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Chapter One

The Alderman Wix estate was grey, forlorn and almost deserted. Soon the demolition men would move in.

Not yet though. The blocks of flats with their cracked concrete

walkways and dripping walls could not be knocked down until the last stubborn old people had been cleared out. Only a few had clung on, but they were so difficult to rehouse. The two men who were walking round it one morning knew this and also that there wasn't much time left.

'How are we going to do it?' said one. 'We can't go knocking on every door.'

'Listen and learn,' said the other as an old man shuffled by leaning on a stick. He went up to him.

'Excuse me, guv'nor. Could you tell me where Mrs Freakwell lives?'



Only we're her nephews and we haven't seen her for years. We'd like to have a chat with her before they knock this place down.'

'Freakwell?' said the old man. 'Nobody round here with that name. I'd know if there was 'cos I never heard a name like that.'

'I suppose I might have got it wrong. It's been a long time. I know she lives here somewhere. Try a few more names.'

'Well, there's the Ellises at number fifteen and the Smiths at twelve. Let me see, who else is there?'

'Who lives over there?' The man

jerked his thumb towards a flat which looked dingier than the rest. Dirty curtains hung behind the windows: the once-blue door looked forlorn as if nobody ever visited.

‘Ah, that’s Mrs Cattermole at number twenty-nine. Weird one, she is. She don’t come out much nowadays, but when she does she says a lot of strange things. Nobody takes any notice though. We’ve heard it all before.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, she keeps on about some treasure she’s got. “Nobody knows about my treasure,” she says. I say,

“If you don’t stop blabbin’ about it everyone’s goin’ to know and there may be people among ’em you wouldn’t want to.” But she doesn’t seem to understand. “My children know all about it,” she says. “They won’t tell anyone.”

‘Children?’

‘Daft old bat. There are no children. There haven’t been children round here since – well, there aren’t no children. She’s ravin’. She ought to be in a home.’

‘I reckon I did get the name wrong. It’s that Mrs Cattermole who’s our auntie. I knew her name

ended with an 'l'. We'll go off and have a cup of tea and then we'll go and see her. Thanks mate.'

The old man watched them go. 'Nice lads, thinking about their old auntie,' he said to himself.

The children often came to see Mrs Cattermole. If they were late, she would pull her frayed shawl tighter, huddle nearer to the heatless hearth and pray that they would soon arrive. It was strange that the moment she finished her prayers, they always appeared as if someone had called them.

First she heard their clear piping voices, then tinkly laughter and, last of all, skipping footsteps as they gathered round her. One might take her hand and hold it in a grip so light that it was as if she was brushed by a feather, another might stroke her thinning hair with fingers that hardly touched. All the children would look down on her tenderly, lovingly.

Then they would break away and play the games she knew so well. There were dipping games, tig, hop-scotch, skipping to rhymes she clapped her old, wrinkled, veiny



hands to. She longed to go further and join in. Sometimes she thought she succeeded. She left her chair by the fireplace. Her body was suppler, lighter. The children looked up to her and their eyes shone with gratitude and love. She felt so young again, so happy.

Then as suddenly as they came, they were gone and she was back in the shell of old age.

‘You’d look a bit silly if there *had* been a Mrs Freakwell there.’

‘No chance. Have you ever heard a name like that?’

They were in a Macdonalds nearby eating burgers.

‘What do we do now then?’

There was only one leader in this twosome and he had no doubts.

‘We try the water company trick.’

‘But we’re always doing the water company trick.’

‘Yeah, because it works. These old grunTERS fall for it every time. Besides, this one’s really worth it now the old bloke’s told us she’s got a treasure.’

‘He might be as daft as she is. And we don’t know what the treasure is.’

‘I know he looks a bit doolally, but I reckon he knows what he’s talkin’ about. And it’s obvious what it is. Money stashed away in a pillowcase. Some of these old biddies are loaded. We’ll take a look this afternoon and come back for it later.’

‘What if she won’t let it go? We might have to thump her.’

‘Then we thump her. It’s all the same to me.’

The two men finished their coffee.

‘Time to go,’ said the leader.