

# BISCUITS

The girls had lost their mother. She had died a few months ago, in a white hospital.

Luckily, they still had a father. But he was spending more and more time away from home. He was late more and more often, sometimes so late that they were almost asleep when he got home. Very quietly, he would slip into their bedroom and sit down on the edge of the bed.

‘I have to do this – just for a while,’ he whispered to his daughters on their pillows. ‘A big new project. You do understand, don’t you?’ The girls nodded, too sleepy to hear what exactly it was that they were supposed to understand, but they knew their father really wanted them to. Because when everything in your life has collapsed, you have to hold on to something, and work was what their father chose to hold on to.

‘But everything’s fine, isn’t it?’ he said when he briefly saw them in the morning at breakfast. ‘You’re my big, brave girls, right?’

And then the girls nodded and smiled as bravely as they could.

Greta was the older of the two, so she had to be the sensible one. Their father always gave her the money for the shopping.

‘Get some milk and vegetables, eh?’ he said, still munching, as he put his coat back on. ‘Got to get your vitamins. Oh, but you know all about that, don’t you?’

And yes, Greta did know all about that. But when life has had a hole punched in it, you have to fill that hole with something, and vitamins don’t do much to help. So, she bought wine gums with the money, and liquorice and marshmallows and fizzy pop and cookies and, if there was any money left, she also bought an apple for Hanna, her sister.

Hanna didn’t like sweets. Which was just as well, because Greta rarely left any. She put the shopping bag on the table, without even unpacking, and ate until it was empty. She often ate the apple too. And then she cried, because she had stomach ache and was full of guilt and regret now that the food was all gone, but mostly because of her mother, of course.

Hanna used to comfort her. She said that tomorrow would be better. That Dad would come home earlier, would stay longer and that the three of them would do something fun together: go to see a film or to the swimming pool or just sit at the table and play cards. And every morning, she asked her dad to do exactly that. He nodded. Yes, definitely. Just not today.

‘Soon,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow. Or next week at the latest.’

‘Really? Next week? You promise? Hand on your heart?’ Hanna took her father’s hand and got him to promise.

Because when so much of what has always been there disappears, you have to hold on to something, and Hanna held on tightly to her sister with one hand and to her father with the other. But his grip was becoming looser and looser, as if there were soapy suds on his hand, and after a few weeks of promises broken over and over again, he slipped away.

He didn’t come home. One evening. Two nights. Three.

'What if he never comes back?' wailed Greta, chewing on the last apple core. The money was gone, the bread bin was empty and all there was in the pantry was a jar of gherkins.

'Of course he's coming back.' Hanna nodded, as if she were sure of that.

'And if he doesn't?'

'Then we'll just have to come up with some way to find food.'

'Like what?'

'Something clever.'

So, the very next morning, they started swapping toys at school. The girls had a lot of nice things at home; their father had always been more generous with gifts than he was with himself. And the other children in their class were only too happy to swap.

