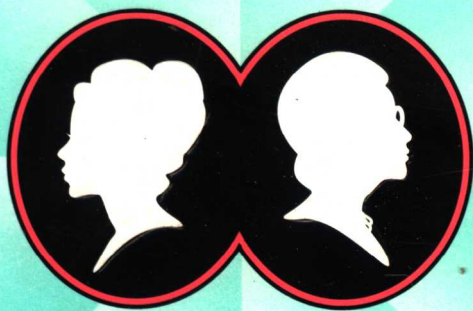


# NANCY LIVINGSTON



## TWO SISTERS

The strongest bond of all

**NANCY LIVINGSTON**

*Two Sisters*



**WARNER BOOKS**

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### *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my mother, Nancy Hewitt, who remembers how it all began.

### *Acknowledgement*

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the help and assistance given to me by Miss Jenny Parker, Senior Assistant Librarian at Middlesbrough Library, County Cleveland.

### *Apology*

To the citizens of the Northern Territories in Australia, for building a *depot* where none exists.

# Chapter One

## *Mr Right, 1920*

It was a dank November afternoon. In the chilly, rented parlour, two sisters in formal black dresses sat beside an inadequate coal fire waiting for their visitor, who was overdue.

The shabby room was above a shop. A smaller room behind was where they both slept. There was a landing between with a stove, a geyser and, hidden behind a folding screen, an old enamel tub. The arrangements were far from ideal, the elder sister, Gertie, complained endlessly. For Rose it was adequate and cheap; a refuge where they could afford to stay until they'd decided what to do.

This afternoon she was uneasy. Harold Brigg was Gertie's visitor and preparations had been lavish. On the folding card-table a starched tablecloth had been laid with the remains of their bone china tea service. One of the cups was cracked and had been carefully positioned; on no account must it be handed to today's guest. As Gertie proudly pointed out, Harold was particular, he had 'standards'.

The tiered cake-stand contained dainty triangular sandwiches, scones and sliced seed cake. Everything had a breathless precision, even the supply of coal. A much larger piece lay in the tongs ready to enliven the fire the instant the doorbell rang.

The north-east wind rattled the window and blew smoke back down the chimney. Rose shivered and coughed. 'I shall have to find a shawl. This frock's too thin - I'm chilled right through.'

'Sssh!' Gertie's eyes shone behind her spectacles; she made

as if to rise, 'Wasn't that ... Didn't I hear ...?'

'No, you didn't. It was next door's clock striking the half, not the bell.'

Gertie stiffened. 'There's no need to be rude. Anyway, you haven't a shawl that's suitable. You can't let me down this afternoon, Rose. I want everything to be - nice.'

It was Gertie's favourite word. She'd even used it when describing their parents' funeral arrangements. Relphs, the undertakers, had been 'helpful', the coffins had been 'best quality', but the funerals had been, 'very nice'.

Rose had found the experience macabre. After surviving the loss of their brother, for both parents to die of rheumatic fever within two years of the Armistice, seemed cruel. As for the way Gertie had squandered money on the burials, that had been ludicrous.

Their father's modest income had died with him; their mother had had no money of her own. After bills had been paid, the girls' sole inheritance amounted to a few hundred pounds and Gertie had insisted on lilies and freesias out of season!

It was Rose who made the decisions after that. She had found these rooms while Gertie wailed to any who would listen that they could never hold their heads up again.

'What will people say when they discover we no longer live in Clairville Road?'

'Does it matter?' Rose demanded wearily. 'We had to leave, we couldn't afford the rent, Gertie. Rooms are so much cheaper in Fleetham Street.'

It was the word 'street' which hurt; in Middlesbrough it meant those hastily erected terraces, marching obediently towards the sources of employment in the ironmasters' district, cradled in the curve of the Tees.

Fleetham Street was livelier than most. Morning and evening a noisy population hurried past on their way to the school but Gertie complained the children gave her a headache. In her opinion, living here was no better than dwelling among the working class. She yearned to be in Linthorpe or,

better still, Albert Park. If only Rose weren't so obsessed with their need to economize!

'Fleetham Street is so convenient,' Rose had pleaded, 'we'll be near the centre of town ... closer to whatever jobs we choose.' Gertie pretended to be deaf. If her sister wanted to soil her hands that was up to her, she had no intention of seeking employment. Her future was assured, it had been foretold and was part of the mystical daydream into which she retreated at the least sign of unpleasantness.

It had begun one hot midsummer at the church Fête. Their mother had paid her twopence to the 'gipsy' outside the fortune-teller's tent. Rose had spoiled it. She had recognized the woman and demanded to know, 'Why are you wearing that hanky with gold coins on your head, Mrs Birtles? Why is your face painted brown?'

Gertie refused to listen. Even though the 'fortune-teller' looked suspiciously like the woman who worked at Coopers the butcher's, Gertie, like her mother, wanted to believe in magic.

The butcher's assistant, recalling this customer usually ordered best steak, had conjured up generous visions. Untold wealth was to be Gertie's portion. For her, 'Mister Right', as plain as a pikestaff, was there in the crystal, waiting at the altar. All Gertie had to do was bide her time.

Gertie left school the very next day. Her elder daughter would remain at home from now on and learn to be a good wife, the credulous mother explained to her husband. When Mr Bossom protested, he was informed there was no need for Gertie to addle her brains.

Mercifully, Rose was permitted to addle hers. She had scowled at the butcher's assistant; her prospects had, in consequence, been far less promising.

Thanks to her brother's encouragement, Rose progressed at her studies until the outbreak of war. Now, six years later, like so many of their generation, she and Gertie were having to make the best of a world turned upside down.

She couldn't understand why Gertie fussed so over this

wretched tea today – surely she didn't still believe in that crystal ball nonsense? They had kept up the pretence while their mother was alive but the time had come to be realistic; under no circumstances could Harold Brigg be described as Mr Right.

Sadly, Gertie with her plain looks had never attracted the menfolk. Her mother discouraged the use of powder and scent: nice girls had no need of artifice according to Mrs Bossom, which was strange considering she used cosmetics herself. Hair brushed straight, wearing youthful frocks, Gertie was paraded at tennis parties and whist drives where male eyes drifted automatically to Rose. She seldom noticed, being preoccupied with thoughts of a career once she left school.

During the war years both sisters poured endless cups of tea for convalescent soldiers. Rose, never Gertie, received many requests to 'be my girl'. Jealous for her favourite daughter, their mother did not permit Rose to accept these invitations. Girls had to be properly introduced and then only to officers, Mrs Bossom announced: other ranks should be ignored.

How circumstances had changed and in such a short time. Several of their friends were employed either in offices or the more select Middlesbrough shops nowadays. One brave soul, a receptionist in a garage, risked rubbing shoulders with mechanics but she continued to survive. Such young women introduced their new friends to their parents, not the other way round as formerly.

Life was so much freer but not for Rose and Gertie. They had to find a way to earn their living and quickly, but what could Gertie do? Whenever Rose tried to discuss it, she refused to listen. Surely Harold Brigg wasn't the answer?

With a spurt of anger she said, 'If I can't afford a suitable shawl today it's because we daren't waste any more money. The sooner Harold Brigg knows how poor we are, the better, Gertie.'

He made her uneasy with his constant references to money. She gestured at the table. 'It's not as if we normally eat this sort of tea.' When Gertie ignored her, Rose tried another tack.



'Suppose he doesn't come? It wasn't a *definite* arrangement, was it?'

'Oh, yes. I made a point of repeating the date and time so that he couldn't be mistaken.'

She was throwing herself at him, thought Rose with dismay.

'I really don't think you should—' she began but Gertie grasped her wrist.

'Don't say anything, Rose,' she begged as if guessing what was in her mind. 'Harold is a decent man; just remember that.'

There were too many hopeful, single young women nowadays and far too many brothers who lay forever beside their own dear Cecil in the Flanders' mud.

Harold Brigg had not been involved in the conflict. A widower of thirty-three, tall, balding, with a mouth overfull of teeth, and a supreme conviction as to his own self-importance, he was neither a fool nor an educated man. He was evasive, however, successfully concealing facts he didn't wish the Misses Bossom to know. Rose considered him a slippery character.

How Gertie had met him was still a mystery. He wasn't one of Cecil's friends, he'd never been invited to those long-ago tennis parties — the very idea made her giggle; Harold certainly wasn't 'their sort'. Gertie refused to acknowledge this; she'd even kept his existence a secret during their parents' lifetime, finally confessing only because she'd been forced into it.

A week after their mother's funeral when she'd announced, 'I shall be visiting the lending library this evening ...' Rose had interrupted.

'There's no need. I'm going there myself, I can take your books.'

To her surprise Gertie had burst out, 'I forbid you to!'

'What?'

'You have no right,' the thin voice had trembled. 'You must *not* visit the library tonight.'

'Why on earth ...'

The hot muddled jumble had been half defiant, half imploring: Gertie had 'a follower', a 'gentleman friend' with whom she had an assignation that evening in the upstairs gallery which housed the local history section, 'where it's quiet.'

The affair progressed in fits and starts. Having met the gentleman, Rose thought she understood why: it was Gertie who was eager, Harold Brigg was merely using her sister for companionship when it suited him.

This concerned her deeply. Gertie was in such emotional thrall that should the widower throw her over the consequences would be dreadful. Rose ventured a warning now. 'You know, we may be misinterpreting the *strength* of Mr Brigg's affections, Gertie.'

'How can you say such a thing!'

If Rose had been alert to the tension in the voice, she might have held her tongue.

'It wouldn't be the end of the world if he didn't come; at least we two should have a splendid tea!' she teased. 'You aren't going to tell me *he* was the figure in the crystal - you can't pretend you actually *like* the man?'

'Rose—'

'He's so much older—'

'I forbid you to criticize—'

'I'm not criticizing, dear, but he's very sly.' Memories of dear departed friends fuelled her indignation. 'Remember how he boasted of fibbing to avoid even the chance of the call-up? I thought that was shameful.'

'Harold is as brave as the next man!'

'He must thank heaven he never had to prove it.' She'd gone too far. Gertie was oblivious to everything except achieving her objective, matrimony.

'How dare you!'

'What?' Both were so upset, neither heard the downstairs bell.

'This afternoon, Harold will propose, I'm certain of it. You

are to remain here beside me for appearance's sake. I shall accept, naturally. Our engagement will be kept short. No one bothers about mourning nowadays. Once we are united, you will have to find somewhere else to live. I cannot share a roof with anyone who *despises* my future fiancé!

Despite her shock, Rose saw the irony. After all the fuss about Fleetham Street Gertie intended to go on living here. But what if Harold didn't propose? That could be equally disastrous.

'Gertie, please don't be precipitate. I know you're anxious and your happiness matters to me, truly it does. You're far too sensible to believe that fortune-teller business,' she begged. 'Reflect for a moment. We need to know much more about Harold Brigg before you even think of ...' She caught sight of Gertie's obstinate expression and burst out, 'I refuse to believe you actually care for him!'

Tight-lipped, Gertie refused to answer.

'If you don't,' Rose persisted, 'just imagine what marriage to him will be like. Waking every morning to find that dreadful leery face on the pillow beside you—'

'Mr Harold Brigg, miss ...' Both women whipped round.

The maid stood in the doorway, clutching Harold's hat. 'I tried to cough, but neither of you was listening ...'

'Thank you, Queenie.' Rose was the first to recover. 'Good afternoon, Mr Brigg.'

'Harold, Miss Rose.'

'Harold, then.' He advanced ponderously and took Gertie's hand.

'Miss Bossom, I trust I find you well?'

'Oh, yes ... quite. Do sit down. It's all right, you can bring tea, Queenie.' Gertie was flustered; her nerves in a jangle, her nice arrangements threatened, all because of Rose.

Harold had turned to her sister. 'I trust I find you in similar good health, Miss Rose?' She inclined her head and moved nearer the window to recover.

He took possession of the hearthrug and stood feet apart, his coat-tails raised to expose his posterior to the fire. 'Inclement weather, Miss Bossom, for the time of year.' It was

said pointedly and Gertie realized her sin of omission.

'Oh, dear!' She snatched at the tongs.

'Allow me.'

Rose watched the stout shiny bottom as he bent to add the coal to the fire. Pompous and fat. He was wearing new spats; did that mean he intended to propose? The idea made her quake with both suppressed laughter and despair. Oh, Gertie, don't! It was no use, her sister wouldn't change her mind. As soon as she decently could Rose would make an excuse and escape. Harold's voice broke through her reverie.

'As I disrobed in the hallway, I couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation.'

Oh, Lord!

He had grasped his lapels. 'You appeared to be discoursing on the benefits or otherwise -' his glance at Gertie was almost coy '- of matrimony. Ah ...'

Queenie had appeared in the doorway with the teapot, a jug of hot water and hot buttered teacakes.

If Harold realized his lateness for tea, he saw no reason to apologize. In his eyes, it was perfectly proper for women to dance attendance on a man. He watched as Gertie and Rose lifted the tea-table to a more convenient position.

'The cup that cheers, ch?' Seizing a chair he waited with ill-concealed impatience for them to be seated so that he could do likewise.

He was full of purpose for he had indeed come to propose. Rose's presence was no impediment. She could learn the advantages the second Mrs Brigg would enjoy. Afterwards, she and her sister would no doubt marvel over Gertrude's good fortune.

He was confident Miss Bossom would accept but intended she should have the opportunity to show gratitude first. She wasn't his first choice; he had tried to find a female more to his liking. Indeed, on first meeting Rose he'd felt aggrieved; she was so much more attractive, so womanly. He cursed fate that had led him to bump into Gertrude rather than her sister at the bus terminus.

There was, however, a coolness in Rose's manner, a disdainful smile when listening to his carefully prepared witticisms, which he found most annoying. At least Gertrude understood when to laugh; given time, she could be moulded into a suitable wife.

Harold preferred not to make a move until he had discovered the precise extent of Miss Bossom's fortune but that information proved elusive. Frustrated by her secretiveness, he'd been at the point of ending their acquaintance when a letter arrived from a certain Miss Ruby Winnot of Haverton Hill which changed the situation dramatically.

Harold had known Ruby briefly a month or two ago. She referred to these occasions and the consequence which had ensued. As well as describing the wrath of her large, coal-miner brothers, her final sentence contained a threat: Miss Winnot wanted a wedding ring; she was not prepared to wait.

Harold abhorred blackmail. The need for a wife was obviously much more urgent but she would be of *his* choosing. Wives gave protection. In the eyes of the Miss Winnots of this world, they were permanent, immovable objects.

He hadn't mentioned Ruby's existence to Gertrude Bossom. There was no necessity. The two young women were unlikely to meet; indeed, he intended to ensure they never did.

Unattractive though Gertrude was, she was eminently suitable. Her respectability was beyond reproach. Even more important, from various hints dropped by her, he truly believed she had money.

On the death of his first wife, her entire dowry had reverted to a family trust. He had learned the sad fact at her funeral and had vowed he wouldn't be deprived a second time. Until the arrival of Miss Winnot's letter he had been doing his utmost to discover the circumstances governing Gertrude's wealth. It was most annoying to be forced to proceed before his researches were complete.

He'd questioned her many times but, to his chagrin, he'd learned precisely nothing. Miss Bossom could, when she

chose, be extremely obstinate. As to why she and Rose had left the family home, Fleetham Street was, she assured him airily, a temporary measure; Rose was nervous of overspending.

'I had to agree, Harold. Rose is only twenty – she's the only family I have. If living here convinces her we are being sensible, so be it.' He wasn't entirely convinced but a frugal outlook was to be encouraged, especially in a female.

Faced with the need to act, he'd seriously considered switching to Rose. He'd done sums on scraps of paper but, being the younger daughter, she was unlikely to have inherited much of the fortune. Reluctantly, he'd tossed the scraps onto the fire: sacrifices had to be made; Gertrude was the only rational choice.

Her eagerness to be married had daunted him before but today that was forgiven. Thank heaven for such keenness! With luck, he could place the announcement in Monday's *Gazette*, then let Miss Winnot and her brothers do their worst!

He caught sight of the skinny body and spectacles and his mind was filled with enticing images of Ruby. He banished them sternly, he must concentrate on the business in hand. Once Gertrude's promise was obtained, only then would he be safe. But even if he had to forgo the pleasure of Ruby's charms, at least his attractive sister-in-law would be within reach. It was sufficient consolation for him to bestow a smile on the object of his affections.

Gertie tried to still the beating of her heart and preside as a proper hostess should.

'Thank you, Queenie.' When the door closed behind the maid, she asked genteelly, 'With milk and sugar, Harold?'

He raised exaggerated eyebrows. 'Does the maid not remain to wait at table?'

'Er, no.' They weren't entitled to Queenie's services but Gertie kept silent.

It was Rose who explained. 'Queenie is Mrs Potter's servant and kindly agreed to make tea for us this afternoon but we do not pay her wages. We are lodgers and cannot make demands on her.'

Harold sipped, cocking his little finger skywards. 'In my opinion it is most important, after the upheavals we have endured since the war, to maintain *proper standards*, especially in the home. I would expect it in any establishment of mine.'

'Cucumber sandwich?' offered Gertie.

Rose put down her cup. 'I don't think I understand,' she said slowly. 'We certainly live much more simply since Father and Mother died but our *standards* haven't changed, only our circumstances.'

'Circumstances. Quite,' Harold said vaguely. 'No doubt a large house ... two young females ...'

'And a complete lack of resources. We must both seek employment as there's so little money left—'

'Rose, please!' Gertie said hastily, 'Harold doesn't want to hear about that.'

'What I wanted to explain, Gertie, is that even if we cannot afford servants, standards which are important to us, such as our self-respect, those haven't changed at all.'

An alarm bell had rung for Harold Brigg. 'Only a little — money?' he echoed, his nose twitching.

'Very little,' Rose was emphatic. Gertie managed to keep her voice steady.

'My sister means — very little — compared to what we had when Father was alive. We have been brought up not to — to be *profligate*.'

'Ah ...'

Rose was astonished; that sounded like deception.

'But I agree with my sister,' Gertie continued quickly, 'neither of us finds it demeaning to practise life's little economies. Dear me, no!' She laughed affectedly. 'Of course, things were very different when we lived in Clairville Road. What a pity you never met Father, Harold.'

He dabbed at his mouth. 'A great pity.'

Rose was silent. In her opinion, Harold wouldn't have been invited; neither Cecil nor her father tolerated fools.

'To return to the present,' Harold was heavily coy, 'and what I believe I overheard ... hmm?' He looked at Rose. Her

cheeks began to redden. 'Were you not trying to *dissuade* your sister, Miss Rose? I understand your reasons, indeed I do. Your delicate sensibility – particularly after the loss of your parents – must assume that I am come to rob you of your dearest possession. Let me assuage that fear.'

He stuffed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth and reached for a scone. Rose watched fascinated as morsels of bread and cucumber poked between the crowded, champing teeth.

'It was always my intention ... to offer not only my hand and heart to you, Miss Bossom ... but shelter beneath our roof to you, Miss Rose.'

Gertie made an noise somewhat between a gasp and a squeak. Was this her proposal at last? If so, why wasn't Harold addressing *her*?

Harold waited for Rose to exhibit delight. He even debated whether or not to help himself to seed cake but decided he'd better bring matters to a conclusion first.

'Gertrude has already told me of your intentions to seek employment. Let me dissuade you from that. Your place is here, beside your sister.'

Rose was astonished. 'Doing – what?' she asked.

'I'm not sure I understand'

'How am I to occupy my time, Mr Brigg?'

'Harold, please.' She inclined her head.

'Harold, then. I cannot sit twiddling my thumbs. I need employment, both to occupy my mind as well as to earn a living. Gertie and I cannot continue using up our capital ... whatever she may decide to do about – matrimony,' Rose finished lamely.

There, she thought, at least I've provided Gertie with a way to escape. Her sister refused to meet her eye. As for Harold, this was another disturbing phrase: 'Using up capital'? What did the girl mean? It couldn't cost more than a few shillings a week to live here.

He pressed on. 'As to how you would occupy yourself, Miss Rose, surely that is obvious? You will assist your sister with



housewifely duties. In return for a home, without the worry of earning a living, no doubt you would wish to express your gratitude in many helpful little ways?"

I'm to be a replacement for Queenie, Rose realized. He wants Gertie to have a servant – the cheek of it! He'll be ordering me to warm his slippers next.

Harold waited confidently. Gertie stared hard at the table. The pause grew painful. Harold, unwisely, began to expound.

'I am accustomed to females practising such courtesies about the house. At home with my late, dear mother; throughout married life with the first Mrs Brigg, I never so much as reached for the teapot because there was always someone, ready and willing ...'

'Another cup?' asked Gertie, hastily.

'Thank you.' As she began to pour he said, 'Tea first, Miss Bossom. It is the *correct* way, after all,' and Gertie's hand shook. She had failed; the first social occasion with Harold and she had performed incorrectly!

The sight of those golden droplets spilling into the saucer ignited Rose. 'What exactly is your background, Harold? We know very little about you. Were you born in Middlesbrough?' He was uncharacteristically silent. Having been born in Smeaton Street, a fact he normally managed to gloss over, as who would not, he was surprised by Rose's bald approach. Frustrated by the lack of response, she went on sarcastically, 'Gertie has obviously told you a great deal about us.'

'Rose!' begged Gertie.

'No doubt she also told you of the servants we had when Father was alive. There was cook, our old nurse and a girl who came in to do the rough twice a week. Then Father took ill and without his salary to support them, they all had to go. Now Gertie and I see to everything.'

'Do be quiet!' her sister whispered urgently.

'Heavens, why shouldn't we tell him? We're capable and healthy, we don't need anyone else to wait on us. However ...' Rose looked at Harold pointedly. 'While we might be content to wait on *each other*, I fail to understand why I should become