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CATHY GLASS

Nobody's Son

All Alex ever wanted was a family of his own…

Cathy Glass

Nobody's Son: All Alex ever wanted was a family of his own

Аннотация

Born in a prison and removed from his drug-dependent mother, rejection is all that 7-year-old Alex knows.When Cathy is asked to foster little Alex, aged 7, her immediate reaction is: Why can't he stay with his present carers for the last month? He's already had many moves since coming into care as a toddler and he'll only be with her a short while before he goes to live with his permanent adoptive family. But the present carers are expecting a baby and the foster mother isn't coping, so Alex goes to live with Cathy.He settles easily and is very much looking forward to having a forever family of his own. The introductions and move to his adoptive family go well. But Alex is only with them for a week when problems begin. What happens next is both shocking and upsetting, and calls into question the whole adoption process.

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Copyright

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

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Prologue

We 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 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 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.

'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.

'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.

'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.’

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. 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?'

'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 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 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 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!

Chapter Two
Unsettled Early Life

The following morning Adrian was up earlier than usual for a Sunday, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Alex. We'd had our Sunday-morning fry-up for breakfast and I'd cleared up so that I was ready to give Alex my full attention. It's always strange when a new child first arrives – for us as well as the child – as we all adjust to each other's likes and dislikes, habits and mannerisms, but by the end of a few days we're all usually jogging along together in our new routine.

The front doorbell rang a little after eleven o'clock and the children came with me to answer it.

'I'll play with Alex while you help Mum unpack,' Adrian told Paula.

'I want to play too,' Paula said with a whine.

'You can both play with him,' I said diplomatically.

As I opened the front door the cold January air rushed in. Alex and Graham stood side by side in the porch, loaded with bags. 'Good morning,' Graham said cheerfully. 'I'll bring these in and then unpack the rest of the car.'

I held the door wide open so Graham could manoeuvre in the two large suitcases he was carrying. 'Are they all right there?' he asked, setting them down to one side of the hall.

‘Yes, fine. I’ll sort them all out later.’

‘That case has Alex’s school uniform in and his winter clothes,’ he said, tapping one. ‘You may not need to unpack the other. It’s his summer gear.’

‘OK, thanks.’

Alex, holding his school bag and a carrier bag of toys, with a bulging rucksack on his back, was now standing in the hall looking very lost.

‘Here, let me help you with that,’ I said, and eased the rucksack off his back.

‘You stay here with Cathy,’ Graham told Alex, ‘while I unload the rest of the car.’

Adrian took the bags Alex was holding from him so he could take off his coat. The poor lad looked even more bewildered now than he had done yesterday. ‘Are you OK, love?’ I asked him as he stood immobile, making no attempt to take off his coat or trainers. He nodded. ‘You’ll soon feel at home,’ I reassured him with a smile.

‘Is this my new home?’ he asked.

‘For now, yes.’

‘But you’re not my new mummy?’

‘No, love. I’m your new foster carer. You should be meeting your new mummy and daddy in a week or so.’

He nodded again and then began unzipping his parka. Slipping it off, he handed it to me and I hung it on the hall stand with our coats. Graham returned with more bags and set them in the hall

beside the suitcases. He also handed me a folder containing the paperwork I needed.

'Do you want his bike in here or shall I take it round the back?' Graham asked me.

'In here, please. Alex can help me put it in the shed later.' It was important Alex saw where his new bike was going so he knew it was safe.

'Shall we play with some of your toys?' Adrian asked, peering into the carrier bag.

Alex gave a small nod and, picking up the bag, followed Adrian down the hall and into the living room. Paula ran after them. Graham returned with Alex's bike and some more bags, which we stacked in the hall. There was hardly any room to move. Children who've been in care a while tend to acquire many possessions – as much if not more than the average child – as carers try to compensate for the depravation of their early years before coming into care. Graham brought in the last of the bags and I was pleased to be able to close the front door against the cold winter air.

'I'll just say goodbye to Alex and then I'll be off,' Graham said, aware that it was advisable to keep his leave-taking short.

I went with him to the living room, where the children were sitting in a small circle on the floor playing with Alex's toys. Toscha was asleep on the sofa.

'Bye then, mate,' Graham said from just inside the door. 'Be good.'

Alex didn't turn or speak. 'Say goodbye to Graham,' I said.

'Bye,' Alex said, but he kept his back to Graham and I knew he was feeling rejected.

I could see Graham was a little surprised, even hurt, by Alex's reaction, perhaps expecting a hug or even tears, but it's a trauma for a child to have to move home when they're settled and Alex was stating how he felt. 'Don't worry,' I said quietly to Graham. 'He'll be fine soon.'

'Bye then, mate,' Graham said again, and then, with no response from Alex, he returned down the hall.

I went with him to see him out. 'I hope everything goes well with the pregnancy,' I said.

'Yes, thanks.' And he was gone, although I knew that the memory of Alex would stay with Graham for a long time, probably forever, just as Alex would remember them, hopefully in a positive light.

Today was all about settling Alex in and unpacking his belongings, so I hadn't planned an outing. After Graham left I checked that the children were still playing happily in the living room, then I carried Alex's suitcases up to his bedroom one at a time. I returned downstairs again for some of his bags of toys and took those up too. I would suggest to Alex that he kept some of his toys in his bedroom and some downstairs to play with, as Adrian, Paula and the other children I'd fostered did. With the hall much clearer I went into the living room and sat with the children for a while and watched them play, then Alex said he

needed to use the bathroom so I went with him upstairs to show him where it was, and waited on the landing until he'd finished. As he passed his bedroom he looked in.

'Will I be sleeping in there tonight?' he asked.

'Yes, love. I'll unpack your cases soon.'

We returned downstairs and I made the children a drink and a snack, which we had at the table, with Alex sitting in his place next to Adrian. Everyone was very quiet and on their best behaviour, but I knew from experience that it wouldn't take long before they felt more comfortable with each other. Once we'd finished eating the children wanted to continue playing in the living room. As they were playing nicely – Adrian was sharing his toys with Alex and Alex was sharing his with Adrian and Paula – I said I'd go and unpack Alex's bags and they should call for me if they needed me. I wouldn't have left all the children I'd fostered unattended on their first day, but Alex didn't have any behavioural issues and appeared responsible, as was Adrian, so I felt OK leaving them with Paula. Adrian knew to fetch me if there was a problem.

With school in the morning I wanted to be organized, so I began by unpacking the case that Graham had said contained Alex's school uniform and his casual clothes for winter. I hung them in the wardrobe and then arranged his underwear and socks in a drawer. I placed a pair of his pyjamas on his bed ready for later and hung his dressing gown on the hook on the back of his door. I took his towel and wash bag into the bathroom, where

I placed his towel next to ours on the rail and set his wash bag on the shelf within his reach. I listened on the landing for the children and could hear them still playing, so I returned to Alex's bedroom. With the first case empty I opened the second but, as Graham had said, it contained Alex's summer clothes so I closed it again and then put both cases out of the way on top of the wardrobe.

One of the bags I'd brought up contained soft toys and I arranged these on Alex's bed and on one of the shelves. Another bag contained more toys and I emptied it into the toy box. There were another couple of new toy boxes downstairs ready for the toys Alex might want to keep in the living room. Although Alex was only staying for a few weeks, it was important he felt comfortable and 'at home' and wasn't living out of cases. Satisfied his bedroom was now looking more welcoming and lived in, I took his slippers downstairs. Alex and Adrian were just coming out of the living room to take another of Alex's bags of toys through to play with.

'Before you do that let's put your bike away,' I suggested. 'It's a lovely bike – you are lucky.'

'Father Christmas bought it for me,' Alex said with a small smile.

Adrian wanted to come and help put the bike in the shed, and then of course Paula, not wanting to be left out, arrived in the hall and said she did too. We all put on our coats and shoes and Alex carefully wheeled his bike down the hall, through the kitchen,

and then Adrian helped him out with it through the back door. Our garden is long and narrow, with a patio at the top and then mainly grass to the shed at the very bottom. 'Shall I ride my bike to the shed?' Alex asked, clearly wanting to.

'Yes.'

He carefully mounted the bike and then rode confidently to the bottom of the garden, where he dismounted. We caught up. 'If the weather is good next weekend we could take the bikes to the park,' I suggested.

'Yes!' Adrian said, and Alex nodded enthusiastically.

I unlocked the shed door and Adrian helped Alex in with his bike and rested it carefully next to his and Paula's. There were other garden toys here too, stored for winter.

'My bike's got more wheels,' Paula said, referring to the stabilizers.

'Otherwise she falls off,' Adrian said with a giggle to Alex.

'Your bike had stabilizers too when you were very little and were learning to ride,' I reminded Adrian. 'I expect Alex used them as well. Many children do.'

We returned indoors and the children continued playing in the living room and sharing their toys nicely. At present, playing together and discovering each other's toys was a novelty, but I knew it was quite possible that after a while the novelty might wear off and squabbles could break out, just as in any sibling or friendship group. Experience had taught me that this was more likely with similar-aged children of the same sex, as Alex and

Adrian were. They were either inseparable and best buddies or arguing over the same toy. Generally, if there is a choice of carers then foster children are placed with carers where there aren't already children of the same age, especially if they are staying long term. But often there isn't a choice, as there is always a shortage of foster carers, and as this wasn't long term I didn't envisage too many problems.

The rest of the afternoon passed happily, and when I called everyone to dinner Alex went straight to his place at the table, far more relaxed and confident, as indeed Adrian and Paula were; everyone was thawing out. We talked as we ate and it was only natural that at some point Alex was going to mention his adoptive family, whom he had been told a bit about and was looking forward to meeting for the first time.

'I'm going to have a forever mummy and daddy,' he said. 'I used to just have a mummy, but she can't look after me.' I nodded. 'Graham says my daddy will do lots of things with me, like playing football. Do you have a daddy?' he asked Adrian.

I saw Adrian's face fall. 'Yes,' he said quietly.

'But he doesn't live with us,' I added, saving Adrian the embarrassment of having to say it.

'Daddy takes us out and buys us sweets,' Paula put in.

'That's nice,' Alex said, and began talking about the sweets he'd had for Christmas. Although Alex's question was entirely innocent, I knew Adrian struggled at moments like this. It had taken him months to admit to his best friend that his father wasn't

living with us any more, and many of his friends at school still didn't know. Adrian perceived a stigma where others did not, and while it greatly saddened me that he had been placed in this position, there was nothing I could do about it beyond supporting him as he adjusted to having an absent father, as many children now have to do.

After dinner I checked I had everything ready for the following morning. Alex's school bag was in the hall beside Adrian's, his school coat was on the hall stand with our coats, and his school shoes were paired beneath the stand with our shoes. Alex had school dinners, as did Adrian, so I didn't have to make any packed lunches. As we would need to rise early in the morning for our new school run I began the children's bath and bedtime routine just before seven o'clock that Sunday. I read Paula some stories and then, leaving the boys playing, I took her up for her bath and settled her into bed with her favourite cuddly – a velvety soft furry rabbit, which her father had bought as one of her Christmas presents.

I returned downstairs for Alex. He was used to a similar bath and bedtime routine at his previous foster carers'. 'What shall I do with all my toys?' he asked. They were strewn across the living-room floor and Adrian had begun to pack his away into the new toy boxes.

'I have just what you need,' I said with a smile, and I brought in the new toy boxes. 'You can put your toys in these and then you'll be able to take them with you when you leave us.' Which

is what I usually did so the children I fostered left me with their toys in boxes and their clothes neatly packed in cases. I only use plastic bags as a very last resort as I feel it's degrading for a child to move home with their belongings in carrier bags and bin liners.

Once the boys had packed away Alex said goodnight to Adrian and I took him upstairs, firstly to his bedroom to fetch his pyjamas. He liked the way I'd arranged his soft toys on his bed and shelf and the toys in the toy box.

'Can I take that toy box with me as well?' he asked.

'Yes.'

He was pleased. Plastic toy boxes aren't expensive but the children love having their own, and of course they help to keep the rooms tidy. I showed him where I'd put his pyjamas and dressing gown and he carried them round to the bathroom, where I ran his bath to the right temperature. I pointed out the laundry basket where he could put his dirty clothes and then, to give him some privacy, I waited on the landing while he washed and dried himself. Once he was in his pyjamas I waited while he cleaned his teeth. I wouldn't leave a child of his age to just get on with it, especially on their first night, although his self-care skills were very good. We returned round the landing to his bedroom, where I asked him, as I always do when a child first arrives, if he liked to sleep with his curtains open or closed. He said closed. Similarly I asked him if he slept with the light on or off. He said off, and with his bedroom door left open a little. Small details, but their familiarity and the comfort they give to the child help them settle

in a strange room. I told Alex that I always left a night light on the landing so he could see where he was going if he needed the toilet, but to call out to me if he woke in the night, as I didn't want him wandering around by himself. Before climbing into bed he chose one of his soft toys to sleep with – Simba from the Walt Disney film *The Lion King*. I asked him if that was his favourite, but he said he didn't have a favourite and just chose a different one each night. Once he was snuggled beneath the duvet with Simba beside him, I said goodnight and then asked him if he'd like a kiss and a hug. He shook his head shyly.

'It's OK. You don't have to,' I said with a smile. I always ask the child, otherwise it's an invasion of their personal space to suddenly be kissed or hugged by an adult if they're not comfortable with it. Some children are very tactile and want hugs and kisses as soon as they arrive, while others wait until they know me better.

'Sandy used to kiss me goodnight,' Alex said quietly. 'But I'll wait for my proper mummy to do it.' Which was very revealing. Alex had been close to his previous carers and felt their rejection. He wasn't going to risk making an emotional investment in me straight away; he was saving it for his adoptive parents, whom he could rely on. 'When will I meet her?' he asked.

'I'm not sure yet. I'll know more when I've spoken to your social worker tomorrow.'

He smiled wistfully, his little face peeping over the duvet. 'I hope it's soon.'

‘It shouldn’t be long.’ My heart went out to him. He was so looking forward to having a family of his own forever, which, of course, most of us take for granted.

Having said goodnight I came out, leaving the door slightly open, and checked on Paula. She was fast asleep, on her side and cuddled up to her soft toy rabbit. I called Adrian up for his bath, and once he was in bed I lay propped beside him on the pillow and we had our usual bedtime chat before we hugged and kissed goodnight. I came out, closing his door as he preferred, and went downstairs. I took the folder Graham had given me from the front room, made a cup of tea and then settled on the sofa in the living room next to Toscha.

With my tea within reach I opened the folder, which contained the information Graham and Sandy – as Alex’s carers – had received on Alex. On top was a handwritten note: ‘The planning meeting on Wednesday is at 11 a.m. at the council offices. Good luck. Sandy.’ I immediately fetched my diary and wrote in the time and venue. I’d have to ask a friend to collect Paula from nursery, as she finished at twelve. I knew the meeting would last at least an hour and then I had the twenty-minute or so drive from the council offices to the nursery. Setting my diary to one side, I began going through Alex’s paperwork. The most recent was on top: the minutes of Alex’s last review. Children in care have regular reviews to make sure that everything is being done as it should to help the child, and that their care plan is up to date. I glanced through the pages. They were more or less what

I would have expected, just an update on his previous review three months before. Sandy had been present at his last review, together with her support social worker, Alex's social worker, his teacher and the independent reviewing officer who chaired and minuted the meeting. Alex's care plan at the time had been to remain with Graham and Sandy until he moved to his adoptive parents', but it had all changed since then, culminating in him being placed temporarily with me. I wondered if there'd be a review while Alex was with me; it's usual when a child moves.

I turned the pages and scanned down the copy of Alex's school report – he was making good progress – then the medical and health checks, a copy of the court order that had brought him into care and miscellaneous paper work. Going further back I found a copy of the minutes of the previous review, from which I learned that Alex had had supervised contact once a week with his mother at the contact centre, but it had been stopped (three months ago) in preparation for Alex being adopted. While this was usual practice for a child who was going to be adopted – to sever any existing bond with his birth family before introducing him to his adoptive parents – it stung my heart as it always did. I could picture that traumatic and distressing scene as Alex's mother said goodbye to her son for the very last time and then had to watch him walk away, never to see him again. While I appreciated that everything would have been done to try to enable his mother to keep Alex, and that the judge would not have made the order without very good reason, it was nevertheless still

heartbreaking. How any mother ever comes to terms with losing her child or children I'll never know. Possibly many don't and are never able to rebuild their lives and move on. It made me go cold just thinking about it. Losing a child for any reason is truly the stuff of nightmares.

I continued turning the pages – more reviews and school reports. Alex had been in care a long time, so there was a lot of paperwork. Then nearer the back I found the essential information form, which included a résumé of Alex's early life and the circumstances that had brought him into care. I read that he had been badly neglected as a baby. His mother had mental-health problems and was drug dependent. Alex had never known his father – little wonder he was so looking forward to meeting his adoptive father, I thought. Alex had been in and out of care for the first three years of his life and had remained in care since then, but that wasn't the end of his unsettled life, for since being in care permanently he'd had to move home a number of times. I couldn't find the exact number or the reasons for the moves, but the foster carers' names on the minutes of the reviews kept changing, and reference was made at the review to the most recent move. Sometimes children in care have to move and it's unavoidable – for example, a child with very challenging behaviour may be placed with inexperienced carers who simply can't cope – but Alex didn't have challenging behaviour as far as I knew.

Since publishing my fostering memoirs I've received many

emails from young adults who were in care and had repeated moves. Some have lost count of the number of different foster homes they lived in, and are now trying to deal with the fallout of such an unsettled childhood: insecurity, anger, panic attacks, depression, irrational fears, lack of confidence and low self-worth are a few of the issues. True, some care leavers email me to say their experience in care was a very good one and they're grateful to their carers who loved and looked after them as their own, but not all. In a developed society like ours, which prides itself on being caring, we tend to think that if a child can't live with their natural parents then our social-care system will step in and look after them, giving them the love, care and security that their parents failed to, but sadly sometimes they are failed by the care system too. And to make matters worse for little Alex, I now read that he'd been born in prison and had spent the first six months of his life there while his mother completed her sentence. It didn't say what crime she had committed. It was all so very sad.

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