've been thinking. You've just made him up, haven't you?'

'No I haven't! He's real, I swear it, God's honour!' I said. It wasn't a lie, he really did exist.

'Then I shall look forward to seeing him visiting you,' said Jeannie.

'Well. He might not be able to come. It's so far away,' I blustered.

'Oh, yeah, yeah,' said Jeannie, yawning again. 'I've heard it all before.'

We had two more lessons after our reading session, which seemed very unfair, because schools don't make you work till five, not even strict ones like the Grammar. But we didn't have to do any homework, which was a bonus. Then the babies had to be fed again – they seemed endlessly hungry, like baby birds with frantic open beaks. The pregnant girls huddled in the living room near the fire and chatted and ate sweets (and two girls smoked too, sticking their heads out of the window).

Then Belinda came back, glowing, telling us how Peter had hung onto her finger all the time she was nursing him as if he could never bear to let her go.

'I love him so much,' she said, her eyes watering. I was certain that Jeannie had told me a pack of lies. Belinda would never part with her baby in a million years.

Supper was egg on toast, which at least didn't smell as bad as the haddock, and milky cocoa, with plates of iced buns for a pudding. The girls practically fought over those buns because everyone wanted the pink ones with the dab of jam inside. I was painfully reminded of the cake shop at home.

‘Are you all right, Laura?’ Belinda asked.

‘Yes. No. Well, I’m a bit homesick. And missing my friends,’ I mumbled.

‘And Daniel?’ Belinda said.

‘Oh yes, very much,’ I said.

‘Maybe he will manage to visit you somehow,’ she suggested.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said.

‘Well, never mind. I expect your mum and dad will come,’ she said comfortingly.

‘Not on Saturday. They’ll both be working. But maybe Sunday,’ I said.

The weekends were much better at Heathcote House. We still had to get up early and tackle all the chores while the babies were fed, but we were otherwise free. We could even go out to the village if we wanted, though it was a twenty-minute walk. After Belinda and Monica had given their babies a bath and their ten o’clock feed, we all ambled down there.

I felt a bit awkward when we passed anyone in the street, worrying that they’d stare at my bump, though I still wasn’t really showing much. Jeannie was huge but she stared back fiercely at everyone, ready with a rude retort if there were any comments.

There wasn’t anything much to see in the village. There was the Anchor Inn, but we weren’t allowed in pubs, and a church,

though most of us weren’t very religious. The only shop was a small general store but the girls acted as if it were Harrods.

They bought four-ounce paper bags of boiled sweets and childish penny treats like bubblegum and gobstoppers and sherbet dabs. They chose chocolate bars too – Fry’s Turkish Delight and Crunchie and Cadbury’s Fruit & Nut – and Belinda bought a bag of oranges as well, though Jeannie complained that they’d make the bedroom stink.

‘Can’t help it. I’ve still got a craving for them, have done since I got pregnant,’ said Belinda.

‘Your skin will turn orange if you don’t watch out,’ said Jeannie.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Belinda, a little smugly. She had beautiful soft pink and white skin, whereas Jeannie was going through a spotty stage.

She bought postcards too, and stamps, and a *Woman’s Own*. Jeannie bought a new biro and a *Mirabelle* love comic. Monica bought ladybird slides for her flyaway hair and a *Beano*. ‘Well, I need a good chuckle,’ she said defensively.

Belinda noticed I wasn’t buying anything. ‘Here, Laura,’ she whispered, and she pressed a shilling into my hand.

‘Oh no, you don’t have to do that. I’ve got my own money, honestly,’ I said, making her take it back. ‘But you’re so kind.’

I felt I had to buy something then, though I wasn’t really in the

mood. I selected several postcards, though they were just dull views of the village, and six stamps.

‘I’m going to write to Daniel,’ I said.

I did too, that afternoon, when I was lounging in the tower room with the other three girls. I didn’t write to the *real* Daniel. There wouldn’t be any point. Dr Bertram would tear up a postcard from me if it came flipping through their letter box.

*Dearest Daniel,*

*I am missing you so much! It’s not as awful here at the home as I thought it would be, and I’ve made some lovely new friends – but I still feel so lonely and sad. If only we could be together! But don’t worry, we will find a way. I know you love me and will stay true to me and that one day we will somehow be a family with our baby.*

*All the love in the world,*

*Your Laura xxxxx*

I sighed as I wrote, deliberately drawing attention to myself.

‘Are you really writing to this Daniel you keep going on about?’ Jeannie asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, adding further kisses right to the bottom of the postcard.

‘No you’re not,’ said Jeannie. ‘I bet you’re writing to your mum.’

‘No, I’m not, I’m writing to Daniel, I *said*,’ I protested.

‘Leave Laura alone,’ said Belinda, swotting at Jeannie with her *Woman’s Own*.

‘She’s having us on,’ said Jeannie, and she suddenly snatched at my postcard and darted to the other side of the room, surprisingly agile in spite of her bulk.

‘Give it back to her!’ Belinda shouted.

Monica giggled, her hand over her mouth. ‘Read it out then, Jeannie!’ she spluttered.

“‘Dearest Daniel,’” Jeannie read. “‘I am missing you so much.’” Then her voice petered away. She pulled a face. ‘It’s just full of stupid lovey-dovey stuff,’ she declared, coming over and flipping it back to me.

‘See!’ Belinda said. ‘You can be a real little cow sometimes, Jeannie.’

I felt triumphant. Jeannie had fallen right into my trap. But she still wouldn’t give up.

‘Yeah, but she hasn’t put an address on it or anything. She’s just mucking about. She’s not going to *send* it,’ she said.

‘Of course I am,’ I said, writing an address immediately. Not Daniel’s actual address. I made one up, writing to a street number that I knew didn’t exist in a road near Shanty Town. I made up Daniel’s surname too, calling him Mansfield. Then I stuck a stamp in the right-hand corner to give the postcard added authenticity.

‘There!’ I said.

I wondered about writing to Mum and Dad. I knew Mum would be worrying desperately about me. Maybe Dad too, even though he was so angry with me. I'd never been away from home before. But they hadn't written to *me*. Miss Andrews gave out the post at breakfast. I'd listened for my name, heart thumping, but I didn't get anything.

I couldn't help hoping that Mum would come on Sunday. Maybe Dad would be able to borrow a car from one of his mates at the coach depot? There were several visitors to Heathcote House that Saturday afternoon, but not for any of us. Belinda and Monica stayed up in the nursery, playing with their babies. Belinda asked Nurse March if I could come too, but there were already a couple of grandmas clucking over the new additions to their families and she said it was too crowded.

I didn't want to hang out with Jeannie or any of the other girls, so I went for another walk all by myself. I didn't really know where I was going, so I just retraced my steps to the village. I posted my card in the postbox there. I knew it wasn't going anywhere. It would stay undelivered in some sorting office for a while and then be chucked in the rubbish. But I was almost starting to believe in this imaginary Daniel. I pictured him clutching my postcard on Monday morning, so relieved that I'd written to him.

'*Darling Laura,*' he'd whisper, and he'd maybe kiss the back of my card where I'd signed my name.

'Darling Daniel,' I said out loud, and a stout woman walking past me stared and then sniffed. I don't think she had a cold. It was a snort of contempt.

'Young hussy!' she hissed.

I wished I had Belinda with me, or Monica, or even Jeannie. Jeannie, most of all, because she'd make a rude retort. I tried to think of something to say in reply but failed. How did she even know I was pregnant? I wasn't showing much, not in my winter coat. I felt so awkwardly self-conscious now that I sidled along, head down.

A couple of schoolboys cycled past on their new Christmas bikes and I clenched my fists, waiting for them to call after me, but thank goodness they were too absorbed in trying to race each other to take any notice of me.

I trudged back to Heathcote House and went to lurk in my cubicle, reading *The World of Suzie Wong*. She was a good-time girl. People thought of me the same way now, and I could understand Mum's determination to hide me away before any of the neighbours realized.

I vowed not to go out anywhere again, but to my horror Miss Andrews insisted we all go to the eleven o'clock Sunday service at the village church. The babies were given their ten o'clock bath and feed at half past nine, so everyone could set off on time. The pavements were narrow, so we had to walk in a straggly crocodile.

Belinda walked with me right at the back of the line, which was a comfort. Monica and Jeannie were just in front.

‘Does everyone peer at us in church?’ I asked.

‘Don’t worry, they won’t stare at us,’ Belinda said mysteriously.

We got to the start of the village. Monica and Jeannie slowed down, letting the other girls march on ahead. Then they suddenly darted down a little lane between the houses.

Belinda took my arm. ‘Come on,’ she said, pulling me down the lane too.

We hurtled forward, one after the other, and ended up in a small recreation ground with four battered swings.

‘Dearly Beloved, let us give praise to freedom!’ Belinda shouted, jumping on a swing.

I climbed on a swing too; we all did. It was the tiniest rebellion, but it felt so exciting!

‘Won’t Miss Andrews be furious though?’ I asked, working my legs hard to go higher and higher.

‘She won’t know,’ said Belinda.

‘Not unless the others snitch – and we don’t think they even notice,’ said Monica.

‘Miss Andrews doesn’t go to church herself. She stays snug as a bug in her room, with a cup of cocoa, selfish old bat,’ said Jeannie. ‘I wish I had one. I’m freezing to death.’

She only wore a light windcheater that emphasized her

stomach. She wore the same maternity smock every day, with a man’s big cardigan and an old skirt with the zip wide open, the hem riding up and exposing her plump knees.

Belinda was wearing a cute knitted cap the same pink as her lipstick. She jumped off her swing and stuck her cap on Jeannie’s tufty hair. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Warm your ears up!’ She jumped back on her own swing and dragged it backwards with her toes. ‘Let’s all swing together. One two three, go!’

We had a few ragged starts, but before long we were all swinging in unison, kicking our legs up like four chorus girls. We went higher and higher until it seemed like any moment we’d be swung right up to the sky. I clung to the cold metal chains and flung my head back, so that the clouds seemed to whirl around me. It was magical – but then they whirled too fast, and I started to feel dizzy.

I slowed down abruptly and juddered to a halt, bending forwards.

‘You’re not going to puke, are you?’ said Jeannie.

‘I hope not,’ I murmured weakly.

‘I threw up for weeks and weeks,’ said Monica. ‘I had to run the bath taps full on so my mum wouldn’t hear me. She’s coming this afternoon – oh, I can’t wait to see her! It’ll be the first time she’s seen little Michael and I just know she’ll fall in love with him. He’s so gorgeous, a true little angel.’

I’d seen Monica’s baby Michael, and he seemed a puny little

creature beside Belinda's Peter but perhaps he looked different to her family. I hoped my own baby would look attractive. Then perhaps Mum would love it. She really liked babies, after all. She had tried so hard to have me.

I couldn't wait to see her, even though we'd only been parted a few days. It seemed as if I'd been at Heathcote House for ever. I was so het up about it I could hardly eat any lunch, although it was a proper Sunday dinner, beef and roast potatoes and sprouts instead of cabbage. Marilyn even made Yorkshire puddings, and we had jelly and evaporated milk in jugs afterwards.

The smell of lunch lingered throughout the afternoon.

'It shows the visitors we're being fed properly,' said Jeannie.

'Is your mum coming today?' I asked her.

'Nope,' said Jeannie. She stared at me fiercely, as if daring me to say any more.

'Oh,' I commented inadequately.

Belinda's mother came. She looked like an exaggerated version of her daughter. She made a fuss of me, calling me 'pet' and 'poppet', but then she went up to the nursery with Belinda to see Peter. They borrowed one of the Heathcote House prams and took him out for a walk.

Monica's mum visited too, with her dad. They went to see baby Michael, but very briefly. Then they went for a car ride with Monica, but they left the baby behind.

'Oh dear. Looks like they didn't think much of the little mini-Mike,' said Jeannie.

'Don't be mean,' I said.

'That's me. Meanie Jeannie,' she said. 'I'm going to have a lie-down. Can I borrow that book of yours, Laura? The one about the girl called Suzie?'

I hadn't finished it yet, but I nodded. I was still a bit scared of her – and yet sorry for her too. I didn't need my book. My mum would be coming any minute.

But she didn't come. I waited and waited by the window, until it got dark. I started to get really worried.

'Maybe she got lost on the way,' I said to Belinda. Her mother had already gone. So had all the other visitors. There was a strange sad quietness in the living room. Several girls looked as if they'd been crying. Monica had gone up to the nursery and hadn't come back. Even Belinda was very subdued, though she patted me reassuringly.

'Perhaps she'll come next week,' she said.

'You don't think something's happened to her, do you? She hasn't written to me either, yet she always fusses over me so. Do you think I should ask Miss Andrews if I could use her phone and ring home?' I said.

'I don't think she'd let you, not unless it was a true emergency,' said Belinda.

‘But maybe it is. She *said* she’d come! She promised!’ I said, though she hadn’t at all. I knew how expensive it was. I couldn’t expect her to use up even more of her savings. And it was such a long way. I knew all this, but I still couldn’t help panicking. ‘I want my mum!’ I wailed like an idiot.

‘I know. We all do,’ said Belinda. ‘I’m missing my mum already and I’ve only just seen her. But it will be OK, Laura, I promise. You’ll feel better in the morning.’

I wasn’t sure. I cried in my cubicle that night, with the pillow over my head in case anyone heard me. Then I had a thought that made me cry more. If missing Mum was as bad as this for me, what was it like for the babies when they were taken away by strangers? It was no use telling myself they were too little to notice who was holding them. Little Peter and Michael knew perfectly well who their own mothers were and stopped crying at once when the right pair of hands lifted them out of their cots. Thank goodness Belinda and Monica had both decided to keep their babies.

Monica looked unusually pale the next morning and didn’t say a word at breakfast. She started sobbing in the middle of our maths lesson that morning. I thought Mrs Brown would become impatient. Monica couldn’t tackle the simplest problem and just gave up, instead of trying to work it out. But this time Mrs Brown went up to Monica, patted her shoulder, and said she could go to her room if she wanted.

‘Can I go with her, Mrs Brown?’ Belinda asked.

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Brown, nodding.

‘Come on, then, Mon,’ Belinda said gently, helping Monica up and leading her carefully out of the room. Monica nestled into Belinda, making pathetic little whimpers.

I was crass enough to feel irritated. Why should Monica get all this special treatment just because she was a dunce at sums? I was shamefully jealous too. *I* wanted to be Belinda’s special friend.

Monica didn’t come back at eleven for the next lesson. Belinda looked as if *she* had been crying now.

‘What’s the matter with Monica?’ I whispered.

‘She’s with Michael,’ Belinda said sadly.

‘Is there something the matter with the baby?’ I asked. He was so small and sallow. Perhaps he was really ill.

‘No, he’s fine. He looks lovely, actually. Monica’s dressed him up in the little nightgown and cap and he looks just like a Victorian baby doll,’ said Belinda, sniffing.

‘But I thought those clothes were for when the babies leave here.’

‘They are. Monica’s been told a couple are coming at twelve o’clock for him,’ said Belinda.

‘What? For *Michael*? But Monica’s keeping him!’ I said.

‘She wants to, but her parents won’t let her. They’ve talked her into thinking it will be best for everyone if Michael is adopted.

They stayed in a hotel last night and they're taking Monica back home this afternoon,' said Belinda, a tear rolling down her cheek.

'Now then, girls,' said Mrs Chambers. 'Try to concentrate on doing your précis exercise.'

'But it's so awful, Mrs Chambers,' I burst out. 'We've just heard the news about poor Monica and her baby!'

I could get away with a lot with Mrs Chambers because I was top at English. She looked at me pityingly. 'It's always very sad when the time comes for your babies to go to their new homes – but don't forget, you're doing your very best for them by giving them a new start in life,' she said. She seemed to have read the same guide book as Mrs Jeffries.

'I think the very best we can do for our babies is to let them stay with us!' I said.

'Yes, that's right, Laura!' said Belinda, and then suddenly everyone was joining in with me, declaring that they were definitely keeping their babies. Even Jeannie joined in, though she said later it was just for solidarity.

'Girls, girls!' said Mrs Chambers wearily, but she didn't get cross.

We heard a car draw up towards the end of our lesson and we all rushed to the window.

'It's only a Ford Anglia,' said Belinda. 'I thought it would be at least a Rover.'

'You don't have to be rich to adopt, Belinda,' said Mrs Chambers.

'But it would be better for Michael if they were,' she said. 'Better for Monica too, imagining him having lots of parties and presents and football lessons and pony rides.'

We couldn't really see much of Michael's prospective parents, looking down from this angle. The man was going bald at the back. The woman had an old-fashioned perm.

'They're too old,' I said.

'Oh, Laura! I should say they're barely thirty,' said Mrs Chambers.

'They're too *ordinary*,' I protested. 'Doesn't Monica have any say in who gets her baby?'

'You can't pick and choose!' said Mrs Chambers.

'Yes, but *they* can,' said Jeannie. 'Boy or girl. And if one of the babies has some little thing wrong with it, they can turn it down and wait for a perfect one. That's not fair, is it?'

'No, it's not fair,' said Mrs Chambers. 'But life isn't fair. All you poor girls have had a raw deal.'

We stared at her in surprise. Everyone else treated us as if we'd all done something dreadful. The girls who went to church said the vicar often preached about shame, though he added that no one should cast the first stone. He reminded the congregation that Jesus preached that even the most immoral sinners should be

forgiven. They said some of the congregation actually turned round and stared at the girls from Heathcote House.

‘Don’t you think we’re sinners, miss?’ someone asked.

‘Mrs Chambers,’ she said gently. ‘No, I don’t. I think you’ve had bad luck, that’s all. But the whole purpose of Heathcote House is to give you a new chance in life. A fresh start.’

I frowned. ‘Do you really believe that, Mrs Chambers?’ I said quietly.

She hesitated. ‘I didn’t say *I* believed that, Laura,’ she murmured. ‘But you must have been doing well at school. Don’t you want to go back and carry on with studying? Pass all your exams, maybe go on to do further training? You’d make a brilliant English teacher one day.’

I didn’t want to be a teacher. I wanted to be something glamorous like an actress, not a boring old teacher! But I couldn’t say that because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings and she was the person I liked most at Heathcote House now, apart from Belinda.

She was still looking tearful. I had a terrible thought.

‘Belinda, *you* won’t have to give up little Peter, will you?’ I whispered to her.

‘No! Of course not. I told you, it’s all fixed. I’m going to be getting married soon,’ she said, fingering her diamond ring.

Jeannie raised her thin eyebrows, but she didn’t say anything.

We couldn’t concentrate on lessons any more. We were reluctant

to go to lunch, though we could smell it was a liver day. No one liked liver, but we had bacon with it, and that was a treat. Then just as everyone was served, a girl at the window table shouted out. She was tall and broad and very tough. Everyone called her Big Pam deferentially. ‘They’re going. And they’ve got Michael,’ she shouted.

We all rushed to the dining-room window, elbowing each other to try to get a proper view. There were the couple walking towards the car. The woman was going very slowly, with baby Michael wrapped in a blanket in her arms.

‘She’s holding him all wrong!’ said Belinda. ‘She needs to hold him more upright. And what a mad time to take him, when he’ll be yelling for his bottle in half an hour. They could have waited!’

It seemed incredible that this couple could simply walk off with Monica’s baby and no one was stopping them.

‘I’ll go to Monica,’ said Belinda, standing up.

‘No, you finish your meal,’ said Marilyn. ‘You won’t be able to see her just now. She’ll be with Miss Andrews.’

‘But I’m her friend,’ said Belinda. ‘I have to say goodbye!’

‘Is she going already?’ I asked.

‘Her parents are coming for her,’ said Belinda. ‘They should have been here for her when she had to hand the baby over.’

‘It’s generally a private time for the mother and the new parents,’ said Marilyn. ‘It’s better that way.’ She spoke calmly, as if it was the simplest transaction.

‘There’s another car! This will be them. I bet they were waiting just round the corner, watching to see the back of their grandson,’ said Big Pam.

We all rushed to the window again, though Marilyn protested. ‘For pity’s sake, girls, that’s best lamb’s liver! Don’t let it get cold!’

We watched Monica’s parents walk up the path. The mother was very like Monica, with those big rabbit teeth. I wondered if Michael would have them too when they started to poke through his gums. It seemed terrible that Monica would never know.

‘Could Monica still change her mind?’ I asked Marilyn. ‘I mean, I know she can’t chase after that couple in the car, but Miss Andrews must have their address. She could get Michael back, couldn’t she?’

‘She’s signed all the documents now,’ said Marilyn. ‘And she wouldn’t want to do that anyway. She’s being very brave and doing her best for her baby.’

‘No she’s not,’ Belinda said. ‘Please can I go and see her now?’

She didn’t get a chance. None of us did. While we still had full plates Monica came out of Heathcote House with her parents. Her father was carrying her suitcase. Her mother was half carrying Monica herself, who was bent over, in floods of tears.

‘Oh!’ Belinda cried in agony. ‘Poor, poor Mon!’

She opened the dining-room window and shouted, but Monica

was sobbing too hard to hear. Her parents bundled her into their car and drove off. It was all over so quickly and brutally.

When we went upstairs I followed Belinda and Jeannie into the tower room. Monica’s dressing gown wasn’t hanging on its hook. Her washbag was gone. Her hairbrush and slides weren’t on her bedside locker. Her clown pyjama case wasn’t on her pillow. Even the pillowcase and sheets were gone, her bed stripped. It was as if she’d never existed.