



**BUS  
STOP  
BABY**



Also by Fleur Hitchcock

**The *Shrunk!* Adventures**

*Shrunk!*

*Shrunk! Mayhem & Meteorites*

*Shrunk! Ghosts on Board*

*Sunk!*

and

*The Trouble with Mummies*

*The Yoghurt Plot*





# BUS STOP BABY

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For Jane and Ellen, whose story is not the same







## Author Note

Foundlings have always fascinated me. I think, as a small child, I confused them with changelings, and thought that they had something to do with the fairies. They are all children who arrive on doorsteps, from nowhere. Often found at night, often only found by the sound of their cry. It seemed romantic.

I started to collect their stories.

A man I met claimed to have been found on the doorstep of the village policeman on Christmas day. The policeman and his wife went on to bring him up.

The story of a baby found in a phone box – again, at Christmas.

A child left in the crib of a church.

And then I came across all the tales of children from the Foundling Museum. Stories of people who sought birth mothers, and made lives with adoptive families. Many hundreds of them, lost and found.

But I'd always wondered what it would be like to find a foundling. Would you, in some way, become a



part of that child's life? Would you, just for a moment,  
become a kind of parent?

And so Amy came along.



The cloth was only a dishcloth and the girl was only young as she dabbed gently at the little creature on the straw bale. She rinsed the cloth in the pail of warm water. Water she'd tested with her elbow like she knew she should, even though she had no idea what it ought to feel like.

'There now,' she said, washing away the blood and the strange white stuff that no one had ever mentioned.

'There now.'

She laid the baby on a towel, it squealed but it didn't scream, and she wondered when it would be hungry.

It should last a little while before they had to try feeding it.

She plunged her hands into the bucket; a piece of straw floated free and water splashed over the sides, wetting the baby, wetting the towel. She decided that her attempts at washing were enough, although there was still a stubborn patch on the baby's head. An



apple-shaped patch that perhaps was a birthmark, or perhaps a mark of birth. Whatever, she couldn't shift it. She rubbed the damp from the baby's skin, picked the baby up, wrapped it another towel and kissed it.

‘Good luck little girl,’ she said as brightly as she could. ‘Good luck.’



# Chapter 1

The minibus drops us at the edge of the village.

Eden gets off first and I follow, my feet crunching frozen grass at the side of the road.

‘Night, girls,’ says the driver, closing the door behind us. He checks his mirror and the minibus pulls away down the lane into the darkness. The red tail-lights bounce along the lane, wink in and out of hedgerows and then vanish.

Above me, the sky is indigo. Clean, with a slim crescent moon hanging between the telephone wires. A crow flies across the moon, heading for a distant group of trees. Stillness creeps over the landscape and I stay, letting the cold sink in, watching the dark, listening to the quiet. My back turned towards the village and its points of light.

After all, I’m in no hurry to get home.

I hear Eden cross the road behind me and someone in the village opening and closing a door.

A cat squeals.



There's a whiff of woodsmoke and I wonder if Dad's already lit our fire. I imagine him glancing at the clock, stopping work, putting on the kettle, and I think for the millionth time about today at school and how he's going to react when I tell him that my brand-new purse has gone. Not only the purse but the brand-new money inside it.

'Amy? Come on,' says Eden from the other side of the road. She pulls her blazer lapels over her chest. 'Don't hang about, it's freezing.'

'I know,' I say. 'I was just –'

'You're going to have to tell him sometime,' she says. She turns her back on me and stomps up the lane towards home. Beyond her, a street lamp flicks on, casting thick yellow light over the lane. It actually makes the village seem colder.

Taking a last look at the little moon hanging in the telephone lines I follow Eden, my bag heavy, my shoes uncomfortable. She's right. I am going to have to tell him. Sooner or later.

The walls along the lane radiate intense cold. The stone is already damp with ice. Kicking at the kerb I wander off the lane, uphill, into the village square. Once again I try to remember all the people near me in the changing room. But I keep coming back to the



same person. The only one with a chance to slip their hand in my bag. The only one with a reason.

Isobel.

My friend. My best friend.

Eden's heels ring on the pavement, echoing from the houses, and something else – probably that cat again – mews above us.

Eden stops and turns. Waits for me.

A car slips out of the little street called The Shambles, halfway up the square, and heads down towards the lane we've just walked up from. The driver doesn't switch the headlights on until they're nearly at the bottom of the hill, and the narrow lane seems to catch them by surprise because they brake suddenly, their rear lights washing the church crimson.

I watch the car until it disappears. But I'm not thinking about it. I'm thinking about PE and purses and best friends.

'It's going to kill Dad,' I say.

'It is,' replies Eden. 'He'll be really disappointed.'

'Thanks for your support,' I say.

'Pleasure,' she says.

A huge tractor turns off the main road and grinds past us up the hill. The roar of the engine bounces around the square, so loud we can't hear our footsteps.



We stomp faster, keeping pace, past the church on our left, the empty shop, the concrete bus shelter and the village hall on our right until the tractor driver finally passes us and accelerates away towards The Tynning.

On the crest of the hill, the pub lights up, its *Green Man* sign only just greener than the sky above it. We walk slowly towards it, our breathing the loudest sound except . . .

‘Can you hear that cat?’ I say. ‘Or is it a seagull?’

Eden half turns, listening. ‘Seagull. Sounds like it’s trapped.’

We wait, our eyes and ears scanning the village. The noise is coming from behind us. ‘But we haven’t walked past it,’ I say. ‘I would have noticed.’

‘It’s probably in somebody’s house.’

‘I’m going to see,’ I say.

‘I’ll go home without you,’ warns Eden. But she stays put at the top of the hill.

Dumping my bag, I walk slowly back down the square towards the village hall. The windows are dark. I stop outside, listening to the village. A cow lows in the distance. A crow calls from the church tower. I listen for the little cry and it comes again, but from somewhere really close. I look up at the windows of



the houses, but they all look closed up, cosy, with curtains drawn.

‘Waaaaaaaaaaaa.’ The sound is clear but faint. Less like a cat or a gull, more like a lamb. And it’s coming from somewhere in the square.

‘It’s right here,’ I say.

‘C’mon, Amy – I need a wee. I really want to go home,’ Eden calls from the top of the hill.

‘Go, then,’ I say, listening for the cry again. It seems to be at ground level. To my left.

‘Waaa.’

The bus shelter. It has to be the bus shelter.

Standing by the small building, I peer in through one of the glassless windows. It’s dark in there although a stretched rectangle of street light reaches across the floor towards the bench at the back. It catches on the names scratched in the brown paint and it catches on a battered cardboard box lying on the stone floor.

I walk around to stand in the entrance. Half of the box is now in my shadow, and I notice the ghost smells that hang around the bus stop. Ice-cold wee and cigarettes.

Eden’s heels clatter on the paving behind me. ‘What is it?’ she pants.

‘Only that box.’



We both stare at the box. It's trembling. Just a little.

'What's in it?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'A puppy or something?'

'Open it.'

I hesitate.

'Go on, I doubt it'll bite,' she says, her breath hot on the back of my neck. I reach forward and pull back the flap, expecting a little fluffy thing to leap out.

But it doesn't.

We crane to look inside. Something small and pale flails at the light.

A tiny hand.

'Oh God,' says Eden, standing back. 'It's a baby. Amy, you've found a baby.'