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# **Nobody's Son**

Written by Cathy Glass

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# CATHY GLASS

## *Nobody's Son*

All Alex ever wanted  
was a family of his own...

H A R P E R  
element

Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates,  
have been changed to protect the family's privacy.



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## PROLOGUE

**W**e immediately fell silent as the noise sounded again. The children stared at me anxiously before our eyes went towards the curtains drawn across the patio doors. It was cold and dark outside, but something was out there scratching and trying to get in. Not our cat; she was asleep by the warm radiator, and it didn't sound like a cat anyway. I stood and gingerly crossed the room, my heart pounding and my senses on full alert. There were just the children and me in the house, and I tried to hide my fear from them as I eased one curtain aside and peered into the dark. Nothing. Whatever it was had vanished again like a phantom into the night.

## CHAPTER ONE

# A NEW YEAR, A NEW CHILD

I'd taken six months off from fostering after my husband had left me. There, I said it – my husband left me. It had been a difficult time, adjusting, supporting my children and reassuring them that it wasn't their fault and their father still loved them. But the fact that I was now able to say out loud that my husband had left me meant I was coming to terms with it and moving on, just as my counsellor had said I would. I only saw her four times and she was also the vicar of our local church. Not that we'd been regular church-goers – Christmas, Easter, Mothering Sunday and the occasional family service – but I knew she was approachable, down to earth and offered counselling. She wouldn't ask me to pray for my husband's salvation or even forgive him, which I couldn't do yet. Get over his cheating and lies and the rejection, yes, but not forgive him, not for making my children fatherless. She'd listened sympathetically, but more importantly she'd told me it was time to acknowledge that my marriage was at an end, that I'd done my best to salvage it and that I should now move on with my life.

In the six months I'd been away from fostering many changes had taken place, developments in procedure and

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practice that remain part of fostering today. I now had a link worker, Jill, also known as a support or supervising social worker, whose role, as her title suggested, was to support and monitor my fostering to make sure it was to a good standard, to check my log notes were up to date and that my training needs were met. Ongoing training and report writing were now part of fostering for carers and I had to keep a daily record of the child I was looking after, which included appointments the child had, their health and wellbeing, education, significant events and any disclosures the child made about their past. There were also regular reviews for the child and an annual review for the foster carer, and fostering was provided through agencies. I worked for Homefinders, an independent fostering agency with charity status. But of course the heart, the essence of fostering, remained the same. The foster family looked after a child or children, short or long term, who, for any number of reasons, couldn't be looked after by their own parents, and their stories and past experiences were still heart-rending and varied. One change I didn't like was that the children now had to call me their foster carer rather than their foster mum, as it was felt it might be confusing for them. It seemed a bit cold to me, but I had to abide by this as I did all the other fostering practices and regulations.

When I asked my son Adrian, then aged seven, if he thought we were ready to start fostering again, he replied with a resounding, 'Yes.' Then added, 'It's time we got back to normal.' An old head on young shoulders. I didn't point out that we'd never get completely 'back to normal' because his father wouldn't be there, but I knew what he meant. It

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was time to pick up the threads of our old life. My three-year-old daughter Paula was at an age when she agreed with her older brother, so she was happy to resume fostering too. They'd both grown up with fostering, so having another 'brother' or 'sister' living with them was the norm. Adrian was especially pleased when I told him that we would be looking after a boy, Alex, almost the same age as him, for while he obviously loved his sister their play was at different stages, and nothing beats having a playmate of your own age.

I'd warmed to Jill, my support worker, as soon as I'd met her. She was straight-talking, with lots of social-worker experience, kind and empathetic too. So when she told me a little about Alex and that he wouldn't give me any trouble and was just what we needed to ease us back into fostering, I believed her.

'A New Year, a new start,' I said. It was Saturday 10 January and I was feeling very positive.

Alex, like most of the children we'd fostered, had had a very unsettled early life but was going to be adopted so, to use a term social workers use, his case would have a 'good outcome'. What wasn't so good, however, and worried Jill as it did me, was that Alex was having to move foster homes again now, not long before the move to his adoptive parents. He'd already had three previous foster homes since coming into care, and now he was having to move from his present carers', where he'd been for five months. The couple had two children of their own and the woman was pregnant again and had found it all too much, which I suppose was understandable. But there was only a month before Alex would be moving to his adoptive home.



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'And they can't be persuaded to keep him for the last month?' I asked Jill on the phone. 'Moving is so unsettling and Alex has had more than his fair share of moves.'

'Apparently not,' Jill said with a small tut of disapproval, 'although if I was their supervising social worker I'd have tried to persuade them. Some extra support could have been put in to keep Alex there. But the carers are adamant he has to go.'

I was therefore providing what is known as a 'bridging placement' – an interim home in between his present foster home and his permanent adoptive one. I hadn't been given much notice of Alex's arrival, but that was often the case in fostering. Jill had telephoned the day before to tell me a little about Alex. Once I'd agreed to take him, Debbie, his social worker, whom I hadn't met yet, telephoned and said she'd asked Alex's present carers to bring him for a visit on Saturday afternoon, then he could move in on Sunday morning. It was good that Alex was having the chance to meet us and look around the house first so it wouldn't be so strange and unfamiliar when he moved in. As it was the weekend, neither Jill nor Debbie would be present when Alex visited or moved in. His present carers and I were experienced foster carers, so it was felt we could manage this between us, which was fine. Debbie and Jill would phone on Monday to make sure the move had gone well.

In preparation for Alex's visit, Adrian had arranged some of his favourite toys in the living room. He was quietly excited and looking forward to meeting Alex. Paula had brought down one of her favourite dolls from her bedroom.

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‘He won’t want to play with dolls,’ Adrian said a little disparagingly. Paula looked hurt.

‘He might,’ I said. ‘You do sometimes. And less of the stereotyping, please.’

When the front doorbell rang a little after two o’clock Adrian and Paula came with me to answer it. Paula brought her doll.

‘Cathy?’ the man standing on my doorstep said. ‘I’m Graham, Alex’s carer.’

‘Hello.’ We shook hands. ‘And you must be Alex? Nice to meet you. Come on in. It’s freezing out there.’

Alex was a slightly built child with brown hair and a sallow complexion, and was huddled deep inside his navy parka. He looked up at me, wide-eyed and nervous.

‘It’s just me,’ Graham said as they came in. ‘My wife, Sandy, is having a rest.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘This is Adrian, my son; he’s nearly the same age as Alex.’

‘Hi,’ Adrian said, taking a small step forward.

‘And this is Paula, my daughter, who is three and a half.’ Paula grinned shyly and clutched her doll protectively to her chest.

‘Nice to meet you both,’ Graham said. He was of average height and build with fashionable chin stubble, and I guessed he was in his late thirties. ‘Say hello, Alex,’ he told him.

Alex managed a small, very timid ‘Hello’.

‘Take off your coat then, mate,’ Graham said to Alex.

Alex did as he was told and I hung his coat on the hall stand. He also took off his trainers. He’d brought a toy car transporter with him and I admired it.

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'Adrian likes cars too,' I said. 'He's set some out in the living room for you both to play with.' I led the way down the hall and into the living room.

'Come and play with my cars,' Adrian said to Alex.

Alex left his carer's side and went over and squatted down beside Adrian. Paula watched them shyly from a little distance.

'Would you like a drink?' I offered Graham.

'No, thanks.'

'What about you, Alex?'

He shook his head.

'We won't stay long,' Graham said. 'It's just a short visit to familiarize Alex with his new home.' This was true, but it was also important that Alex spent a little time playing, as it would put him at ease.

'Have a seat,' I said to Graham. 'I'll show you around shortly.'

He sat in one of the easy-chairs and I sat on the sofa. Paula stood beside me, clutching her doll and watching the boys, not brave enough yet to join in.

'You were told why Alex is having to move?' Graham asked me, slightly guiltily, I thought.

'Yes, your wife is expecting. Congratulations.'

'Thanks. She's been very sick with this pregnancy and it's all become too much. Debbie, Alex's social worker, isn't happy with us. She suggested we put Alex in after-school club so we could see him through to permanency, as it's just a month. He already goes to breakfast club. But you know how it is in fostering – one month stretches to two and so on. We couldn't take the risk.'

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I nodded. I did know how it was. Carers have to be very flexible, as plans can and do change in fostering, sometimes with very little notice.

‘He should only be here a month though,’ Graham added. ‘Sandy and I have met the adoptive parents. I guess you’ll take over where we left off?’

‘I would think so.’

‘There’s a meeting on Wednesday to plan the introduction and the move to his new parents,’ Graham said. Alex looked up. ‘You’re looking forward to meeting your new parents, aren’t you, mate?’

Alex gave a small, shy nod and then, lowering his gaze again, continued to play with the cars.

‘I haven’t been told about the meeting yet,’ I said. ‘I guess Jill or Debbie will tell me on Monday when they phone. But I’ll make a note of it in my diary. What time is it?’

‘Not sure. I’ll bring all the paperwork with me tomorrow when I move him. I suppose they might postpone the introduction because of this move,’ he added. ‘I know it’s not the best timing, but you have to put your own first, don’t you?’

Difficult one, I thought. My experience of fostering had taught me that sometimes the needs of the foster child had to be placed first and your own family did on occasions have to take second place. Toscha, our rather lazy cat, sauntered out from behind the sofa where she’d been curled up in her favourite place beside the radiator. Alex looked startled.

‘She won’t hurt you,’ I said. ‘She’s just come to say hello. Do you like cats?’

Alex nodded cautiously. My first impression of him was that he was a slightly nervous child, unsure of himself or situations.

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Hardly surprising given his unsettled past. Children show anxiety in different ways; some run in loud and assertive while others, like Alex, recede into their shell until they feel safe.

'He's fine with animals,' Graham said. 'We've got a cat and a dog.'

'That's good,' I said, relieved. 'Toscha likes you, Alex.' She was purring loudly and sniffing his jumper. He didn't seem to mind.

I let Alex play for another ten minutes while Graham and I talked – about the weather, fostering and life in general. It was important for Alex to see me getting along with his current carer, as it would give the move and me the stamp of approval, but I was aware that Graham needed to get back so I suggested showing them around the house.

'I'll show you my room,' Adrian said proudly. Taking hold of Alex's hand, he drew him to his feet.

Graham saw this. 'It'll be nice having someone your own age to play with, won't it?'

Alex managed a small smile and picked up his toy transporter to take with him.

'So, this is our living room,' I said, beginning the tour. 'We're often in here, playing games or watching the television. You can see the garden through the patio windows. It's lovely to play out there in summer but a bit cold at present, unless of course we have snow.'

'I hope we have snow,' Adrian said.

'Me too,' Alex quietly agreed.

I led the way through to our kitchen-cum-diner.

'That's my place,' Adrian said, pointing to his chair at the table. 'You can sit next me if you like. Can't he, Mum?'

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'Yes, of course,' I said.

'That'll be nice, won't it?' Graham said encouragingly.

Alex nodded again.

Toscha had followed us out and Paula bent down to stroke her. Alex did likewise. 'I like your doll,' he said shyly to Paula.

She smiled equally shyly. 'I like your car.'

Great first step, I thought: all three children were talking to each other and Alex was starting to relax a little. I continued the tour downstairs into the front room and then upstairs. Alex wasn't really interested in the other bedrooms or the bathroom – what seven-year-old boy would be? – but it was important that he saw them, as he would be able take away an image of the inside of our house so it wouldn't feel so strange when he moved in tomorrow. However, when we went into his bedroom he looked lost and bewildered. I'd made it as homely as I could, with posters of action heroes on the walls and a Batman duvet cover on the bed, but it still looked rather empty compared to the other rooms.

'It will be much better once you have all your things in here,' I told Alex.

'We'll pack everything when we get home, mate,' Graham said to Alex. Then to me, 'We bought him a bike for Christmas; have you got a shed it can go in?'

'Yes.' Alex looked anxious. 'Don't worry,' I said to him. 'We have room for all your belongings. Nothing will get left behind.' It is often an anxiety for children who come into care or those who've had a number of moves that their possessions will be lost or left behind. And of course in a month's time we'd be packing up all Alex's possessions again and moving

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him to his permanent home. From what I'd seen of Alex so far he was coping with all of this very well.

'Do you like your room?' Graham asked him.

Alex gave a small nod.

'Good, and remember Adrian's room is just next door,' I said.

We'd seen the other rooms upstairs, so Graham led the way out of Alex's room and downstairs. He didn't return to the living room; instead he stopped at the coat stand and unhooked Alex's coat. 'Get your trainers on then, mate,' he said. 'You'll see Cathy again tomorrow.'

I appreciated Graham wanted to get back to his wife and pack. 'We'll see you in the morning,' I said to Alex with an encouraging smile.

He nodded.

'At eleven o'clock,' Graham said to me. 'Is that what you were told?'

'Yes.'

Alex had put on his trainers and Graham passed him his coat. 'Will I still be able to go to my old school?' he quietly asked Graham.

'I think so, mate,' he replied.

'Yes, you will,' I confirmed. 'I'll take you there in my car. You go to breakfast club so we'll take you there first and then Adrian to his school and Paula to nursery.'

Alex looked relieved and managed another small smile. School is often the only constant factor in a foster child's life if they have to move home; it's familiar, safe and reliable, so it's important that they remain at the same school if at all possible. There was a chance that Alex would have to change

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schools when he went to his adoptive parents, as the matching process – children with prospective parents – stretches across the country, but if so that would be unavoidable, and it would be the last move he'd have to make.

'See you tomorrow then,' Graham said as they headed down the front path.

We watched them go and then I closed the front door.

'I like Alex, he's nice,' Adrian said.

'I like him too,' Paula agreed.

'He's a lovely little boy, but remember he'll only be staying with us for a few weeks,' I cautioned, as much for my benefit as the children's. I knew how easily we became attached to the children we looked after, especially a child like Alex, unassuming and vulnerable. You felt like you wanted to give him a big hug and never let him go, but he'd only be with us a short while.

We played some card and board games that afternoon and then in the evening, after dinner, the three of us watched some television. The house phone rang at six o'clock and I was slightly surprised to hear John, their father. He usually telephoned on a Sunday evening, but he quickly explained that he was away for a few days so he was phoning now while he had the chance, as he didn't like to let the children down. I bit back the retort at the tip of my tongue about letting the children down in a much bigger way and passed the handset to Adrian, who usually spoke to him first. Adrian told him about school and football and what he'd been doing generally – a life that John had once been part of and familiar with but now needed to be told about. When Adrian had finished his news he passed the phone to Paula who, not understanding



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about divorce, asked as she had done before, 'When are you coming home, Daddy?' It stung my heart now as it always did.

'He's not,' Adrian said under his breath.

'It's OK,' I said quietly to him. Then to Paula I said, 'Daddy is coming to see you next Sunday.'

John must have said something similar for she repeated, 'Seeing Daddy next weekend.' Then, satisfied that she'd spoken to him, she said, 'Goodbye, Daddy,' and passed the phone to Adrian to say goodbye and hang up.

John would now return to his life as we returned to ours, and while it was getting a little easier for us to accept, I would never understand how a father could leave his family for another woman. Had John's life with me really been so bad? He'd admitted once that it hadn't, that it was just one of those things, beyond his control, that he'd fallen in love with another woman. As though it wasn't his fault!