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Girl Alone

Written by Cathy Glass

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Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates,
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CHAPTER ONE

UNSAFE BEHAVIOUR

‘I hate you!’ Joss screamed at the top of her voice. ‘I hate you. I hate your house and your effing family! I even hate your effing cat!’

Our beloved cat, Toscha, jumped out of Joss’s way as she stormed from the living room, stomped upstairs and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

I took a deep breath and sat on the sofa as I waited for my pulse to settle. Joss, thirteen, had arrived as an emergency foster placement twelve days earlier; angry, volatile and upset, she wasn’t getting any easier to deal with. I knew why she was so angry. So too did her family, teacher, social worker, previous foster carers and everyone else who had tried to help her and failed. Joss’s father had committed suicide four years previously, when Joss had been nine years old, and she and her mother had found his lifeless body. He’d hanged himself.

This was trauma enough for any child to cope with, but then, when Joss was twelve, her mother had tried to move on with her life and had remarried. Joss felt rejected and that her mother had betrayed her father, whom she’d been very close to. Her refusal to accept her new stepfather as her younger brother had been able to had seen family arguments escalate

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and Joss's behaviour sink to the point where she had to leave home and go to live with an aunt. The aunt had managed to cope with Joss's unsafe and unpredictable behaviour for a month, but then Joss had gone into foster care. Two carers later, with Joss's behaviour deteriorating further, she'd come to live with me – the day after Danny, whose story I told in *Saving Danny*, had left.

It was felt that, as a very experienced foster carer, I'd be able to manage and hopefully improve Joss's behaviour, but there'd been little progress so far. And, while I felt sorry for her and appreciated why she was so upset and angry, allowing her to self-destruct wasn't going to help. Her present outburst was the result of my telling her that if she was going out she'd have to be in by nine o'clock, which I felt was late enough for a girl of thirteen to be travelling home on the bus alone. I'd offered to collect her in my car from the friend's house she was supposedly going to, so she could have stayed a bit later, but she'd refused. 'I'm not a kid,' she'd raged. 'So stop treating me like one!'

It was Friday evening, and what should have been the start of a relaxing weekend had resulted in me being stressed (again), and my children Adrian (sixteen), Lucy (thirteen) and Paula (twelve) being forced to listen to another angry scene.

I gave Joss the usual ten minutes alone to calm down before I went upstairs. I wasn't surprised to find Paula and Lucy standing on the landing looking very worried. Joss's anger impacted on the whole family.

'Shall I go in and talk to her?' Lucy asked. The same age as Joss and having come to me as a foster child (I was adopting her), Lucy could empathize closely with Joss, but I wasn't passing the responsibility to her.

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‘Thanks, love, but I’ll speak to her first,’ I said. ‘Then you can have a chat with her later if you wish.’

‘I don’t like it when she shouts at you,’ Paula said sadly.

‘I don’t either,’ I said, ‘but I can handle it. Really. Don’t worry.’ I threw them a reassuring smile, then gave a brief knock on Joss’s door and, slowly opening it, poked my head round. ‘Can I come in?’ I asked.

‘Suit yourself,’ Joss said moodily.

I went in and drew the door to behind me. Joss was sitting on the edge of her bed with a tissue pressed to her face. She was a slight, petite child who looked younger than her thirteen years, and her usually sallow complexion was now red from anger and tears.

‘Can I come and sit next to you?’ I asked, approaching the bed.

‘Not bothered,’ she said.

I sat beside her, close but not quite touching. I didn’t take her hand in mine or put my arm around her to comfort her. She shied away from physical contact.

‘Why do you always stop me from having fun?’ she grumbled. ‘It’s not fair.’

‘Joss, I don’t want to stop you from having fun, but I do need to keep you safe. I care about you, and while you are living with me I’ll be looking after you like your mother.’

‘She doesn’t care!’ Joss blurted. ‘Not for me, anyway.’ This was one of Joss’s grievances – that her mother didn’t care about her.

‘I’m sure your mother does care,’ I said. ‘Although she may not always say so.’ It was a conversation we’d had before.

‘No, she doesn’t,’ Joss blurted. ‘She couldn’t care a toss about me and Kevin, not now she’s got *him*.’

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Kevin was Joss's younger brother. '*Him*' was their stepfather, Eric.

'I know it can be very difficult for children when a parent remarries,' I said. 'The parent has to divide their time between their new partner and their children. I do understand how you feel.'

'No, you don't,' Joss snapped. 'No one does.'

'I try my best to understand,' I said. 'And if you could talk to me more, I'm sure I'd be able to understand better.'

'At least you have time to listen to me. I'll give you that. She never does.'

'I expect your mother is very busy. Working, as well as looking after her family.'

Joss humphed. 'Busy with him, more like it!'

I knew that with so much animosity towards her stepfather it would be a long time before Joss was able to return to live at home, if ever. However, we were getting off the subject.

'Listen, love,' I said, lightly touching her arm. 'The reason you were angry just now wasn't because of your mother or stepfather; it was because I was insisting on some rules. As you know, when you go out I expect you to come in at a reasonable time. The same rules apply to everyone here, including Adrian, Lucy and Paula.'

'Adrian stayed out later than nine last Saturday,' she snapped. 'It was nearly eleven when he got back. I heard him come in.'

'He's two years older than you,' I said. 'And even then I made sure he had transport home. Lucy and Paula have to be in by nine unless it's a special occasion, and they only go out at weekends sometimes.'

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‘But they don’t want to go out as much as I do,’ Joss said, always ready with an answer.

It was true. Joss would be out every night until after midnight if I let her, as she had been doing with her aunt and previous foster carers.

‘I don’t want you going out every night, either,’ I said. ‘You have school work to do and you need your sleep. It’s not a good idea for a young girl to be hanging around on the streets.’

‘I like it,’ she said. ‘It’s fun.’

‘It’s unsafe,’ I said.

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘Trust me, love, a teenage girl wandering around by herself at night is unsafe. I’ve been fostering for fifteen years and I know what can happen.’ I didn’t want to scare her, but she had no sense of danger and I was very concerned about her unsafe behaviour.

‘I’m not by myself. I’m with my mates,’ Joss said. ‘You’re paranoid, just like my aunt and those other carers.’

‘So we are all wrong, are we, love? Or could it be that, being a bit older and having more experience, we have some knowledge of what is safe and unsafe?’

Joss shrugged moodily and stared at her hands clenched in her lap.

‘I’m still going out tonight,’ she said defiantly.

‘I’ve said you can. It’s Friday, but you will be in by nine o’clock if you are using the bus.’

‘What if I get a lift home?’ she asked.

‘I offered that before and you refused.’

‘Not from you – one of my mates’ parents could bring me back.’

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I looked at her carefully. 'Who?'

'One of my mates from school, I guess.'

'Joss, if you are relying on a lift then I would like to know who will be responsible for bringing you home.'

'Chloe's parents,' she said quickly. 'She's in my class. She's a nice girl. You'd like her.'

I continued to look at her. 'And Chloe's parents have offered to bring you home?'

'Yes. They did before, when I was at my last carer's. You can ask them if you like.'

On balance, I decided she could be telling the truth, and if she wasn't, questioning her further would only back her into a corner and make her lie even more.

'All right, then,' I said. 'I trust you. On this occasion you can come in at ten o'clock as long as one of Chloe's parents brings you home.'

'Ten's too early if I have a lift,' she said, trying to push the boundaries even further. 'Eleven.'

'No. I consider ten o'clock late enough for a thirteen-year-old, but if you want to raise it with your social worker when we see her on Monday, that's fine.'

'It's not fair,' she moaned. 'You always fucking win.'

'It's not about winning or losing,' I said. 'I care about what happens to you and I do what I think is best to protect you. And Joss, I've told you before about swearing and that you'd be sanctioned. There are other ways to express anger apart from swearing and stomping around. Tomorrow is pocket-money day and I'll be withholding some of yours.'

'You can't do that!' she snapped. 'It's my money. The social services give it to you to give to me.'

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‘I will be giving you half tomorrow, and then the rest on Sunday evening, assuming you haven’t been swearing. If you do swear, I’ll keep the money safe for you and you can earn it back through good behaviour.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ she said, and, folding her arms, she turned her back on me.

I ignored her ill humour. ‘Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. I think Lucy wants to talk to you. Is that OK?’

‘I guess.’

I went out of Joss’s room, called to Lucy that Joss was free and then with a sigh went downstairs to finish making the dinner. I knew I’d have another anxious evening worrying about Joss, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have doubts that I’d made the right decision in agreeing to foster her. I was especially concerned about the effect her behaviour could be having on my children. But I hadn’t really had much choice. I was the only experienced foster carer available at the time, and the social services couldn’t place Joss with an inexperienced carer, as they had done the first time. Joss had been that carer’s first placement and she’d only lasted two weeks. I hoped she was given an easier child for her next placement, or she might lose hope and resign.

Once dinner was ready I called everyone to the table. Adrian had stayed in his room while Joss was erupting, and now greeted her with an easy ‘Hi’. There wasn’t an atmosphere at the meal table as there had been on Tuesday and Thursday when I’d stopped Joss from going out at all. Now she was happy at the prospect of a night out and ate quickly, gobbling down her food and finishing first.

‘I’m going to get ready,’ she said, standing and pushing back her chair.

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‘Wouldn’t you like some pudding first?’

‘Nah. I need to get ready.’

‘All right. Off you go, then.’ Normally I encouraged the children to remain at the table until everyone had finished, as it’s polite. But with a child like Joss, who had so many issues, I had to be selective in choosing which ones I dealt with first. I couldn’t change all her behaviour at once, and coming home at a reasonable time for her own safety and not swearing were more important than having exemplary table manners.

It was the beginning of June and therefore still daylight at seven o’clock when Joss yelled, ‘Bye. See ya later!’ from the hall and rushed out. I was in the living room drinking a cup of coffee, with the patio doors open and the warm summer air drifting in, thinking – worrying – about Joss. I’d thought about little else since she’d arrived. Although I’d been fostering for a long time, Joss was possibly my biggest challenge yet. I was also thinking about her mother, Linda, whom I would be meeting for the first time on Monday. Judging by what I knew from the social services, Linda had been a good mother and had done her best for Joss and her younger brother, Kevin, supporting them through the tragic loss of their father and then, more recently, gradually and sensitively introducing them to her new partner, Eric. I certainly didn’t blame Linda for wanting to move on with her life and remarry. I was divorced, so I knew what it was like bringing up children alone, and it’s not easy. Yet, sadly, it had all gone horribly wrong for Linda – by introducing Eric into her family she’d effectively lost her only daughter.

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I never completely relaxed while Joss was out in the evening, but there was always something to do to occupy myself. I cleared up the kitchen, sorted the clean laundry and then returned to the living room and wrote up my fostering log. Foster carers are required to keep a daily record of the child or children they are looking after, which includes appointments, the child's health and well-being, significant events and any disclosures the child may make about their past. When the child leaves, this record is placed on file at the social services. Once I'd finished, I watched some television.

Lucy, Paula and Adrian were in their rooms for much of the evening; the girls were doing their homework so that it wasn't hanging over them all weekend, and then they chatted to their friends on the phone, and Adrian – who was in the middle of his GCSE examinations – was studying. By ten o'clock all three of them were getting ready for bed and I was listening out for Joss. I prayed she wouldn't let me down this time. If she hadn't returned by midnight I'd have to report her missing to the police, as I had done the previous Saturday. Then, doubtless, as before, she'd arrive home in the early hours, having wasted police time, and be angry with me for 'causing a fuss'. I hadn't given Joss a front-door key as I'd learnt my lesson from previous teenagers I'd fostered who'd abused the responsibility. My policy – the same as many other carers – was that once the young person had proved they were responsible, then they had a key, and it gave them something to work towards. But, of course, not having a key was another of Joss's grievances that she would be telling her social worker about on Monday. Joss wasn't open to reason; she felt victimized and believed she was invincible, which was a very dangerous combination.

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At five minutes past ten the doorbell rang. I leapt from the sofa and nearly ran down the hall to answer it, grateful and relieved she'd returned more or less on time.

'Good girl,' I said as I opened the door. 'Well done.' I heard a car pull away.

'Well done,' she repeated, slurring her words. And I knew straight away she was drunk.

'Oh, Joss,' I said.

'Oh, Joss,' she mimicked.

Keeping her eyes down, she carefully navigated the front doorstep. 'I'm going to bed, see ya,' she said, and headed unsteadily towards the stairs.

As she passed me I smelt the mint she was sucking to try to mask the smell of alcohol, and also a sweet, musky smell lingering on her clothes, which was almost certainly cannabis – otherwise known as marijuana, weed or dope. I'd smelt it on her before. My heart sank, but there was no point in trying to discuss her behaviour with her while she was still under the influence. Greatly saddened yet again by her reckless behaviour, I watched her go upstairs.

I gave her five minutes to change and then went up to check on her. Her bedroom door was closed. I knocked but there was no answer, so I went in. She was lying on the bed, on her side, asleep, and fully clothed apart from her shoes. I eased the duvet over her legs, closed the curtains and then came out, leaving the door slightly open so I would hear her if she was sick or cried out. Joss often had dreadful nightmares and screamed and cried out in her sleep. On those nights I would immediately go to her room to comfort and resettle her, but that night – possibly because of the alcohol – she didn't wake.

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She was still asleep when I got up the following morning. As it was Saturday and we didn't have to be anywhere I left her to sleep it off. She finally appeared downstairs in her dressing gown shortly after twelve. I was in the kitchen making lunch.

'Sorry,' she said, pouring a glass of water. Joss apologized easily, but it didn't mean that she wouldn't do it again.

'Joss, we need to talk,' I said.

I heard her sigh. 'Can't we make it later? After I've showered. I feel like crap.'

'I'm not surprised. Have a shower and get dressed, then, and we'll talk later. But we do need to talk.'

She returned upstairs to get ready and then half an hour later came down, and we all sat at the table for lunch. She looked fresher and chatted easily to Lucy, Adrian and Paula as though nothing untoward had happened, which for her it hadn't. Arriving home drunk and smelling of dope was a regular occurrence – at her parents', her aunt's, her previous foster carers', and now with me. She didn't talk to me, though, and after lunch kept well away from me all afternoon, although I heard her chatting and laughing with Lucy and Paula. Not for the first time, I hoped their good influence would rub off on Joss and not the other way around. The girls were a similar age to Joss and it was a worry that her risky behaviour could appear impressive and exciting. I'd talked to them already about the danger she placed herself in, and would do so again.

It was nearly five o'clock before Joss finally came to find me. I was on the patio watering the potted plants. I knew why she was presenting herself now, complicit and ready to hear my lecture: she would want to go out again soon.

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‘You wanted to talk?’ she said, almost politely.

‘Yes, sit down, love.’

I put the watering can to one side, pulled up a couple of garden chairs and in a calm and even voice began – the positive first. ‘Joss, you did well to come home on time last night. I was pleased. Well done. But I am very worried that you are still drinking alcohol and smoking dope after everything I’ve said to you.’

She looked down and shrugged.

‘I thought you understood the damage alcohol and drugs do to a young person’s body.’

‘I do,’ she said.

‘So why are you still doing it, Joss? You’re not daft. Why abuse your body and mind when you know the harm it’s doing?’

‘Dunno,’ she said, with another shrug.

‘It’s not only your physical and mental health that are being damaged by drink and drugs,’ I continued. ‘You’re putting yourself in great danger in other ways too. When someone has a lot to drink or smokes dope, they feel as though they haven’t a care in the world – that’s why they do it. But their awareness has gone; they lose their sense of danger and are more at risk of coming to harm.’ I was being careful to talk in the third person and not say ‘you’ so that she wouldn’t feel I was getting at her – another complaint of Joss’s. ‘Joss, apart from your health, I’m worried something dreadful could happen to you. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’ She glanced at me. ‘So if I promise not to drink or smoke, can I go out tonight?’

‘Where?’

‘Chloe’s.’

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‘Did Chloe’s parents know you were drinking and smoking drugs last night?’

‘We weren’t,’ Joss said.

I held her gaze. ‘Joss, I’m not stupid.’

‘No, they didn’t know. They weren’t in,’ she admitted.

‘So who brought you home last night?’

‘Not sure,’ Joss said easily. ‘Her uncle, I think.’

‘You think?’ Joss could have just admitted to eating too many sweets for all her lack of concern. ‘Joss, are you telling me that you were so off your head last night that you don’t even know who drove you home?’

‘I’m sure it was her uncle,’ she said.

I looked at her carefully. ‘Joss, I’m very worried about you.’

‘I know, you said before. I’m sorry, but I can look after myself.’

I wish I had a pound for every teenager who’s said that, I thought. ‘Joss, I don’t want to stop you from having fun and spending time with your friends, but I do need to keep you safe. Given what happened last night, and last weekend, the only way you’re going out this evening is if I take and collect you in my car.’

‘But that’s not fair!’ she cried, jumping up from her chair, all semblance of compliance gone. ‘You treat me like a fucking baby. I hate you and this fucking family! I hate everyone.’