

JOSEPHINE COX

with GILLY MIDDLETON

A DAUGHTER'S SECRET



Must she bear her
burden alone?



A Daughter's Secret

A
Josephine Cox
Novel
with Gilly Middleton



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CHAPTER ONE

1912

D AISY FARLOWE WAS really starting to hate her job. She disliked it so much that the only thing worse, she thought, would be to have no job at all, and therefore no wage. What on earth had possessed her to choose to work at the laundry run by that harriidan Mrs Chapman, when she could have been at the mill with her best friend, Betty? Yes, there wouldn't have been time to have a giggle with Betty when the work was so relentless – and Betty was often pale with exhaustion by the end of the week, and speaking very loudly, a habit born of working in a place so noisy – but at least Daisy wouldn't have been on her own, as she was at the laundry, and therefore the only person to field Bertha Chapman's ill temper and meanness.

Daisy had thought that taking the laundry job would bring her more independence than working at the mill, where hundreds of people were employed, and would make of her something different, special – literally, *not* run-of-the-mill. So she had ignored Mrs Chapman's perpetually dissatisfied face and bad-mouthing of her customers at the outset, naïvely failing to realise that soon the bad temper and disparaging remarks would be aimed at Daisy herself. Now she knew better.

Before starting at the laundry, Daisy had worked in a fishmonger's shop, where it had been cold, and the smell of fish hung about her clothes and her hair. She had not liked the staring sightless eyes of the dead creatures, either – scaly, muscular and slippery on the slab. She wasn't interested in fish, except battered and fried, eaten hot from a newspaper, and soon her attitude to the job had become so apparent that the fishmonger had asked her to leave.

Before that, there had been an ill-suited and short-lived position as a tea lady in an office. Everyone there had seemed very old – at least thirty – and

they were all men, who talked among themselves and mostly ignored Daisy. Then one day, one of them had slapped her bottom as she went by his desk, and she'd poured his tea over his head in retaliation. It had been Daisy who had been asked to leave.

Daisy's mother had tried to think of a role for her in the tiny millinery business she owned, *Louisa Farlowe – Hats*, but with Louisa employing the ever-faithful Gertie Pullinger as her assistant, and the business being so very small, there was no role for Daisy.

'It's not as if I really want to sell old-fashioned-looking hats to old ladies anyway,' Daisy said, when Louisa told her how sorry she was not to have room for her.

'Less of the old-fashioned, if you please,' said Louisa, although mildly. She knew her market, and was proud of running her own business. Daisy was proud of her mother, too: that she was good at what she did; that she had soldiered on so bravely when Dad had died although her heart was clearly broken; that she was, and always had been, the backbone of the family, the best mother in the world.

And now Daisy worked for Mrs Chapman, with her sharp tongue, a face on her as if she'd been drinking vinegar, and the penny-pinching conviction that clothes could be washed clean in lukewarm water, using the cheapest washing soda and the end of an ancient bar of soap. Perhaps it was time to think about working elsewhere ...

Still, home now, and the prospect of a cosy evening with Mum, just the two of them, chatting about their work, playing Snap, or perhaps browsing one of the popular fashion newspapers Louisa bought for millinery inspiration. Daisy's sister, Rose, was now working in Yorkshire as a cook in what sounded like a smart house. They both missed her, of course; nevertheless these weekday evenings, with just Daisy and Mum, were happy times. Their needs were modest, they had enough to get by and, most importantly, they had each other.

Daisy let herself into the little terraced house in Shallow Street. She kicked off her boots, hung up her coat and knitted beret and went to put the kettle on.

There was the sound of Louisa's key now.

'Hello, Mum. Just making a pot of tea. Shall I get slicing that black pudding?'

There was no answer.

‘Mum?’

Daisy went out into the tiny hallway, no more than a narrow passageway, and saw her mother standing with one hand to her brow as if her head was full of worrying thoughts, battering her for attention, and she had neither heard nor seen Daisy.

‘Mum?’

Immediately Louisa let her hand fall and summoned the bright smile her daughters loved.

‘You all right, Mum?’

‘Yes ... yes, of course. Just tired, love. Sorry, I was miles away. Now, I’ll just get my hands washed and we’ll get on with doing our tea ...’

They cooked and ate, although Louisa wasn’t very hungry and gave Daisy most of her potatoes. Then they washed up together, and all seemed normal. But when Louisa had gone to set up a card game in the little sitting room at the front of the house, and Daisy came in quietly with cups of tea, she found her mother gazing out of the window, the same anxious look on her face as before.

‘Mum, what’s the matter? Is summat wrong at the shop?’

‘No, flower. The shop’s fine.’ She made a clear effort to rally. ‘Gertie sends her love, as she does every day.’

‘Mine to her in return. So there’s nowt wrong?’

‘No, I told you, love. Everything’s all right.’

The next day, all was as usual, and Daisy thought her mother had just felt tired. The days passed and she put that evening out of her mind.

Daisy herself was all energy, waging a low-level conflict with Bertha Chapman, deliberately disobeying her in ways that could be explained as misunderstandings. It added interest and excitement to the horrible task of washing other people’s dirty clothes.

One evening the following week, there was an unexpected knock at the front door of 26 Shallow Street.

‘You’re not expecting anyone, are you, Mum?’ said Daisy, putting down the teacloth and going to answer it.

‘Oh, wait, love ...’ Louisa began, still washing the last of the dishes, but it was too late for her to say more.

‘Uncle Alec!’ said Daisy, unwelcomingly, finding Louisa’s brother looming on the doorstep.

‘Hello, Daisy.’

They stood facing each other for a few seconds, neither budging.

‘Er, is your mum in? Can I come in?’

‘If you must,’ Daisy murmured under her breath, and stood aside to let the big man in, where he seemed to get even bigger in the tiny space.

Louisa came out of the kitchen. ‘Alec,’ she said, deadpan.

‘Thought I’d just come by and see how you are. See, I’m wearing that cap you sold me the other week.’

He pulled off his flat cap as he said this and flourished it awkwardly.

Daisy’s thoughts were whirring now. Mum hadn’t mentioned Uncle Alec had been to the shop. She herself hadn’t seen her uncle since her father’s funeral, over a year ago, and not for a long time before that.

Daisy decided to stick close to her mother. Uncle Alec was not among Rose and Daisy’s favourite relatives. Louisa had this slightly older brother and three much older sisters. The three sisters were not close to their younger siblings, due to the ten and more years’ gap between their ages, so that they had been brought up almost like two separate families. There had been two more children to fill this gap at one time, but they had not lived beyond infancy. Louisa’s daughters had heard various tales of Alec and Louisa’s shared childhood, and it was clear that Alec had not been a good friend to his little sister, but rather bullying and unkind.

Perhaps he had been at the shop because he needed a new cap, but somehow Daisy doubted that was the beginning and end of the matter. And why was he here now? He must know Louisa wouldn’t welcome a visit from him.

But Daisy’s plan to assess this visit was immediately thwarted.

‘I could do with a cup of tea, Lou,’ said Alec, going into the front room uninvited and sitting on the sofa.

‘Daisy, would you go and make us a pot of tea, please?’ Louisa asked.

‘Well, I just ...’

‘Please.’

Daisy went to do as she was told. She could hardly do otherwise. She left the sitting-room door open so she could eavesdrop from the kitchen, but Alec got up and pushed it to behind her.

So, Daisy decided, he’d evidently come for a specific purpose, not for a social call – as if he’d be making a social call here anyway, unless he’d changed his ways dramatically.

When she brought in the cups of tea on a tray, Louisa was looking anxious. Alec was hard-faced and didn't even acknowledge the tea he'd asked for.

Daisy closed the door gently behind her, then pressed her ear to it. Blast and bother, she couldn't hear a thing! Still, at least Alec wasn't shouting.

Of course, as soon as her uncle had left, Daisy asked what was going on.

'Nowt overmuch, flower,' said Louisa.

'But he must have come for summat.'

'He ... he asked to borrow a couple of bob to tide him over, that's all.'

'But why would he think you had two bob to spare?'

Louisa looked a little evasive then. 'Ah, you know what folk are like – always thinking others have more than them.'

'No, I don't know that, Mum,' said Daisy.

'Well, whether you do or you don't, it's true,' said Louisa. 'Anyway, he says he'll pay it back so it makes little difference. So, just forget about it, love.' She carefully looked into Daisy's face until Daisy nodded in agreement.

Louisa was a bit quiet for two or three days after her brother's visit. Daisy could understand that. Uncle Alec wore an air of menace, of a tough and single-minded focus on himself and his needs. He wasn't outward-looking; he was not a man to spread joy in his encounters.

Louisa couldn't easily spare two shillings, and Daisy noticed her mother bought a little less food for them that week, but served Daisy the same, herself the smaller portion.

Uncle Alec did not come round to pay the money back, but then he didn't come to borrow any more either, so after a week or so everything was as it had been, and Daisy stopped thinking about her uncle.

The weeks passed and the increasingly dark days of autumn lowered even Daisy's spirits. It was then that she started to notice how often Louisa wasn't quite managing to eat her tea. She always had some ready excuse, but she was growing thinner, and her pretty face was no longer quite so bonny, so carefree. She had developed a little cough, which had come on so gradually that it was hardly noticeable, until Daisy did notice, and then she heard it often. Folk did develop coughs when the days grew damp and the sooty air clung around everyone's throats, but Louisa worked in a clean environment, and a cough that lasted this long was something new to her.

Louisa shrugged off Daisy's concern. 'It takes a lot out of you, running your own business, you know, flower,' she said one day, impatient at Daisy's questions. Yet when Daisy had gone home via the hat shop to check how things were there, she found it calm and cheerful, and Mum and Mrs Pullinger working harmoniously together, just as usual.

Louisa was becoming forgetful, too. One time she bought only some of the meat and cheese she'd set out to get from the market – 'Never mind, we'll just have to have extra bread, Daisy.' But she herself had had nothing extra, Daisy noticed. She was clumsy, too, and broke a clock she was particularly fond of. Daisy was out at the time but saw it had gone – beyond repair and the pieces in the dustbin, Louisa said.

Uncle Alec turned up at the house again, wanting another private conversation with Louisa.

'Did he bring the money he owes you from before?' asked Daisy, when he had gone.

'He ... he forgot, love. I reminded him, though, and he says he'll bring it next time.'

Next time. That sounds like bad news.

It gave Daisy no satisfaction to be proved right. Her uncle Alec came to visit again the following week, and that time Louisa reported that he'd said he was a bit short of cash and wasn't able to pay her back. 'But he will as soon as he can. He did say so.'

Daisy didn't believe this, and she noticed that Louisa's hands were gripped together so tightly that her knuckles were white with the tension, so Daisy thought she didn't believe it either.

One evening soon after that, Daisy, going into Louisa's bedroom with some clean clothes, saw that the room looked different from usual. She peered around, trying to pin down the reason for the empty look, and soon saw that the walls were missing their framed pictures. One had been a cross-stitch sampler, an alphabet worked by Grandma Gimson in her childhood, the stitches almost miraculously intricate, with 'Norah Hargreaves 1845' worked along the bottom row. The other was an engraving of a painting: *The Light of the World*, which Daisy had been told was very famous and which she liked because the figure of Jesus looked so kind and resembled her father a little bit. Where on earth could they have gone?

Daisy thudded down the stairs and into the sitting room, where Louisa was totting up takings for the shop in a big notebook.

‘Mum, where are the pictures from your room: Grandma’s stitching and Jesus?’

‘Oh, love, they’d been there for so long they were becoming faded and old looking. I got rid of them.’

‘Got rid ... ?’ Daisy was speechless for a moment.

This was a first. People like the Farlowes didn’t get rid of things they liked on a whim, just because they were starting to show their age. Especially Grandma’s beautiful embroidery; especially a picture of Jesus. It was not that the Farlowes were churchgoers or anything, but some things were just embedded in your culture as precious, sacred.

‘Yes,’ snapped Louisa. ‘They were mine to do with as I like, Daisy, and I decided I’d looked at them long enough.’

‘But, Mum—’

‘So, please, let that be an end to it.’ She looked hard at Daisy, who decided there was no point pursuing the matter, dissatisfied though she was. She went upstairs – to sort out the rest of the clean clothes, she said – and lay down on her bed, thinking.

There was something wrong, and it was plainly to do with Uncle Alec’s visits. She and her mother had been happy until he had turned up, and now Mum was tense and snappy, on edge every time anyone knocked on the door. If Alec had borrowed a couple of shillings the first time he’d visited, it was likely that, as he hadn’t paid those back, he had borrowed a couple more the second time, and the third. Why else had he come here? But Mum was pretending to keep up a brave front and shrug off any problems – except that she wasn’t.

It was then that Daisy decided to do something that was going to cost her a deal of effort and probably the rest of this Monday evening. She was going to write a letter and ask for help.

CHAPTER TWO

THERE WASN'T TIME to read the letter now. Rose pushed the envelope, addressed to her in her sister's untidy handwriting, down into the deep patch pocket of her pinafore and decided to put it out of her mind for the time being. Whatever Daisy had written about, this was not the moment to find out. Mrs Metcalfe's soft-poached eggs must be timed to the second, and Mr Metcalfe's kippers served piping hot.

Still, a letter from Daisy: a first. Rose hoped there wasn't anything wrong at home, Daisy or their mother ill. But no, Daisy had written, which Rose knew would have cost her some effort, so at least *she* must be well.

'You all right, Rose?' asked Mary, who had handed Rose her post. 'This tray ready to go up?'

'Yes, thank you, Mary,' Rose summoned a smile for the tall house-parlourmaid. 'Yes, to both questions.' She got on with slotting neat, even triangles of toast into a silver rack.

But as she lifted Mr Metcalfe's kippers into a warmed serving dish, her mind was back on the letter. Maybe it was good news. Perhaps Daisy had a new job, or ... or was getting married. Oh, don't be daft, Rose told herself, even as she was imagining Daisy in cream-coloured lace, her pretty dark hair dressed with a coronet of flowers. At just sixteen, Daisy needed a little polish before she was ready for life ... before any man would want to take her on, or before she had the gumption to choose the right man. She wasn't yet the finished article. She needed ... well, a whole different attitude, really. Their parents had brought up their daughters nicely, but Daisy liked to go her own way.

Anyway, Rose decided, slowing her hand to drain the eggs, whatever news the letter contained, it would have to wait.

The morning progressed with Rose receiving Mrs Metcalfe's instructions for the food she would like to have served later, then taking in deliveries from suppliers at the back door and cooking for the household. Soon, the kitchen window, which overlooked the former stable yard, with what was

now the garage on the far side, was steamed up, obscuring the view of the wet November day.

Nonetheless, Hannah, the kitchen maid, was gazing through the condensation on the scullery window, focusing on nothing, when Rose went to retrieve some utensils she needed and found they were still to be washed. Really, Hannah was sometimes more trouble than she was worth. But she was only twelve – barely out of school – so Rose knew she couldn't expect too much of her. Hannah hadn't been dealt an advantageous hand so far as looks or brains went. She was so skinny she was hard to notice sideways on, and she must definitely have been absent the day they gave out initiative, although at the front of the queue for clumsiness ... Rose chided herself for being unkind. Hannah was polite and honest, although she was a daydreamer. But then Rose understood all about daydreaming and she couldn't condemn the child for her wandering mind, provided she got her work done in time.

After lunch, Rose set to work baking savouries and decorating the cakes she'd made earlier. She thought of the envelope, still in her pocket, and almost against her will her hand made a furtive dive to retrieve it. But immediately she noticed it was time to take the sausage rolls out of the oven, and the moment was lost. Mrs Metcalfe had invited her mother and another relative to tea and had asked Rose to make a sumptuous spread, including 'those sweet little bird things you did last time, as my mother particularly likes them'.

Bird things? Oh, that'll be butterfly cakes.

Rose took the tray of finished cakes through to the cool of the larder and sat them next to a rack of tiny chocolate eclairs. The identical rows looked like a window display in a cake shop, or a smart tearoom. Mary often said that people would pay good money for Rose's fancy cakes ...

Rose allowed herself a few moments' daydreaming of her very own pretty tearoom, with a counter display of dozens of little cakes arranged on towering three-tier stands, and, under glass domes, vast Victoria sponges sandwiched with lemon curd or with raspberry jam and cream, as light and deep as fairy mattresses ...

It would be easy for Rose to get lost in these happy thoughts, to let her mind start wandering to the style of chairs she'd choose, or the colour of the waitresses' dresses, and whole minutes would just disappear if she didn't pull herself back to reality sharpish. This afternoon, if Mrs Metcalfe – and

her redoubtable mother – were pleased, that would be sufficient. Rose had been the cook for the Metcalfes at Elizabeth House for just two months, and was conscious of always striving hard to impress her employers, to repay their faith in choosing to employ a woman of just twenty-two, instead of someone older and more experienced.

Back in the kitchen, Rose noticed Hannah hovering aimlessly.

‘C’mon, Hannah, get that kettle on while I make the sandwiches. We’ve no time to be staring into space.’ Which was exactly what she had been doing herself just now, of course.

‘Yes, Cook.’

Terry came in, shrugging on his jacket in readiness to answer the front doorbell. Tall and straight-backed, with neat dark hair, he looked good in that striped waistcoat. He knew he did, too, with his practised smile and confident manner. A little forward for a footman, some might say, but Mr Metcalfe valued Terry very highly ... according to Terry himself.

‘Everything will be ready to take through as soon as the ladies arrive, Terry,’ said Rose.

‘I gather it’s Mrs M’s mother this afternoon, and some cousin or other,’ Terry informed her importantly.

‘Yes, tea for three,’ nodded Rose, ‘but I’ve made plenty.’

‘Let’s hope there’s summat left over, then,’ said Terry, grinning. ‘I’m hoping to have a taste of one of your eclairs.’

The way he said it, it sounded somehow rude. And wasn’t that the hint of a saucy wink? This was not the first, either. Rose decided it was best just to ignore him. He’d soon realise she was not in the least bit interested in, or embarrassed by, his lewdness. She simply got on with cutting bread and pretended she hadn’t heard.

Mrs Langdale, Mrs Metcalfe’s mother, would be pleased to see her daughter presiding over a generous tea table. It was unclear how the cousin fitted in, but Emma Metcalfe was unfailingly kind to everyone: generous to her family, and her friends, judging by the number who came to call, and considerate to her servants. She had been married to Desmond Metcalfe, who owned a couple of high-quality stationery shops in Leeds, for two years, and was his second wife, his first having died a few years ago of appendicitis. So far there was no sign of the marriage being blessed with a baby Metcalfe, and Emma had inherited no stepchildren, but she was only in her twenties, many years younger than Desmond, so there was time yet.

The front doorbell rang and Terry hurried away to answer it, passing Mary in the kitchen doorway.

‘Hurry up with that teapot, Hannah,’ Mary ordered, ‘and don’t you dare slop owt over my clean apron.’

Hannah slowly and unsteadily lowered the teapot onto the first tray while Rose arranged cucumber sandwiches on a china plate. With the sausage rolls and some tiny cheesy biscuits, this was a sumptuous afternoon tea indeed.

After the tea had gone upstairs, Rose reached into her pinafore pocket for her handkerchief and found the letter from her sister. The effort of this afternoon’s work had almost put it out of her mind, but now she felt a little nag of anxiety all over again.

She was just about to slit open the envelope with a knife when Hannah dropped the butter dish, which shattered, sending butter, softened in the heat of the kitchen, spattering across the floor.

She let out a loud wail. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, Cook. I’m really sorry. I won’t do it again ...’

‘Never mind, Hannah,’ Rose told the tearful girl, ‘just hurry up and get the mop and a bucket of hot soapy water while I pick up these bits of pot and the worst of the butter. No, don’t tread in it! Be careful where you put your feet until you’ve cleaned up.’

Rose pocketed her letter again with a sigh, and got down on her knees with a spread of old newspaper in which to gather up the debris.

‘Looking lovely this afternoon, Hannah,’ Terry said, coming in and grasping the situation straight away. ‘Blushing a little, if I’m not mistaken. Someone been paying you compliments, have they?’ he added mercilessly.

‘Shut up with your nonsense, Terry,’ said Rose, as Hannah turned redder still, and her lower lip trembled. ‘If you haven’t come to help, you can keep out of the way.’

‘Not my place to clear up Hannah’s mess,’ Terry replied. ‘Mary can do it.’

‘What can I do?’ asked Mary, bringing the hot-water jug back to be refilled. ‘I heard Mrs Langdale praising your little cakes, Rose, and she wishes her own cook had your light hand with them pastries, too.’

‘Thank you, Mary.’

‘But, no, I’m not mopping floors down here with my afternoon apron on,’ the house-parlourmaid added, straightening the starched frills over her

shoulders, then returning to a more interesting subject. ‘T’other lady – I think she might be a cousin or summat – she hasn’t eaten much, though.’ She leaned in and lowered her voice confidingly. ‘I reckon she doesn’t feel she ought to. Hasn’t much to say for herself either.’

‘Well, never mind,’ Rose said dismissively. It wasn’t her place to comment on Mrs Metcalfe’s cousin. ‘But, Mary, if you’re up to pouring water while you’re wearing that pinny, please would you refill the hot-water jug, and, Terry, perhaps you would take up this second plate of cakes, if they’re wanted? Hannah, I’d start over there with the mop, if I were you.’

‘Getting a bit bossy, aren’t you, Rose?’ said Terry, but lightly.

‘I’m the cook and this is my kitchen,’ said Rose, and left it at that while everyone got on with what they were meant to be doing.

It was late that evening when Rose finally had time to read Daisy’s letter. By then, tiredness had sapped too much of her energy for her to summon up anxiety all over again, and she sat in her sagging armchair in her little bed-sitting room off the downstairs corridor, and calmly extracted the single sheet from the envelope.

Dear Rose,

Can you come home soon, please? I’m worried about Mum.

A few weeks ago Uncle Alec came round here. He was wearing a cap he bought at the shop so he had already been there. Anyway, after he’d gone, Mum admitted he had borrowed a few shillings. We were a bit short that week, but Mum said he’d pay it back. He’s been round twice since then, but he hasn’t paid back owt, and I think he might have borrowed more. Mum’s been a bit nervy of late. I think she’s under the weather because she’s worried about how she’ll manage with less in her purse.

I’ve tried to get Mum to tell me how much Uncle Alec has borrowed and what he said about repaying her, but she just gets impatient and says I’m to stop bothering her. That’s not like her either. Maybe she’ll tell you because everyone always says you’re the sensible one, and you might know what to do.

Please come when you can, Rose.

Love from

Daisy xxx

Instantly, Rose was concerned. Louisa had had so much to put up with these last couple of years, the illness and death of her husband being topmost of her worries. Louisa had inherited a little legacy, a bit of money that Albert had been saving 'for a rainy day'. That, and the tiny millinery business she ran from rented premises off King William Street, Blackburn, meant at least there were no immediate financial worries, although the way of life for the Farlowes had always been about economising and managing rather than flourishing. It was how many hard-working people lived, and it was good enough. There were a lot who had it far worse.

Had Uncle Alec thought she had money to spare? Oh, but he was a nasty piece of work, and he wouldn't mind if he left his sister struggling if he got a bit of money from her. This wouldn't surprise Rose at all, but how come Alec had turned up now? Apart from Dad's funeral, he hadn't bothered about the Farlowes for years.

Rose put her face in her hands and rubbed her tired eyes. Of course she would go home, but there was no question of being able to make the journey to Blackburn before her half-day, which was Sunday.

Rose decided to go straight to Mrs Metcalfe after breakfast the following morning to ask for the whole of Sunday off, to get home and do what needed doing. She had mentioned no details of Daisy's letter, of course, telling her employer only that her sister was anxious about their mother.

'... I'm hoping it's nowt to worry about, Mrs Metcalfe, but it might just take a bit of sorting out. I'd make up the extra time when it suited you best.'

'And do you think you will be able to sort it out by yourself, Rose?'

'I reckon so, Mrs Metcalfe. I'm determined on it.'

'I'm sure you are, Rose. Yes, you may have this coming Sunday off. If you prepare something Mary can serve hot to us after church, then you can get away as early as you want. I'll speak to Mary myself so she knows what I expect.'

'Thank you, Mrs Metcalfe.'

'And please let me know how you get on at home – Blackburn, isn't it, where your family live?'

'That's right.' Rose was amazed Mrs Metcalfe remembered.

'Your sister – she's, what, quite young?'

'Yes, Daisy is only sixteen.'

'And is Daisy's ambition to be a cook, too?'

Rose thought of Daisy's complete lack of interest in cooking and fought down the urge to laugh. It sounded odd to hear Daisy's name and the word 'ambition' in the same sentence. 'No, ma'am, she works in a laundry.'

'Ah, a laundry maid,' said Mrs Metcalfe, mistakenly thinking that Daisy, too, was in service, perhaps in a grand house that had its own laundry facilities. 'Excellent. Now, about this evening: it's to be pheasant, so I thought Mr Metcalfe might appreciate that special red cabbage you do ...'

The conversation about her family was over, the extra hours off secured. There wasn't time for Rose to write to Daisy and tell her she would see her on Sunday. Rose would just turn up, and maybe that was best anyway. That way she could see exactly how things stood.



On Saturday morning, it was the custom at Elizabeth House – the light, airy but not particularly large home that Desmond Metcalfe had had built for himself in the latest style, and which he had named after the woman he had been heard to describe as 'England's greatest monarch' – for the servants to file into Mr Metcalfe's study, one at a time, to receive their wages. Mr Metcalfe would then ask each in turn if he or she was happy in their work and if they had any complaints. So far as Rose had gathered from Mary, no one had ever said they were unhappy, or voiced any complaint whatsoever. Discontent was not a feeling that servants were expected to express – even when asked – and, anyway, there had been no need. The Metcalfes were benevolent and certainly not too demanding. In fact, they had a very up-to-date attitude to their staff, mirrored in the practical design of the house, and displayed a friendliness that in more traditional homes would have been thought outrageously informal and slack.

'Lucky you, Rose. My lot are sticklers for tradition,' Rose's friend Millicent, who cooked at a neighbouring house, had remarked. 'Starchy doesn't begin to describe them. Same with the way they live. Still using oil lamps and candles, as if we haven't enough to clean! I envy you at Elizabeth House, with your electric lights.'

The Metcalfes were very willing to embrace the latest labour-saving devices, so they were able to keep a clean and efficient house with just four servants. There was even a vacuum cleaner, of which Mary was a little bit afraid.

Although everyone had to rub along together as best they could in the kitchen-cum-servants' hall, the staff in other establishments often had it far worse. Rose knew this from her previous position in a large house in Roundhay, where there had often been quarrels and her employers had been mean. Mr Metcalfe was probably only interested in his servants insofar as they made his life comfortable, but it was good of him at least to ask about them.

He sat behind his vast polished mahogany desk, and Rose stood before him on the Turkey rug after Terry had taken his turn. She received her thirteen shillings with a smile and a 'thank you, sir'.

She was about to retreat when he said, 'Mrs Metcalfe tells me you need to go to see your family early tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir. My sister's worried about our mother.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. I've asked Terry to take you to the station, to save you time.'

'Thank you, sir. That's very kind of you,' Rose smiled. She had been wondering just how early she could get away for the walk into Crossthwaite, where there was a little station with infrequent trains into Leeds, from where she would change onto the first of two for the remainder of the journey to Blackburn.

'Well, I hope you find your mother is on the mend,' said Mr Metcalfe, assuming Rose's mother was ill, and bringing the interview to an end.

Rose thanked him again and left the room, passing Mary outside the door, and little Hannah, behind her, standing on one leg and wringing her hands nervously as she waited her turn.

Clutching her wages, Rose hurried straight to her room. She counted out eleven shillings into her purse, then put the other two in a small green and gold tin, which had once held golden syrup, and which she kept hidden at the back of her wardrobe. There was a noticeable weight to the tin now, but Rose didn't want to count the coins. She knew she was so very far from the sum she needed to make her dream of a little tearoom business a reality, and she didn't want to risk feeling it was all a hopeless cause by frequently reminding herself of this. Better just to keep adding a bit each week and then, when the tin was full, if it ever was, see how much it held.

The rest of her wages were for herself and for her mother and Daisy. She knew that, at Elizabeth House, where her room, her food and her work clothes were provided, she lived a life of relative comfort and security,

compared to Louisa, who worked for herself, paid rent for her tiny shop and workshop premises as well as her home, and employed Mrs Pullinger. Daisy's work at the laundry was very poorly paid.

If Rose could take some of her wages to her family to help them out, then she was glad to do so. Louisa's little legacy from Albert was a precious safety net in case of hard times or illness, only to be used as a last resort.

Louisa was very mindful of her budget, and Daisy paid nearly all of her wages to her mother, but anyone could suddenly find themselves with unforeseen expenses. And if Uncle Alec had borrowed a few shillings, Louisa could well be finding it hard to make ends meet.

Even as the thought passed through her mind, Rose took the tin of precious savings out of her wardrobe again and withdrew the two shillings to add to those she was taking home. It meant she had saved nothing this week, but perhaps the extra she was giving them might just help her mother and sister through any awkwardness.

Terry was sitting in the car in the old stable yard on Sunday morning. When Rose emerged through the back door he jumped out and rushed round to open the car door for her.

'Oh, I thought I was early. I didn't mean to keep you waiting, Terry,' said Rose.

'I'd gladly wait all day for you,' grinned Terry, 'but you are early. It's just that I was earlier.'

'Daft lad,' she muttered under her breath as she got into the four-seater Austin, careful of her coat and clutching her handbag and furled umbrella. Terry made much of tucking her coat in snugly around her legs – rather more hands on than was strictly necessary, Rose thought – and when he went round to get in beside her, she repositioned herself more comfortably, slightly nearer to the door.

'Right, to the station!'

'Yes, please.'

'Hold onto your hat!'

They set off, Terry driving quite slowly. Rose didn't feel there was any danger to her hat at this speed. Terry mainly took Mrs Metcalfe where she wanted to go in the car, but Mr Metcalfe liked to drive himself and, so far, he hadn't seen the need to employ a chauffeur.

'What time's your train?'

‘From Crossthwaite? About half past.’

‘No, I mean from Leeds. I’m taking you to Leeds.’

‘Oh, that’s good of you, but will Mr Metcalfe mind?’

‘It was him that suggested it. I thought you knew.’

‘I, er, well, Leeds it is, then. Thank you, that’s a real help. I’ll just get the first train I can.’

‘I’ve got some news to pass the time,’ said Terry, setting off south towards the main road, still at a sedate pace. ‘That cousin of Mrs M’s who came to have tea – Amy Langdale, I think she’s called; she’s coming to live with us.’

‘Us? You mean, at Elizabeth House?’

‘You’re quick this morning, Rose,’ said Terry. ‘Some relation of Mrs M’s mother: a distant cousin or summat. Her folks are dead and she can’t manage on her own so she’s coming to keep Mrs M company.’

‘But Mrs Metcalfe has a lot of company, doesn’t she? There are always friends, or Mrs Langdale, or other folk visiting. She likes the place lively and fun.’

‘I meant it’s for this Amy’s sake that she’s coming to our house. She’s going to be Emma’s companion.’

Rose’s first thought was a wish that Terry wouldn’t refer to Mrs Metcalfe so rudely by her first name. It was unthinkable that he would ever do so to her face. Her second thought was that poor Miss Langdale was something of a spare part, an unnecessary addition to the house, except for her own benefit. And who would want to take on the role of companion, anyway, the polite euphemism for a poor relation, a woman – and it was always a woman – to be pitied? A charity case.

‘I expect the presence of Miss Langdale will make the most difference to Mary’s work,’ said Rose carefully. ‘I shall order and cook what I’m asked, and you tend to deal more with Mr Metcalfe.’

‘Mebbe ...’ said Terry, growing bored with that subject. ‘Now, what’s with the extra time off? You’ve been very quiet about it.’

Rose didn’t want to be the subject of Terry’s latest tittle-tattle, so she had kept to herself the reason for her visit home. Now, however, she couldn’t avoid some explanation.

‘My sister wrote to say our mother’s not feeling too good,’ she improvised, ‘so I thought I’d go and cheer her. See if I can cook them summat tasty.’

Terry just nodded. There was nothing exciting to get his teeth into there.

There was a little silence, and Rose took in the view of the cold, wet fields of the West Riding and vowed to remember this fresh air when she got to Blackburn, where the air was very far from fresh. They turned onto the main road, Leeds – also not renowned for the freshness of the air – ahead, and suddenly Terry was picking up the pace.

‘Terry, are you sure you’re quite safe going this fast?’

‘There’s nowt to it, Rose. Just put my foot down and off we go.’ As if to demonstrate, he sped on faster, showing off. ‘I told you to hold onto your hat, didn’t I? I’ll get you onto an earlier train and then you’ll have longer with your poor old ailing ma,’ he said, raising his voice above the rattling noise the car was now making, and not sounding at all sympathetic about her mother. Rose just hoped she’d get to the station in one piece. Perhaps this car ride was not such a help after all, but a risk to her life. Good grief, they must be going at thirty miles an hour!

As Rose sat in her third-class seat on the train heading west, she pulled Daisy’s letter out from her handbag and reread it, although by now she knew the entire letter by heart. Forced for once to be idle, she tried to imagine what situation she would find at home, but no scenario she dreamed up was a happy one.

CHAPTER THREE

ROSE REACHED THE top of Shallow Street. From here she could make out her mother's house, halfway down on the right. Every front door was painted the same dull crimson, but number 26 was distinguishable even at this distance with its curtains of an unusually vivid blue. Louisa had made them several years ago and, although not as bright as they had been, the curtains still displayed a stylish cheerfulness. All the windows were closed, of course – in contrast to Elizabeth House, where fresh air was almost a religion and the rooms were aired every day. Well, there was no fresh air here, and the air there was, was far from healthy.

A light drizzle made the blackened cobbles greasy, although many of the doorsteps giving onto the pavement were astonishingly clean against the sooty walls of the buildings. A pristine doorstep was a source of pride to any self-respecting housewife, and those that neglected them tended to be disparaged or pitied.

Rose walked on, skirting round puddles and a group of boisterous little boys, kicking a dirty football in the road.

'Davie, Duncan, you keep that ball away from Miss Farlowe, d'you hear?' called Mrs Palmer, from number 18, washing her front windows. Sunday might be the official day of rest, but for many women it was just another day for getting on with housework.

Mrs Palmer turned to Rose. 'Hello, love. You all right? Little tykes ... You don't want that mucky thing on your coat.'

'Thank you, Mrs Palmer. It's nice to see you again,' smiled Rose, and strode on with a wave goodbye.

Nothing had changed: same faces, same street games, same smell of coal fires and the same sooty air.

She delved into her handbag for her key, noticing Louisa's doorstep looked as clean as the best of them – which was a good sign – and let herself into the house, calling out, 'Hello, Mum. Daisy.'

'Rose!' Daisy came rushing out from the sitting room.

‘I hoped you’d come. I’m so pleased to see you,’ she said quietly, hugging Rose tightly.

Daisy, Rose thought, was taller and lankier than when she had last seen her, although that had been only a few months ago. She was nearly the same height as Rose now.

‘Well, I wouldn’t not come,’ Rose whispered, ‘after you wrote.’ She held Daisy away from her and saw that her sister’s hands were chapped with her laundry work.

‘Rose, love, what a lovely surprise! You must have got away early.’ Louisa came out then and grabbed Rose’s hand to pull her in to sit down.

‘Mrs Metcalfe was feeling generous so she gave me the whole day off,’ said Rose, which was pretty much the truth. ‘With all day free, what better for me than to come and see you both?’

She sat down on the old-fashioned, stiffly upholstered sofa, its dark blue velvety fabric now balding along the edges and the arms. There was a very modest fire in the grate: not like the merry blaze in the morning-room fireplace at Elizabeth House, but it just about took the chill off.

‘So, tell me your news,’ she said, to give herself the chance to assess her mother’s appearance properly. ‘Daise can make us a cup of tea, can’t you, flower? And then I’ll cook us summat for lunch, if you like?’

‘Ooh, *lunch*,’ mocked Daisy, giggling and getting up to do as she was asked. ‘I’ve never had *lunch* before.’

‘Soft lass. You have when I’ve been cooking it. And old jokes wear thin, let me remind you.’

‘So long as you’re not getting all posh on us, our Rose.’

‘Go on with you. You’ve less sense than little Hannah, and she’s barely out of the egg.’

Daisy went off to make the tea, laughing and flouncing.

Rose noticed that Louisa didn’t look ill exactly, but she was thinner than when Rose had last seen her. There were a few strands of grey in her hair, too, which Rose was certain had not been there previously. Still, Louisa was in her forties now, and the dark brown hair, so like that of her daughters, would show every touch of grey.

‘Well, Mum, how have you been?’

‘All right, love. I’m glad to say the shop is, too.’ She chatted on about some Yorkshire tweed that she’d sourced at a bargain price to make into flat caps.

Rose was only half listening. She was distracted by the thinness of her mother's hands and, now Rose was looking properly, she thought Louisa looked tired and drawn. Of course, it must be hard being a widow and having to keep going, no matter what, no matter how much you'd rather lie down, opt out, just stop and let the sadness drain through you until you felt strong enough to get up and carry on again. There had been no question of Louisa having the luxury of time to gather herself after Albert died of pneumonia last year, and perhaps that was stopping her getting over her grief as soon as she might. They all felt the loss of the man of the family, but how much worse it must be for Louisa.

Rose decided to wait to ask about Uncle Alec. Louisa would know Rose had come specifically to talk about him if she mentioned him too soon, and she might think Rose was interfering. If Louisa spoke of him first, Rose hoped she could then tease out the whole truth.

Daisy brought in three cups of tea and, while they drank them, she entertained Rose with blackly humorous stories about the meanness of Mrs Chapman and Daisy's commitment to paying her back in underhand ways.

It was as she was getting up to see about cooking the lunch that Rose noticed the ornate little clock, which had always stood on the mantelpiece, was no longer there. Now she'd seen it, the absence was glaring.

As Louisa went ahead to the kitchen, Rose pulled Daisy back by her jumper sleeve and whispered, 'What's happened to the clock?'

'Mum dropped it and it broke, so she had to throw it out.'

'Oh, no, she'll have been upset about that. Couldn't it be mended?'

'I wasn't there so I didn't see, but she said not.'

Rose borrowed Louisa's apron, forbade her mother to lift a finger to help, and roped in Daisy to peel potatoes while she eked out a very few sausages with extra root vegetables. Seeing how modest her family's larder was compared to the abundance at Elizabeth House, Rose declined to use what little butter there was, and roasted the potatoes, carrots and parsnips in a bit of beef dripping. There did seem to be less food in the larder than she might have expected, but by now she was used to ordering generously for the entire Metcalfe household. How easy it was to become spoilt, when most people managed perfectly well with modest portions of plain-cooked food.

'I'm sorry about the clock, Mum,' she said, setting the kitchen table.

For a moment she caught a closed expression crossing her mother's face.

'Daisy told me it got broken,' Rose went on gently.

‘Yes, that’s right. It was a shame,’ Louisa said, looking away.

‘Couldn’t you have had it mended?’

‘No ... it was broken beyond repair.’

‘That’s a pity. I’d have taken the pieces to that man with the workshop near the cathedral. You never know, he might have been able to mend it.’

‘Well, it’s too late now. Don’t go on about it.’

It wasn’t like Louisa to be snappy and Rose was taken aback.

Louisa clearly regretted her tone because she then said gently, ‘Now, Rose, tell me what it is you’ve been baking for Mrs Metcalfe ...’

Rose knew not to pursue the subject of the clock, but something about the way her mother dismissed the loss of what had been a much-treasured wedding present, and then changed the subject, sounded odd. Perhaps she was just too upset to want to be reminded of it.

While they ate their lunch, Rose told her mother and sister about the ride all the way to Leeds in Mr Metcalfe’s motor car.

‘Oh, I wish I could ride in a motor car,’ sighed Daisy. ‘I wouldn’t be afraid at all. I’d like to see just how fast it could go.’

‘Not on the road from Crossthwaite to Leeds you couldn’t,’ laughed Rose. ‘And Terry was just showing off. He can be a bit like that.’

‘At least you work for interesting people who have a motor car,’ said Daisy. ‘Can you imagine Mrs Chapman buying one?’

‘Never in a million years,’ said Rose, and Louisa laughed loudly, which her daughters were pleased to hear.

Then there was a lull in the conversation. Rose noticed her mother’s face resuming a worried expression, and then Louisa put down her knife and fork.

‘What’s matter, Mum? Isn’t it all right?’ She gestured towards Louisa’s plate.

‘It’s fine, Rose. Better than fine – it’s grand. Thank you, love. I’m just not very hungry. I ate quite a bit for breakfast.’

‘I didn’t notice that,’ said Daisy. ‘But if you’re really not going to eat that potato, can I have it, please?’

‘Go ahead.’

Daisy reached across and stabbed the potato with her fork before Rose could intervene.

After lunch, more cups of tea were poured and Rose suggested Louisa went to tend to the room fire while she and Daisy put away the washed

plates.

‘I’m going to have to ask her about money,’ said Rose as soon as Louisa was out of hearing distance. ‘I hoped she’d mention Uncle Alec and then we’d be up and running, but I reckon I’ll just have to ask her outright.’

‘Right, well, let’s get on with it,’ said Daisy. ‘I feel like a kettle that’s about to boil over with all this skirting round the point.’

The girls took the tea through and found Louisa staring out of the front window at nothing, but clutching her handkerchief.

‘Mum,’ jumped in Daisy, ‘you’re going to have to tell us what’s worrying you. I reckon it’s the money Uncle Alec came and borrowed, and Rose needs to know all about that. If that’s the worry, just tell us. If you’re ill or summat, tell us about that instead.’

Well, there would be no more skirting round the subject now, thought Rose.

‘I can see you’re thinner, and it’s plain that you’re anxious,’ she said gently. ‘Please tell us what’s up, Mum. I can’t go back to Yorkshire and not know the worst.’

There was a long pause, and Rose took Daisy’s hand and squeezed it in the hope she’d get the message to button her lip and not fill the silence.

‘No, I’m not ill, love,’ Louisa said, trying for a reassuring smile and not pulling it off. ‘But it’s true: I’ve ... I’ve lent a bit of money to your uncle Alec. Oh, I’m sure he’ll pay it back soon – he said he would – but, well, he’s taking his time, that’s all.’

‘I see. And so it was more than you could afford, Mum?’

‘No ... not really—’

‘Because it’s plainly bothering you.’

‘No, Rose, love. As I said, it was just a bit. Oh, I expect it’ll all be all right. I’m just being silly.’

‘But you don’t think it’ll be all right, do you?’ said Rose. ‘Otherwise you wouldn’t be so worried. Why would Uncle Alec think you had money to lend anyway? ... Oh, I see now: he knows about Dad’s rainy-day fund.’

‘You told him about that?’ asked Daisy. ‘It’s not like you to go around telling folk your private business.’

‘Daisy ...’ cautioned Rose. She felt exasperated, too, but Daisy didn’t always know when she’d said enough, and said it too bluntly.

‘So Uncle Alec came here, right out of the blue, and asked you to lend him some money?’

‘He’s been to see me a few times lately. First time was at the shop when he bought a hat. He looked proper smart in it and he made a big show of asking both me and Gertie our opinions. Didn’t ask for a discount or owt. Very friendly, he was, too. I thought nowt of it – just that he was being kind.’

‘From what you’ve told us, Mum, he was never very kind to you when you were little.’

‘True, but I thought he’d grown up at last; that he had become a better person. He said he was passing and just wanted to be sure I was all right, what with me losing your dad. Wanted to see I was managing. That’s when I mentioned the little nest egg – not to show off or owt, but to reassure him.’

‘Did he offer to do owt for you, Mum, in the interests of making sure you were all right?’ asked Rose artlessly. ‘Clean the shop windows, perhaps? Come round here and carry in the coal?’

‘No, love, but you know I wouldn’t expect that. I’m quite capable.’

Rose and Daisy exchanged glances. Louisa was more than capable in many ways, but it was obvious to them that her brother had not cared whether she was ‘managing’ or not. He had visited her entirely in his own interests.

‘After that he came here one evening. He asked to borrow a bit of money. He said it was just “to tide him over” while he was a bit short of cash, and I’d have it back before I knew it.’

‘How much, Mum?’

‘It was ... two ... shillings.’

‘So you lent him two shillings?’ asked Rose. Strange that this was the exact sum she had put in her savings tin, then taken straight out again, to give to her mother instead.

‘Yes ... that’s right. At first I didn’t want to because I don’t like to lend or to borrow, but he said he’d pay me back quickly, and I believed him at the time ... when he was there, saying it.’

Rose thought she would never have believed Alec, but then she could more easily stand back and see him for what he was: unkind, untrustworthy, dislikeable. She hadn’t the complication of a shared childhood with him.

‘So he borrowed two shillings and hasn’t paid you back. Is that all he borrowed?’ Rose, remembering what Daisy had written in her letter, risked a quick sidelong glance at her, willing her to be quiet and let Louisa tell her herself.

‘Well ...’ Louisa looked shame-faced, ‘there was a bit more, the second time he came. You see, I thought he’d come to pay me back. But then, when I mentioned it, he said he’d forgotten about that, but had come for a little loan. He acted as if the first one had never happened.’

‘So how much did you give him, Mum?’ asked Rose.

‘Ten shillings more. He said he was a bit hard up, had had a run of bad luck.’

‘With what? Sounds like betting to me.’

‘I asked him and he said it was nowt for me to worry about, that I wouldn’t understand anyway.’

‘You had every right to know why he was borrowing money from you, Mum,’ said Rose, crossly. ‘He could have just told you instead of being patronising.’

‘That’s right,’ joined in Daisy. ‘If he’d just wanted it to buy drinks for his friends, or ... I don’t know ... summat else that didn’t matter, then you wouldn’t have lent it to him.’

‘Of course I wouldn’t. But he sort of implied it was summat important, to do with business.’

‘Mum, you run a business yourself and you’re just as important as Uncle Alec.’

‘And a lot nicer,’ added Daisy. ‘I thought he worked in a mill – why would he have any business other than doing his work there and being paid for it?’

‘I agree,’ said Rose. ‘It makes me wonder what exactly he’s up to.’

‘Well, it’s done now. I gave him some money from the housekeeping.’

‘That must have left you short,’ suggested Rose, gently. ‘I noticed you haven’t much in the larder, Mum. So was that the last time he came here?’

Louisa looked rather pink. ‘There was another time. But, love, before you get cross, I just hoped he’d come with all he owed, but then, when he was here, he got a bit cross and said I was cruel not to help him out, and he’d thought better of me. I was feeling that bad about ... well, about everything, and he said he was in need of a bit of ready cash and he knew I was well off with your dad’s little rainy-day fund, and that most folk would think that riches indeed and wouldn’t keep it all to themselves like a miser. Well, I felt battered with all his accusations – miser, indeed! – and I just wanted him to go away so I lent him some more.’

Rose and Daisy looked at each other in consternation.

‘How much more, Mum?’ Rose asked, leaning forward to take Louisa’s hand, where she sat in her armchair opposite the girls on the sofa.

Louisa glanced down at their hands. ‘Just a bit.’

‘A bit?’

‘A couple more shillings, love.’

‘Two?’

‘Yes, that’s right: two.’

‘So fourteen shillings altogether.’

‘But I’m sure he’ll pay it back now. He wouldn’t be able to forget that much, would he?’ said Louisa, struggling for a bright tone. ‘I’ll admit it’s made these last few weeks a struggle. It’s hard to keep within your budget when your budget is reduced, even by a little. We still had to eat, and pay the coalman, and the rent, of course. It creeps up so quickly, the danger of getting behind. I dare not get a reputation for not paying my bills. I’ve always settled promptly, both here and at the shop, and, once lost, folk’s good opinion is hard to win back. It wouldn’t be fair to those I owed, either.’

Louisa looked anguished now she had aired her worries.

‘Oh, Mum, I’m so sorry.’ Rose got up and went to sit on the arm of Louisa’s chair, so that she could give her a hug.

‘And I don’t want to break into your dad’s little nest egg just to make up the shortfall over this. If I start spending that now, first sign of being hard up, it’ll be gone for good.’

‘No, Mum, of course not,’ said Rose. ‘So have you got behind or is everyone paid who needs to be?’

‘We’re managing, thank you, Rose. I paid the rent as a priority.’

‘Cept this is the last of the coal and we should keep some back for the range. There hasn’t been any delivered for a fortnight. And Mum’s been eating tiny amounts to make the food go further,’ said Daisy. ‘I have noticed, Mum, before you tell me I’m mistaken. I reckon your stomach has shrunk and you can’t manage to eat much at all now.’

Rose narrowed her eyes. ‘Daisy ...’

She got up off the chair arm and turned to the window, her hands to her mouth to stop herself blurting out her opinion of her uncle Alec before she’d thought through the right thing to say, the right thing to do.

‘Now, Mum. It’s possible that Uncle Alec has gone off with your money and you’ll never see it again. You can’t really do owt about that other than

write it down to experience and vow not to lend him any more. In the meantime, these November evenings are cold and you both need to keep warm and have hot food to eat. Get some more coal delivered.’ She bent down and picked up her handbag from the corner of the sofa. ‘Here,’ she took out all but two of the shillings that Mr Metcalfe had given her the previous morning and put them on the low table beside the sofa. ‘That will get you coal and some more tea which I saw you were also about to run out of, and some food. And, please, Mum, let there be no more invalid-size plates of food. You need to keep your strength up—’

‘—to punch Uncle Alec on the nose if he asks to borrow owt more,’ interrupted Daisy.

Rose and Louisa both smiled and Louisa shook her head indulgently.

‘Daft lass, I’m not one for punching noses, and nor should you be.’

‘I’m sorry I can’t give you more,’ Rose continued, ‘but I hate to think you’ve got behind and I hope it will take the edge off your worry and help you to get back on track a bit quicker.’

‘Thank you, Rose, my love, but I can’t take so much of your pay,’ said Louisa. ‘You’ve always been generous, helping us out whenever you’ve come home, but this ... it must be most of your wages and you’ll be left short. Now I shall have to pay *you* back and I can’t do it straight away.’

‘I don’t want to be paid back,’ said Rose lightly. ‘The most important thing is for you to have the money for the rent, summat decent to eat and a fire in the grate. Don’t forget, I don’t have to pay for my keep. I shall always be warm, fed and clothed while I work for the Metcalfes.’

The thought of the little tearoom she was, against all common sense, trying to save up for flashed through her mind, but she refused to engage with it. Now was not the time for ambitious dreams.

‘Thank you, Rose,’ said Louisa quietly. ‘You’re a good girl.’

‘Well, if Uncle Alec comes round wanting more, make sure you tell him he’s to pay back every penny that he owes you already, Mum, then refuse to lend him owt else. Just tell him straight you can’t afford it, don’t listen to his pathetic pleading and remember his words are just bullying and you can ignore them. Don’t let him imply his needs are more important than yours and Daisy’s. He has no right to do that.’

‘I’d tell him to get lost for good, but only once he’d paid me back,’ said Daisy.

Louisa gave a little smile. Already there was more colour in her cheeks, a brighter look in her eye. 'I expect you would, Daise. And I might do that, too.'

'I think we should go over there now and see what we can get off him in the way of repayment,' Rose suggested. 'I know it's quite a walk, but we'd be taking him by surprise, and the three of us can face him down. If we set off at once, we can do that and I'll still get the train I need to back to Leeds.'

'Oh, no, love! I can't have you spending your afternoon off doing that for me. Either he's made himself scarce and now he'll stay away and not bother me again, or he'll do as he said and bring me the money when he has it. Either way, it's for the best.'

'It would be best if he repaid you, and now,' said Rose. 'C'mon, while I'm here to lend support.'

'I don't mind facing him down, if need be,' said Daisy.

'Let's just leave it be, love, and I'll have learned my lesson,' insisted Louisa.

Rose and Daisy looked at each other, undecided.

'Please, girls,' she pleaded, turning away to cough into her handkerchief. 'I won't lend him owt more,' she added eventually.

'All right, Mum, if that's really what you want,' said Rose, and Daisy, reluctantly, nodded.

On her walk back to the station that afternoon, Rose thought about all that had happened and whether she had done right.

Should she have insisted on going to Uncle Alec's house and asking for the repayment of Louisa's money? Probably, but Louisa had been adamant she didn't want to do that. And Alec might not have had the money, or he might not have been at home, and then Rose would have had to go back to Leeds, leaving nothing achieved but disagreement and distress.

Rose just hoped her uncle would consider himself lucky to have got away with fourteen shillings from his sister, and leave it at that. She didn't think he could have forgotten about it at all. Louisa, however, was more cheerful; she was resolved not to lend Alec any more money, and she and Daisy would have food and coal. That was a good outcome, if not actually the best one. Probably, however, the whole business was now over and done with.

Rose's walk took her past some shops, which she had ignored on the way home in her eagerness to see her family. Now, though, she just happened to notice, in a pawnbroker's window, a red velvet opera cloak with white fur trimming. Where on earth had that come from, in Blackburn? She stopped to look and admire, and her attention was then caught by the other feature of the window: a large mahogany desk. And in the centre of the desk, in pride of place, stood Louisa's clock.

There was no doubt about it. With black Roman numerals in a gilded face, and set into a walnut veneer case with the base curved up in a scroll at each side, it was unmistakable.

Oh! Oh, my goodness. The mantel clock that had supposedly got broken ... while Daisy was out ... and the pieces went straight in the dustbin ... and Mum didn't want to talk about it.

Because she didn't want to elaborate the lie she was telling us.

Louisa, telling lies! Rose had never known her do that before. And it raised disturbing questions: why had she lied about it, and what else had she lied about?

Rose could guess the reason for the lie, but she was disappointed in her mother nonetheless. Louisa was ashamed she had had to go to the pawnbroker, and she would rather her daughters didn't know. The pawnbroker's shop was closed but, even if it had been open, Rose, with only two shillings left in her purse, would have been unable to redeem the much-loved clock for her mother.

What else Louisa had lied about was a more disturbing thought, and all the way to the station, Rose found herself stopping to think and ponder and worry. She even thought about going back to Shallow Street and demanding the whole truth, but then she would miss the train, and she simply had to get this next one.

'Oh ... oh, I'm sorry!' She had been so distracted she bumped into a man stopping to light a cigarette on the pavement.

'You want to look where you're going, lass,' he retorted, and Rose murmured another apology and walked on, her embarrassment quickly forgotten as her mind filled with horrible thoughts about her mother's actions again.

If Louisa had had to pawn her clock as well as do without her housekeeping, didn't that suggest she was more than fourteen shillings

down? Just how much had Uncle Alec borrowed? Had he taken all Louisa's nest egg as well? Had he any intention of paying any of it back?

Suddenly Rose's gift of her week's pay looked pathetic and naïve. Perhaps Louisa was in deep, deep water and Rose was just a silly but well-meaning daughter, paddling in the shallows, thinking her grand gesture would save the day, when it hardly made a difference. Now she and her mother were both out of pocket, and Rose felt helpless to do anything about it.

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CHAPTER FOUR

LOUISA AND GERTIE were just tidying up at the end of a dark autumn afternoon at *Louisa Farlowe – Hats*, when the shop doorbell jangled and the door opened to admit Louisa's brother, Alec.

'Afternoon, ladies,' he smiled. 'Thought I'd drop by and see how you are, Louisa.'

'I'm just thinking about closing, Alec,' said Louisa, stiffly, her stomach doing an unpleasant little swoop already.

'Well, it's a good thing I haven't come to buy a hat, then, isn't it?' he said, his tone hardening slightly.

Louisa didn't answer, but clumsily started to gather up some caps she and Gertie had been about to arrange on stands.

'Thing is, Lou, I've summat to say that needs saying in private, like.'

Louisa glanced at Gertie, undecided whether to ask her to go early.

Gertie, always astute and faithful, said quietly, 'Are you all right, love? Do you want me to stay or shall I go now?'

'Thank you, Gertie, you get off home. I'll be on my way too in a minute. I'll just lock up and I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Well, if you're sure,' said Gertie, quietly. Then she went to collect her coat from a peg in the workshop.

Alec moved to the shop door and opened it wide to let her out. 'Good night, missis,' he said, and closed the door again almost on Gertie's heels.

'Alec, that was rude,' said Louisa.

'Nosy old baggage,' replied Alec. 'Right, Lou, you know why I'm here.'

'Alec, please. I can't keep giving you money.'

'Why can't you?'

'Because I've hardly owt left. Daisy and I are on our uppers and we're struggling. Really struggling.'

'Oh, how my heart bleeds for you and *your daughter*. Well, you can consider yourself lucky to have a daughter, can't you?' He gave her a very long and hard look until she fearfully dropped her gaze. 'Some of us have

suffered a sight more than you, Louisa, and for years. You've come into a bit of money now and so I reckon it's time you started to pay me back.'

'Listen, Alec,' she said, 'I don't know why you're so short of funds you need to come begging off me. Isn't the job at the mill enough? Most folk manage on their wages.'

'I'm not at the mill any longer,' he replied. 'Really, Louisa, you think I'd be doing that for the whole of my life? No, I'm working for Mr Lancaster.'

'Our landlord?' Louisa saw this as bad news.

'The very same. Collecting rents. I've also got a bit of business of my own going. But you see, Louisa, regardless of who I'm working for, from where I'm standing, it seems like you're the one who owes me.'

'No ...'

'Oh, but you do, Lou. My life could have been a lot different if you hadn't interfered. Who knows where I would be, what I'd be doing ... who I'd be married to? I've got a pretty good guess, and I think you have, too. I could have had a different life, a happy one.'

Alec took a step closer to her, looming over her. He was tall and broad and intimidating, and, although Louisa tried to look defiant, they had both been here before. Alec knew she was frightened, and they both knew how easily he could hurt her.

'Remember, Lou, what I know about you – it would be terrible if it got out, wouldn't it? What's a bit of cash when I've suffered my whole life because of what you did?'

'I told you, Alec—'

'And I've told you, Louisa. P'raps you didn't understand. Working for Lancaster, I get to meet folk. Know a few on the local newspapers ...'

Louisa swallowed. She was sure he could see her trembling.

'Now, let's see what you've got for me, sis, eh?' he said quietly, holding out his hand.

'I've ... I've next to nowt in my purse. I can't give you owt more,' said Louisa, her voice cracking as she fought back tears.

'Well, I seem to remember that drawer in the counter there is where you put your takings,' said Alec, his voice low and full of menace. 'It might be best, Louisa, if you was to open it and see what you've got ...'

Emma Metcalfe felt sorry for Amy Langdale. Amy was a distant relation, some sort of cousin – second or third, or once or twice removed, or some

such. It seemed a good idea for Emma to offer her impoverished cousin a home. The Metcalfes had so much: Elizabeth House; the stationery shops; good friends; and money enough to enjoy life, while not being so wealthy that they took everything for granted. Amy had none of these privileges. In fact, she seemed to own little more than the clothes she stood up in. Thin and dowdy, she had neither beauty nor charm, both of which advantages Emma knew she had in abundance.

Emma didn't know if Amy had ever had an admirer, or if she had ever been in love, but neither seemed likely. Poor Amy. According to Emma's mother, Pamela, Amy's parents, dour and joyless, had fallen ill, first her mother and then, a year or two later, her father, so that much of Amy's adult life had been spent nursing them until eventually they had both died, leaving their home to some male relative of whom no one had ever even heard, and rendering their daughter, who had sacrificed what few opportunities she might have had, reliant on the charity of this man she didn't know for the roof over her head. She had very little money from her parents, and no income of her own at all. Effectively, she was both homeless and virtually penniless at the age of thirty-five.

Amy had neither education nor common sense, so far as Emma could see. However, she did not want to turn her back on her cousin. That would be too cruel.

'Desmond,' she said one evening, when the weather was bleak and cold, and Amy, visiting for tea that afternoon with Emma's mother, Pamela Langdale, had looked so pathetic, with her stick-thin wrists poking out of her old-fashioned mourning frock, 'we have so much – we have each other, most of all – and I feel so lucky. Poor Amy has no one and nothing. She's all alone, her parents dead, and she can hardly afford her firewood, she told me and Mama. We have room for her here, don't we, darling? We can offer her a home? What if she caught a chill and got poorly and died, with no one to care for her, while we did nothing to help her?'

'But has Amy no skills? Can't she find suitable work – looking after infants, teaching children to read and write, or something equally respectable?'

Emma pursed her lips. 'I don't think she's really very ... dynamic. You've seen how she is – would you want to employ her, Desmond? She doesn't exactly inspire confidence, does she?'

‘Emma, I know you have the kindest heart, but it doesn’t sound to me as if you are entirely devoted to Cousin Amy.’

Emma sighed; Desmond could be disconcertingly direct sometimes. ‘But I feel it’s my duty to do the right thing, regardless of my own feelings about Amy. I expect I could grow to like her better once I’ve taken her in hand. She needs some decent clothes and some good food, and then she’ll blossom and start looking more cheerful. I’m sure I can improve her. Who knows, perhaps I could even find her a husband once she looks more womanly and attractive ... and maybe has a new way of doing her hair.’

She caught sight of herself in the mirror over the fireplace and patted her golden curls into place.

‘Well, we certainly have room for her here, my love, but Amy Langdale is not a life-size doll for you to play with, you know, or a stray puppy, to be taken in until you are bored with the novelty.’

‘I know that, Desmond. I never said she was,’ said Emma crossly. ‘But, what with her parents, she’s lacked the chance and the eye for pretty things, and I’m sure she’d thank me for a little guidance.’

‘Then why don’t you invite her to stay for a little while and see how you get on?’

‘What, and throw her back overboard if it doesn’t work out?’ Emma looked astonished.

Desmond regarded her with raised eyebrows. After a moment or two he said, ‘Who can tell how things will go along? Invite Amy to stay for the foreseeable future and let’s just see, shall we?’

‘Oh, Desmond, you are such a dear,’ Emma said. ‘I shall write to Amy straight away. I’ll get Mary to prepare that bedroom down the corridor, at the side. I know it doesn’t get the sun and it overlooks the stable yard, but it’s very big and Amy will have lots of room for all her things.’

‘I thought you said she hasn’t got a lot of things,’ her husband replied, annoyingly, ‘but you must do as you like, my darling.’

A week into the new arrangement, and already Emma was growing a little tired of the woman, which then made her feel bad because she thought she ought to like her more. Not for one moment, however, was she ready to tell Desmond that he had been right all along.

Amy had arrived accompanied by one shabby, dented metal trunk containing all her worldly possessions.

‘It’s all I need. I am used to managing with very little,’ she’d murmured, her eyes cast down beneath the rim of her old-fashioned black bonnet.

Emma was used to her cousin’s timidity. However, while an afternoon of it was bearable, endless days of it were proving to be wearing. It was strange how someone who sought to hide her personality so completely, and was, on the whole, silent, could make her presence felt so heavily.

But then, this morning, Amy showed a different side to her character – she had an opinion – and Emma didn’t much care for that either.

Emma and Rose met most mornings briefly to discuss the day’s menus and the ordering of provisions. Their discussions were always businesslike, but cheery and agreeable. Emma loved good food, especially puddings and cakes. In her opinion, life should be fun, and tea parties with her family and friends, sharing delicious little cakes, while talking about everything from the latest novels and fashions to the progress of the suffrage movement – which Emma and her friends supported without actually taking an active role themselves – could bring a festive air to a wet autumn afternoon.

‘... and on Thursday I’ve asked my mother and three other ladies to tea. Rose, could you ice some little shortbread biscuits in the suffragette colours, green, white and violet? It would be fun to acknowledge the cause in icing?’

‘I can do that, ma’am,’ said Rose, her pencil hovering over her notebook. ‘If you think it would be appropriate,’ she added.

‘Oh ... oh, Rose. My word, I am such a feather-brain sometimes! How could I even think of iced shortbread when there are women on hunger strike in prison for protesting that they have no vote, and are being *force-fed*! Now the very idea of a tea party to acknowledge and honour the brave women fighting for suffrage looks ridiculous.’

There were a few moments of silence.

‘Well, if I may suggest ... ?’ Rose began quietly. ‘P’raps you might have your mother and your friends to tea, but not link the occasion directly to the cause. Just a lovely tea party where you would all feel free to talk about whatever you felt was right.’

‘Yes ... yes, of course. Rose, you are quite right. Let’s just have those winged creatures my mother likes, and some of your buttery plain shortbread.’

‘Yes, ma’am. Butterfly cakes and shortbread, no suffragette colours.’

‘Suffragettes?’ said Amy, from her seat in the corner of the room, coming to the discussion late. She put down her knitting, which looked as if it was going to be a large black shawl. ‘I can’t believe you support them, Emma. So violent and unladylike. Why do these women want to smash things and ... chain themselves up ... and be so *loud* and *shrill*?’

‘No one is loud or shrill in my house, Amy,’ smiled Emma. ‘And if brave women are taking direct action, then it’s because they want the vote. “Deeds, not words” – that’s the rallying cry. Why shouldn’t women, who are every bit as clever as men, not have the right to vote? That is half the people in this supposedly democratic country whose opinions are discounted, just because of their sex.’

But Amy was determined to air her opinion this morning. ‘But *are* women as clever as men? I think men are so much wiser, and stronger, and really, where would we be without our fine menfolk to tell us how to go on?’

Emma looked at her cousin in surprise. Did she really believe that nonsense? Was she actually *simpering*? And who were ‘our fine menfolk’, in her opinion? Did she mean Desmond? What other man was there in Amy’s sad little life? Well, she needn’t appropriate Desmond to support her silly ideas. If she wanted a man to tell her – wisely and strongly – what to do, she’d better find one of her own.

Emma could not resist a quick sideways glance at Rose, to see what she made of Amy’s nonsense.

Rose’s face was composed into complete blankness.

‘Well, Amy, just because you think that, doesn’t make it true,’ said Emma, drawing a line under the subject.

Oh dear, Rose thought as she took her lists and instructions back to the kitchen. She could foresee ructions if Miss Langdale stayed around. She and Mrs Metcalfe were different breeds of women, entirely moulded by their life’s experiences. Mrs Metcalfe was agreeable, kind, which cost her nothing as her servants were there entirely to please her, and sometimes rather silly. But Rose loved working for her. She was very appreciative and approachable, and, really, what more did a cook want from her employer? Well, possibly a little more in wages ... and perhaps, one day, one of those electric toasters that Rose had heard about, but never actually seen. Still ... She thought of her friend Millicent, having to clean old-fashioned oil lamps

on top of all her work as a cook, and Rose acknowledged again how fortunate she was to work for the Metcalfes at Elizabeth House.

Miss Langdale, on the other hand, was altogether harder to fathom. Until this morning she had appeared to be quiet, mousy, and rather too self-effacing to be true. Now she had shown herself to be both old-fashioned and rather odd. Which man did she imagine was wisely telling her ‘how to go on’? It was that attitude of allowing others to make her life for her that had got her into the position of having to rely on a distant cousin for her food and shelter in the first place, instead of gathering her courage, looking for work she could manage to do and supporting herself.

Look at Louisa – a widow, and keeping going, no matter what. When Albert had fallen ill with his bad lungs, Louisa had nursed him as best she could, while continuing to run the hat shop, bringing home the making-up in the evenings so that she wouldn’t fall behind with the work; so that she was not imposing an unfair burden on her employee, Mrs Pullinger. In fact, Gertie Pullinger, whose own husband had been dead many years, had been a godsend then, seeing what needed doing and just quietly getting on with it before Louisa had even to ask. They were two courageous women, working hard and doing their best.

Whilst she made a pot of hot chocolate, Rose allowed her mind to wander to Louisa’s supposed ‘loan’ to Uncle Alec. How she wished she could rush off to Blackburn, redeem the clock from the pawnbroker, restore it to her mother’s mantelpiece, and still hand Louisa sufficient money that she could write off completely the funds she’d lost to her sponging brother. In her daydream, Alec turned up at number 26 Shallow Street while Rose was there making everything right, and she, Louisa and Daisy gave him such short shrift that he ran from the house to escape them, vowing never to return. Daisy, in particular, did not hold back, of course. Rose imagined her with her hands on her hips, yelling, ‘Thief!’ raucously down the road as he made himself scarce.

‘... shall I, Rose?’

It was Mary, and Rose, lost in her daydream, hadn’t heard her.

‘I’m sorry, Mary, what—’

‘Is that hot chocolate ready to take up to Mrs Metcalfe?’

‘Yes, please. And Miss Langdale prefers a cup of hot water with a slice of lemon. I’ll just do that now ...’

‘Fancy preferring hot water to hot chocolate,’ said Mary, rolling her eyes.

Rose smiled but didn't comment.

'I don't want to be a burden,' added Mary, in the querulous little voice Amy Langdale used. *'Oh, the food here is so rich. I'm not used to such extravagant dishes. I've heard her bleating.'*

'I think,' said Rose, carefully, *'that Mrs Metcalfe will manage Miss Langdale in her own way.'*

'Wretched woman,' Mary muttered. *'True enough, I'll not be the only one glad when she's gone.'*

Louisa, working by lamplight, stitching together the peak of a cap, wished she hadn't had to take the money Rose had given her. Rose was always generous, but on the last visit she must have given her mother almost every penny she'd earned that week.

Now that money was spent, and Louisa was eking out the few shillings that Daisy had earned. There was the money she had given to Alec from the drawer at the shop to pay back too. All the takings had to be accounted for, there was Gertie to pay, all the overheads on the shop, and she had nothing left with which to pay herself. The rent must be found, and how could she and Daisy manage without coal now it was winter? And how could they survive without food? Tonight's tea had been boiled cow heel, a cow heel being cheap on the market, but Louisa had really rather it had been something else. She wasn't fond of offal, and it had seemed to be mostly offal for tea these last few weeks.

'Mum, I think we'd better ask Rose what to do with this,' Daisy had said, poking the pale thing with her knife, a look of disgust on her face. *'I'm not sure you've got it quite right. It needs summat to disguise what it looks like, and mebbe to take the taste away.'*

'Well,' Louisa had replied, unusually impatient, *'you've two choices, Daise: take it or leave it. If you leave it now, you can have it tomorrow.'*

'So no choice at all,' Daisy had grumbled.

'Got it in one.'

Now it suddenly occurred to Louisa that it would be cheaper for her to close the shop and run the business from home, still employing Gertie and using the sitting room as both the workroom and the retail premises. That would work for the workroom, but who would traipse off to a terraced house in Shallow Street to buy a hat? No, that idea was daft. She had to

keep the shop in the town centre, and it was convenient to have the workroom behind it.

Then a very bad thought, mean and shaming, like a temptation from the devil, wormed itself into the corner of her mind: tell Gertie she couldn't afford to pay her any longer; she would have to find a new job. But no, she'd never hold her head up again if she let Gertie down like that. It was Gertie who had steered her through the utter misery of early widowhood, and it would be nothing short of criminal to repay her friendship in that disgraceful fashion. Whatever happened, Gertie must stay. Anyway, she was brilliant at her job, and Louisa couldn't do everything by herself.

There was no hope of redeeming the clock – or the pictures she'd taken from her bedroom walls, or the silver-plated sugar bowl she'd inherited from her parents and had kept safely in the sideboard – from the pawnbroker now. Louisa was sorry about that, but pretty things weren't a priority when you were having to eat cow heel; when the situation might get an awful lot worse very quickly. When you were fast getting up to your neck in trouble and your entire life was descending into secrets and lies.

The lies were the least of it, but Louisa hated being untruthful to her girls about the amount she had 'lent' to Alec. Too late now, and in any case they were powerless to help. At first it had been a few shillings. Then a few shillings more. Then a pound, then another, then two more. Now, every time the shop doorbell rang, Louisa dreaded that – rather than a customer to buy a hat – it would be Alec coming to ask for money.

And not merely to ask either, but to demand, with threats she could not risk ignoring.

The amount he had 'borrowed' from her was now a disaster in the short term, and Louisa was struggling to keep from Daisy just how little she had left. The cow heel, however, might have been the last straw. Daisy was not daft.

This was proved to Louisa the following day, when Daisy, tired and cross after a day of laundry and friction with Mrs Chapman, came home, plumped herself down on the unyielding sofa and said, 'Right, Mum, I've been thinking. I reckon we should go round to Uncle Alec's house on Sunday, when we can be sure he won't be working, and we'll demand the money back that he's taken off you, and we won't leave until we've got it.'

'Oh, but, Daise—'

'And if you don't want to go, I'll go by myself.'

‘No, Daisy, you can’t do that. I won’t let you.’

‘Then you’ll have to come with me. Surely the two of us together can manage to get your money back. C’mon, Mum, it is *your* money. And I suspect, what with the bloomin’ cow heel, and it being freezing in here, and the tea so weak it’s hardly worth drinking, that you might have lent Uncle Alec a bit more than you told us when Rose was here, am I right?’

Louisa opened her mouth to deny it, her instinct to cover up how far Alec had been able to control her, time and time again, but what would be the point now?

‘You’re right, love. Quite a bit more.’

‘He’d pay you back some of it, wouldn’t he? He said he would – you told me that. We really, really need to ask.’

‘All right, love, let’s try. We can see what we can get out of him.’ She owed this much to Daisy. ‘There’s nowt lost in trying, is there?’

But every waking minute between then and Sunday afternoon, Louisa was filled with dread about visiting her brother.

Louisa knocked at the door of Alec’s house and she and Daisy waited. Outside, the place was much like their own, but the windows and doorstep were grimy. Still, Alec lived alone and employed a woman to go in to do the rough work. Louisa had never seen this person – Sal, she was called, apparently – but she thought Sal might be old and frail and perhaps finding it difficult to put much effort into the work. It certainly looked that way.

After a couple of minutes, during which the visitors felt the eyes of Alec’s neighbours on them, and Louisa had to curb the instinct to flee, dragging Daisy with her, Alec opened the door. He was pulling his braces over his shoulders and tucking his shirt in his trousers. His hair was sticking up, uncombed.

‘Hello, Alec.’

‘Lou. And Daisy.’ He was clearly not pleased to see them.

‘Sorry to disturb you. I can see you’ve just got up. Are you ill?’

Not a good start, to begin with the word ‘sorry’. It’s him who should be sorry, not me. C’mon, Lou, don’t be so wet ...

‘No ... no ... I’m fine.’

‘Are you going to let us in, Uncle Alec, or do we have to say what we’ve come to say in the street?’ said Daisy loudly, setting out her stall.

Louisa whispered shushing sounds. The threat of disclosures being made in the street was not one she wanted batted back to her.

Alec opened the door to let them in. 'I'll thank you to keep quiet, you cheeky madam,' he said. 'I'm busy. Will it take long?'

'Busy? But haven't you only just got up?' jumped in Daisy, ignoring Louisa's warning glances.

'And if I have, what's that to you?'

He couldn't be both busy and just out of bed, Louisa agreed, but she pulled gently at Daisy's sleeve in warning and Daisy wisely chose not to answer.

Louisa and Daisy crowded in at the bottom of the stairs where they stayed, as Alec was blocking their route any further into the house.

'Well, I came to ask you if you could repay me some of ... um, repay all that money I lent you.'

'Oh, aye? What money would that be?' He acted out a ridiculous pantomime of total astonishment.

'You know what money,' Louisa said quietly, trying to keep her tone pleasant. 'Over several weeks now. Two shillings, then ten, then two shillings more, then a pound, then another pound, then two pounds that you borrowed when you came to the shop, then two more.'

Daisy's eyes were huge in astonishment. This was the first she'd heard of the real sum. 'That's six pounds and fourteen shillings, Uncle Alec! How did you think Mum could afford that?'

'Well now,' said Alec, standing his ground, 'I don't remember it being so very much. In fact, wasn't it more like a couple of pounds altogether? Two, I reckon, although mebbe I'm wrong and it was less than that.' He fixed Louisa with a hard stare and adjusted his considerable weight so that, in the tiny hallway, he was towering over the two thin women. Louisa felt suddenly small and powerless – and why had she allowed her precious daughter to come here?

'If Mum says it was six pounds and fourteen shillings, then it was,' Daisy said fiercely.

'I know no such thing. Did I give you an IOU? 'Cos if I did, I'd like to see it, just to check, like.' He held out his hand as if ready to receive the paperwork.

Of course, there was none.

‘It was that much, Alec, and each time you said you’d repay it. This has been going on for weeks now. Daisy and me – we’re having to do without. We’ve hardly owt to eat.’

‘Oh dear, poor you, Louisa. Poor little Daisy. Well, we can’t have that, can we? I tell you what ...’ He delved into his trouser pockets and pulled out a few coins. He picked over them in one palm and offered her two half-crowns. ‘There you are: five shillings. Now I can’t say fairer than that, can I, on a Sunday afternoon, when you turn up unannounced demanding money you say I owe you?’

‘Five shillings! You owe far more than that, Alec, and you know it.’

‘But even if it were true, and I’m not saying it is, where would I get that kind of money now – today – when you come here out of the blue? D’you reckon I’ve got it in my trouser pockets, just sitting there waiting for you?’ He turned out the linings of his pockets to show her, like some starving orphan searching for his last farthing. ‘You’re even dafter than you look if you think that.’

Louisa could now see how unlikely it was that she could just come along unannounced and claim her money. She’d have to return and try to negotiate the repayment of the rest, and she really didn’t fancy more encounters such as this. Even as she wondered what to do, Daisy, who had been speechless, exploded with anger.

‘What an insult! How dare you treat Mum like that? You know damn well what you’ve had off her. And you produce that and expect it will do?’

‘Daisy, love—’ began Louisa.

‘Well, there’s a word for folk who take from other people, and it’s not a nice one, Uncle Alec. Thief! That’s what you are. A thief. P’raps Mr Lancaster might be interested to know what kind of lowlife he’s employing —’

‘Daisy, please. Be quiet.’

‘Ah, shut up, you half-grown guttersnipe,’ Alec snarled at Daisy. ‘D’you think Lancaster’d listen to the likes of you: a scabby-looking laundry slavey? You wouldn’t get through the door of his office. Now get out, the pair of you. Go on, you screeching harpies. Get the hell out and don’t ever come round here begging again.’

‘Begging? You’re the one begging,’ yelled Daisy. ‘But don’t think you haven’t been warned—’

‘Daisy, please!’ Louisa was desperate to get out now in case, in the exchange of accusations, Alec started shouting about her, telling Daisy her terrible secret.

Suddenly a loud thump came from upstairs, as if someone had dropped something heavy on the floor. The silence that followed was intense. All three raised their eyes to the ceiling. Then Louisa stepped back and looked up the stairs.

‘What was that, Alec?’

‘It was nowt,’ he said. He looked angry now.

‘Is there someone here?’

‘I *said* it was nowt.’

‘But—’

‘I’ve never answered to you and I’m not about to start. Just go. Go on, clear off! If you come here again, I’ll punch you in the face!’

He reached across, opened the front door and, as Daisy stepped out, he practically pushed Louisa out after her.

Daisy had moved aside or she would certainly have been injured, but Louisa landed in a heap on the street in front of Alec’s house. He must have seen her fall but the front door, which he’d slammed, remained firmly closed.

‘Mum! Oh, good grief, are you hurt? Here, let me help you.’ Daisy helped her mother to her feet. ‘Where are you hurt? Show me.’

Louisa brushed off her coat.

‘I’m all right, flower. Just my ankle – I landed on it, but it might have been a worse fall if I hadn’t.’ She bent down, pulled aside her coat and lifted the hem of her skirt to inspect the damage. Already her ankle looked swollen.

‘Twisted, I reckon, or even sprained,’ said Daisy. She let out a huff of anger and a breathy curse. ‘Such a long way to walk home on it, too. Will you manage if you lean on me, d’you think?’

‘I don’t know, love. Just give me a minute.’

Louisa took a moment to compose herself, to catch her breath and square her shoulders.

The other annoying thing was that she hadn’t pocketed the meagre five shillings Alec had offered her, so she was no further forward in getting back any of her money.

‘Are you all right, missis?’

It was a middle-aged man. Neither Louisa nor Daisy had seen him approach.

‘I-I just tripped on the doorstep. I’ve twisted my ankle, but I think we can manage, thank you.’

‘Have you far to go?’

‘Across town,’ said Daisy, looking anxious.

Louisa felt her resolution to be strong crumble, and she fought back childish tears, so overwhelming was the infuriating feeling of helplessness. Alec could make her feel like that: like a little girl he could bully.

‘Reckon you could do with some transport,’ said the man, kindly.

He was a few years older than Louisa, his hair properly grey at the sides, and he wore a well-worn overcoat and a cloth cap. His blue eyes looked at her full of concern.

‘We could, sir,’ said Daisy. ‘I’m not sure how I’ll get my mum home without.’

‘I’ve my bike just over the way. I’ll just fetch it and you can ride home.’

‘Oh, but I don’t know how to ride a bicycle,’ admitted Louisa. ‘It’s right good of you, sir, but we’ll manage.’

‘I can see you won’t. I meant, I’ll wheel the bike and you can just sit on it. Better than limping, eh?’ He smiled encouragingly, encompassing Daisy in his plan with a twinkle in his eyes, and Louisa winced as she put her weight on her right foot. ‘Wait here. I’ll be right back.’

He quickly crossed the road and disappeared into a narrow ginnel between two houses.

‘Don’t say owt about why we’re visiting your uncle,’ cautioned Louisa. ‘It’s no one’s business but ours.’

Daisy nodded. ‘Course not.’

The man returned then with a black bicycle.

‘Now, you sit up, side-saddle, like, on the seat, with your other leg resting on the crossbar, and I’ll hold you upright and take you home, missis.’

‘Thank you, Mr ... ?’

‘Thomas.’

‘I can’t call you Thomas. We’ve only just met,’ smiled Louisa, feeling better for this man’s concern and kindness, where before, the afternoon had been nothing but horrible.

‘My name is, in fact, Thomas Thomas,’ said the man.

Daisy let out a crow of laughter; she couldn't help it.

'Yes, I know. My parents were lunatics, I reckon, but at least folk don't forget once they know.'

'Louisa Farlowe, pleased to meet you,' said Louisa, offering her hand.

'And I'm Daisy Farlowe.'

'And now, if you just help me onto my perch, I shall try to sit still. I really am that grateful, Mr Thomas.'

'Here, give me your handbag, Mum ...'

By the time Louisa, Daisy and Mr Thomas reached Shallow Street, he knew all about the hat shop, and Daisy's work for Bertha Chapman, and even about Rose and her job in service. Louisa spoke of her brother, just to explain why she and Daisy were in this part of town, but Daisy kept her word not to mention what had happened earlier. Both she and Louisa could hardly bear to think of it anyway.

The tea was very weak, as usual these days. Louisa and Daisy sat in the kitchen, which was the only warm room in the house. Louisa had her twisted ankle up on a chair.

'I liked the look of Mr Thomas,' said Daisy. 'He's got a kind face, and he rescued you like a knight in shining armour, Mum.' She giggled, aware of her own silly romantic cliché. 'It's a good job there's some good folk left in the world. For every Uncle Alec there needs to be a Mr Thomas, otherwise it would be hell on earth.'

'You're right,' said Louisa. She gave a little cough.

'I hope your cold isn't worse with that slow bike ride home.'

'So do I. But let's just be glad I was rescued or I'd still be limping across town in the damp air now.' She tried for a smile but she couldn't put her heart into it.

'I wonder who that was upstairs at Uncle Alec's. He didn't want us to know.'

'I'm guessing there's summat not nice about whoever it was, if he wants to keep him or her a secret.'

'Shame we didn't see, then. We could blackmail him,' said Daisy, laughing, and Louisa turned away to hide her face.

'Shall we go and get the money from Uncle Alec next week, Mum?' Daisy asked tentatively. 'I'll come with you.'

Louisa realised then that she had been defeated in every way. She'd been thrown out of her own brother's house, and she did not fancy going back and making another attempt to get her money.

'No, Daisy. I think not. It was bad enough this time.'

They both sat silently and glumly, and allowed this to sink in.

Then: 'Bugger it, we'll be eating cow heel again,' said Daisy.

Louisa opened her mouth to tell Daisy off for bad language and found herself laughing with an odd hysterical kind of mirth that was both laughing and crying at the same time. Eventually she subsided with a bout of coughing while Daisy came to stand over her, hugging her close.

'Whatever happens, flower,' said Louisa, wiping her eyes, 'I'll spare you that. There's your dad's little rainy-day fund – mebbe I need to borrow a bit from that. Just to be going on with ...'

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CHAPTER FIVE

ROSE WAS QUITE content to make up the extra time Mrs Metcalfe had allowed her to go to see her family. Advent was upon her, with all the festive preparations, and there was a Christmas cake to make. Getting on with the Christmas baking now would save precious time later.

Rose had told Millicent, whom she often met on Sunday afternoons, that she planned to do some baking in the time she owed Mrs Metcalfe, and Millicent had arranged to spend the time baking, too, and take a whole day later in the month for Christmas shopping, ‘... although Mrs Naismith wants only a tiny Christmas cake, and not iced either. She didn’t say why, but either she’s too mean to want to buy the sugar, or her teeth are so bad she can’t manage the icing once it’s set hard.’ She shrugged, deadpan. ‘Could be either.’

Rose had grinned and thought again how fortunate she was to work for the Metcalfes. Millicent took the attitude that the Naismiths were imbeciles and the only course of action was to rise above their absurdity with a sense of humour.

Everyone – upstairs and down – had gone out for the afternoon on this, the servants’ half-day, and Rose had the entire place to herself, with no one around to interrupt her.

The Christmas cake recipe was Grandma Gimson’s, and never bettered. Rose set to work weighing and beating, measuring and adding. She’d just got the cake into the oven, with a brown-paper collar tied round it to prevent it over-browning, when she thought she heard light footsteps on the tiled corridor outside.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’

There was no answer. Maybe she’d imagined it. She listened hard, keeping perfectly still, and the silence settled heavily so that, in the dimness of a winter afternoon, the atmosphere started to feel unsettling.

Daft lass – Elizabeth House was light and friendly, not at all creepy. But, no, it wasn’t the house that was oppressive, it was the feeling of having been watched.

Taking a leaf out of Daisy's book – and there were times when Rose recognised that her sister's approach to life wasn't entirely without merit – Rose marched out of the kitchen door and into the corridor in time to see a figure in black retreating into the shadows at the far end.

'Miss Langdale? Can I do owt for you?'

Amy Langdale turned, as if surprised to find Rose was there.

'Oh, Cook. I ... I lost my way. That is, I came through the wrong door. I ... I didn't know there was anyone here this afternoon.'

Well, that heap of explanations needed some unpicking, but never mind.

'Can I get you owt, Miss Langdale? I can bring you up a cup of tea, or hot water with a slice of lemon, if you'd like. If you'd rung the bell, I'd have come up. It's Mary and Terry's afternoon off, but I can get summat for you.'

'Thank you, Cook. I'd forgotten it was their half-day. Yes, please, a cup of tea, not too strong, if it's not too much trouble.'

'It's no trouble, Miss Langdale. Where would you like it brought up to?'

Amy looked undecided for a moment. Then she swallowed and said, 'Please may I drink it down here?'

'Here? In the servants' hall?'

Amy nodded. 'Is that what you call it? It just looks like a lovely big kitchen to me.'

'It's both, Miss Langdale. Those of us who work here sit at the big table for our meals, and to read the newspaper, and there are board games in a drawer.'

'I suppose I work here, too, after a fashion,' said Amy, now going ahead of Rose into the kitchen. 'I mean, I have to do as Emma – Mrs Metcalfe – tells me. Then Desmond – Mr Metcalfe – gives me a bit of pin money on Saturday mornings, before you all line up for your wages.'

Rose didn't think Amy had to do much for her pocket money, except make herself agreeable, and from what Mary had said, she wasn't even very good at doing that, but Rose merely nodded and indicated a chair.

'Please sit down, Miss Langdale, and I'll make you the tea.'

Rose set about doing that, using a small silver teapot, setting out a tray with a pretty cloth, milk jug and sugar basin, a bone-china cup and saucer. All the while she tried to work out what Amy was up to. Of course she hadn't forgotten that Sunday afternoons were the servants' half-day off. What had she come down here hoping to find? Why hadn't she gone off to

Harrogate, to the piano recital for which the Metcalfes had tickets? Creeping about, making up stupid excuses that didn't even add up ... Rose began to feel impatient. She wanted to tidy up and then start the preparations for the cold supper that the Metcalfes ate on a Sunday, but it seemed impolite to be bustling around ignoring Mrs Metcalfe's cousin. Rose certainly didn't want to sit down and drink tea with her, however. Amy might claim to work at Elizabeth House, but she had no place below stairs with Rose herself, Mary, Terry and little Hannah. Really, it was too bad, being interrupted like this ...

'Are you sure I can't take the tray upstairs for you, Miss Langdale?'

'No, thank you, Cook. I'll just sit here. After all, as I say, I am something of an employee here, too. I looked after my parents for a long time when they were ill and got quite used to a life of drudgery.'

'Mm ...'

Oh, please, Lord, just make her go away before I find I've actually told her to.

Amy sat awkwardly drinking her tea and Rose took her cake-making utensils off to the scullery for Hannah to wash when she returned from her afternoon with her parents. She might like to scrape out the mixing bowl and lick the spoon before she set to work. Rose had deliberately left a little of the cake batter containing a couple of pieces of glacé cherry for the child.

Rose came back into the kitchen and began to prepare a side of salmon, to be poached and served cold with watercress.

'What has Terry been doing this afternoon?' asked Amy, out of the blue.

'Terry?' Rose was surprised. 'I don't know, Miss Langdale. I don't remember him saying.'

'Do his family live nearby?'

'Dewsbury, I think.'

'I've never been to Dewsbury.'

Rose turned to look at Amy, wondering why they were talking about Terry – or at least Amy was.

Oh, I see ...

'Well, I know Terry is often back late on his afternoon off, Miss Langdale,' she lied. 'And Mr and Mrs Metcalfe will be returning soon. I reckon Mrs Metcalfe will want to tell you all about the recital.'

'Yes ... yes, I expect so,' murmured Amy. 'Thank you for the tea, Cook.'

Reluctantly, she got up and went out, looking disappointed.

No sooner had her footsteps faded on the stairs, but the back door opened and Terry blew in, clutching an umbrella and looking bedraggled.

‘By heck, it’s perishing out there, Rose. Make us a cup of tea, love, while I get my wet things off.’

‘I’m not your love, Terry, as well you know. But I will put the kettle on.’

Terry went off down the corridor to hang up his dripping coat.

‘Mm, your cake smells good,’ he said, coming back in, grinning.

Somehow he made it sound as if he were talking about her person rather than her baking, or perhaps she was misinterpreting, as Amy must surely have done about something. Rose didn’t like to think she herself was that foolish. ‘No one else back yet?’

‘No, although I expect Mary and Hannah are on their way. But I did have a visitor: Miss Langdale.’ Rose lowered her voice. She didn’t like to gossip but she thought Terry should be told that Mrs Metcalfe’s companion had a crush on him. ‘She most particularly asked about you.’

‘She did?’ Terry looked neither surprised nor displeased, which wasn’t the reaction Rose had expected. He was always slightly disparaging about Amy, dismissing her as sad and pathetic.

‘She’s just a lonely woman in a miserable position, which she hates. Don’t ...’

‘Don’t what?’

‘Lead her on. Encourage her silliness. She’ll soon stop her simpering when she sees how professional you are.’

‘Aye, quite right. Why would I cast an eye on her when you’re down here, all pretty with your rosy cheeks and your curls.’ He reached out and teased a lock of Rose’s hair, which had sprung loose from under her cap. ‘How about a kiss, our Rose, while the others are out? Could make it more than that later, if you play your cards right.’ His hand caressed her chin and he tilted her face up, moving in to kiss her.

Rose stepped back, tucking her hair back under her cap. ‘No, Terry. Enough of your nonsense. We work together, that’s all. Don’t spoil it.’

‘I’m spoiling nowt, love. I just reckon it could be more than that. We both live here, we’re both fancy free and we’d make a very handsome couple.’ He moved in again and Rose pushed him away.

‘I said, enough! Leave me alone.’

‘Terry trying it on, is he, Rose?’ said Mary, opening the back door in time to hear Rose’s protest. ‘Soft lad – thinks all the women fancy him. Isn’t that

right, Terry? Finds it difficult to accept that most just don't.' She looked at him disdainfully.

'Shut up, Mary. We all know what your problem is,' snapped Terry.

Rose glanced from one to the other and saw a flash of real animosity. They had always seemed to get on before – she thought everyone did down here – but suddenly the picture had changed, twisted, to reveal an uglier reality. Rose tried to think quickly what she should say. Hannah would be here any moment and she didn't want the child walking in on this.

'A bit of a misunderstanding, Mary,' she said. 'I'm sure Terry realises that we're all just folk who work together, nowt more, and we can *never* be more than that. Better we get along, especially as there's no reason not to – is there, Terry?' She looked hard at him until he nodded.

'Right, well, if you're making that tea, I'll go and change my clothes while it brews,' he said, and went out without looking at either Rose or Mary again.

'Tried it on with me a few times,' said Mary. 'Wouldn't accept I wasn't interested. In the end I threatened to tell Mrs Metcalfe. Mr Metcalfe might think the sun shines out of that one, but he'll always listen to Missis above anyone. There's a tip for you, Rose, if you need it.' She laughed vengefully. 'Mostly we understand each other now, but he's like a spoilt child at times. He just can't accept that he's not at the centre of everyone's world; that some of us don't care whether he's here or he isn't.'

'Well, thanks for your help, Mary.'

'I just happened to arrive at the right time, that's all.'

'Have I arrived at the right time?' asked Hannah, coming in, wearing a raincoat that was very old and much too big for her, and misunderstanding what was being said.

'Perfect,' said Rose. 'There a heap of dishes waiting for you in the scullery, and you can "test" any cake batter you can scrape out of the basin, see if I've got it right. Go and take off your wet things and I'll pour you a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, Cook.' Hannah grinned and disappeared off down the corridor, dripping rainwater.

'You don't think Terry would try it on with Hannah, do you?' asked Rose, quietly. 'Now I'm worried.'

'No, she's nowt more than a baby,' said Mary. 'And even if she wasn't, I reckon Terry would think a kitchen maid rather beneath him. Said he was

stooping to look at me when I told him to get lost.'

That evening, Rose made doubly certain her bed-sitting-room door was locked. She had been unsure for a while whether Terry was becoming overfamiliar, and now she thought she should have slapped him down weeks ago. She remembered the way he'd run his hand over her leg when he'd tucked her coat around her, that day he'd driven her to Leeds. She'd ignored it then, thinking it was accidental. Now she would have to pretend to forget what had happened, but that, of course, meant that they both would. Mary had neither forgiven nor forgotten, but most of the time she and Terry got on all right, superficially.

She shrugged off her anxiety and turned her attention to a letter home. She had heard from Daisy again earlier in the week. She and Mum had gone to see Uncle Alec last weekend to ask him to repay her money – 'and it turned out to be over six pounds, Rose' – but he'd come on nasty and thrown them out. Now, Daisy said, their mother had 'borrowed' a few shillings from the rainy-day fund Dad had left her, so they had a fire downstairs some evenings, and scrag-end stew to eat, rather than 'disgusting cow bits off the market'.

Rose thought it was a terrible pity their mother was having to use the nest egg so soon. It had been intended to provide for her if she became ill or couldn't work for any other reason and, if used now, it would be hard to pay back later, when circumstances might be even worse. And what if Uncle Alec started taking that, too? Still, it was no use writing this to Daisy. Instead, she offered her sister what advice she could without making her more anxious.

It's better if you and Mum don't go back to Uncle Alec's, Daisy. He's much bigger and stronger than either of you. If he wants to behave like a brute and a bully then it is better to avoid him.

In the meantime, I'm sorry it's offal, which is tricky to make nice and it needs cooking with care. I'm not keen on it myself, and when Mr Metcalfe asks for kidneys on toast for breakfast, I have to open the windows to let out the smell. You don't have to eat meat. You can make a lovely soup with just a few root vegetables, remind Mum. I'm enclosing a postal order for five shillings, which Mum can cash at the post office. I hope it will help take the edge off your and Mum's

worries and save her having to borrow any more from Dad's rainy-day fund ...

When she had finished, Rose folded the postal order into the letter, sealed the envelope and addressed it neatly. The money would help a little, anyway. If Uncle Alec was so dishonest and hard-hearted as to throw her out of his house, Louisa would certainly not be lending him any more of her hard-earned cash.

Rose put some thought to what she should send her mother and sister for Christmas. She would not be able to see them over the holiday, but Mr Metcalfe had said that in the New Year he'd get in an agency cook from Leeds and Rose could have a couple of days off. That was something lovely to look forward to. It would be wonderful to be at home, for Rose to see for herself how her mother and Daisy were, and for the three of them to look forward to all the possibilities that she felt a new year always presented.

It would be the second Christmas without her father, and Rose still felt a rush of sadness when she thought of him, his kind face, his gentle voice, so seldom ever raised in anger, so concerned as he was dying that his wife and daughters would be able to manage without him. Now it didn't seem as if her mother was managing quite as well as she might, but that was all Uncle Alec's fault. He'd surely keep away now he'd shown himself in his true light.

Rose tended to the little fire in the grate, placing the guard in front of it, then got undressed, put on her warm nightdress and got into bed. Soon she was asleep, but twice in the night she woke from a dream in which someone was noisily trying her door. Fully awake, she realised she had been mistaken. There was no one there. The corridor remained silent. It was only her peace of mind that was disturbed.

CHAPTER SIX

‘OH, LOVELY, SUMMAT from Rose,’ said Louisa, picking the envelope up off the kitchen table where Daisy had left it for her.

‘So I saw, Mum. What does she say?’

Louisa opened it.

‘There’s a Christmas card, with a robin on it and glitter, see? And ... a postal order. Oh, but, love, I’m glad of this, I have to admit.’

‘I know, Mum,’ Daisy said quietly.

... Happy Christmas to you both, and I hope you’ll be able to get a bit of Christmas dinner with this. If you buy a little chicken, you can make it do for lots of meals, and boil the bones for soup.

‘Can we actually have a chicken, Mum, please? I don’t remember when I last ate chicken.’

‘I don’t know, flower. You know I’ve been short of money lately, and you know why. It seems a bit rash to be buying a chicken. There’s always the coal to pay for, and the rent.’

‘But you said the shop was doing all right, and Rose says a chicken will do several times. I won’t expect a Christmas tree or presents or owt, but just summat nice to eat would be lovely. And we won’t have a pudding. Just a bit of chicken and a roast potato each, and some gravy. Please.’

‘I’ll see, love ...’ Louisa said, torn between wanting to please Daisy, who asked for so little, and doing the sensible thing of buying essentials only.

Even with a little chicken to eat, it was going to be a very low-key Christmas.

Christmas was over at Elizabeth House. Rose was tired after the largest and most sustained amount of cooking she had ever done, but pleased everything had gone well when so much of the success of her employers’ festivities had rested on her shoulders.

‘The most delicious Christmas dinner ever,’ Mr Metcalfe had told her the day after Boxing Day, as he handed each of his staff in turn a generous Christmas bonus. The house had been full of visitors for nearly a week: some different ones each day, and some who were staying for a couple of days or longer, including Mrs Langdale, Mrs Metcalfe’s mother. She had been very complimentary and had presented Rose with a little box of chocolates to thank her for the special effort she had made. Mrs Langdale was very particular about her breakfast, and Rose had gone out of her way to make everything perfect. She knew these things mattered, and also that keeping Mrs Langdale happy was important to the overall mood of the occasion.

Rose had been a little worried that her working relationship with Terry was going to be marred by his over-familiar behaviour, but, as with Mary, at least superficially, that seemed to have been put behind them and was not referred to again. Rose, with so much cooking to do, found the thought of his bold rudeness receding to the back of her mind, although she did not forget to bolt her bed-sitting-room door carefully at night.

She was due to go home for a very short holiday early in the New Year, when the celebrations were over, and was counting the days until then, full of excitement to see her family. She had kept the chocolates Mrs Langdale had given her, in their pretty box with a violet-coloured ribbon across one corner, as a present for Louisa, and before Christmas she’d sent both her mother and Daisy some warm felt slippers.

Rose really wanted to add her Christmas bonus to her teashop fund in the golden syrup tin, which had not been growing at all lately, with the need to send home as much of her wages as she could spare, but as her mother had given Uncle Alec more than six pounds, Rose knew she would still be scrimping on her daily expenses.

For three days she almost added her bonus to the tin, but every time she opened her wardrobe door to take out the makeshift money box, she thought better of it. The rule was strictly that her funds would go only one way: what went towards the teashop fund was *only* for the teashop. She’d broken the rule once, but never again. In the end she squirrelled her bonus away in a compartment at the back of her purse to give to Louisa when she went home for her holiday.

Twice over Christmas, Amy Langdale had appeared in the servants’ hall like a thin black crow, casting a melancholy and restrictive air in the

mourning clothes she still wore for her parents. The first time she sat around aimlessly, as everyone was very busy with their tasks: Rose cooking, and Hannah clearing and tidying to order around her. Mary had gone to dust and vacuum the morning room while the Metcalfes and their guests were out walking off the huge amounts of food they had consumed, and Terry was out in the stable yard, doing something with the car.

Soon bored with trying to pretend she belonged there, much to Rose's relief Amy took herself away with a rather sulky, 'Well, you're clearly too busy to make me welcome.'

'What did she want, Miss Farlowe?' murmured Hannah. 'Oughtn't she to be upstairs, doing whatever she does all day?'

'I think she's in a difficult position,' Rose confided quietly. 'She's finding it hard to work out her place.'

'Well, I don't reckon it's down here,' said Hannah, surprisingly forthright. 'P'raps I should ask her if she'd like to help with the washing-up, if she's at a loose end.'

'I wouldn't if I were you, Hannah,' said Rose, trying not to smile at the idea of the tiny twelve-year-old bossing Amy Langdale about. 'As far as we are concerned, Hannah, Miss Langdale is Mrs Metcalfe's cousin and a long-term guest in this house. Please remember that and then you won't go wrong.' She didn't want Hannah to speak out of turn in front of Amy, even if the child did hear Mary regularly grumbling about her and copying her plaintive voice in a very accurate impression.

The next time Amy came down, it was halfway through a long afternoon in which everyone was taking a well-earned break. Terry was sitting at the big table, reading the *Daily Mail*, Mary was darning the elbow of her warm jumper and Hannah was cutting a frieze of Christmas trees from a sheet of newspaper.

Rose looked up from the novel she was reading to see Amy hovering by the door from the corridor, watching everyone. The look on her face was one of longing, like a child peering into a cake shop.

'Can I help you, Miss Langdale?' asked Mary, standing up at once when she saw her.

'Oh, I just came down to see ... to see what you're all doing,' she said.

'You should have rung, Miss Langdale, and I'd have come up to you,' insisted Mary, ignoring what Amy had said. 'Shall I bring you a cup of hot water?'

‘Er, I’ll just sit here, if I may, and join in,’ said Amy, sitting herself down on an upright chair next to where Terry had been slouching before he, too, had risen to his feet.

Mary caught Rose’s eye, but Rose pretended she hadn’t seen. This was awkward. The talk up until now had been friendly enough, but sparse. These were hard-working people who didn’t feel the need to entertain each other, and silences were acceptable. Indeed, ‘a quiet afternoon’, in every sense of the word, was a treat.

It was unclear what Amy thought she was going to ‘join in’ with as everyone was getting on with whatever they each wanted to do. Quiet settled over the room again.

‘Right, well, I think I’ll finish this later,’ said Mary after a minute or two, rolling up her jumper. ‘I’ve the drawing-room fire to check on before everyone comes back from their walk.’ She got up, took her pinafore from a hook, put it over her head and was through the door to the corridor in seconds, tying the strings behind her as she went.

‘I’d better be getting on, too,’ said Terry, folding the newspaper. ‘Excuse me, Miss Langdale.’ He got up to leave.

‘Oh, Terry, I wonder if you’d do something for me. I don’t want to be a nuisance, but the ... the catch on my room window is very stiff and I can hardly move it.’

‘Of course, Miss Langdale.’

‘I’ll show you which one if you have time now,’ went on Amy, looking sidelong at Terry from under her eyelashes and with what might have been her idea of a winsome smile. ‘If you don’t mind?’

‘There’s no need, Miss Langdale, thank you. I’ll soon find which one needs easing.’

‘Oh, but you might not. I’ll come up with you now, shall I?’

‘As you like, Miss Langdale. Please, after you.’ He stood aside to let her go first.

Rose was now trying to catch Terry’s eye to convey a ‘What on earth is going on?’ look, but Terry, his face a mask of professionalism, was avoiding looking at her and followed Amy out into the corridor at a respectful distance.

When they had gone, Hannah said to Rose, ‘Miss Farlowe, do you think Miss Langdale really has got her window catch stuck?’

‘Oh, I expect so, Hannah,’ said Rose. She had no idea whether or not she was lying. She didn’t know what to think.

When Terry came back later – quite a long time later – his face was inscrutable.

‘All fixed?’ Rose asked casually as she started the preparations for dinner.

‘I reckon I made a good enough job of it,’ he replied.

‘Terry ... ?’

‘What?’ His look was suddenly hard and hostile.

‘Just be careful.’

‘Rose.’

‘What?’

‘Shut up and mind your own business.’

On the third day of the new year, when Rose was thinking about what to take home with her for her two-day holiday, Mrs Metcalfe called her up to the morning room. Rose thought it was to discuss the food she’d ordered in for while she was away, when the agency cook was taking over.

‘Oh, Rose, there you are,’ said Mrs Metcalfe, looking plump and pretty, sitting in a big armchair. ‘Good morning to you, although I’m afraid I have some rather bad news.’

‘Good morning, Mrs Metcalfe. Good morning, Miss ... Miss Langdale.’

For a moment Rose was distracted by Amy’s dress, which she recognised as a cast-off of Mrs Metcalfe’s, and must have been made over to fit, as Amy was both shorter and thinner. It was the first time she had seen Amy not wearing mourning, and the pretty, cherry-red striped cotton was a surprising distraction. The dress had looked lovely on Mrs Metcalfe, but Amy was too thin for the low square neckline and, perhaps because she had always worn black before, on her the dress looked strangely garish. All this passed through Rose’s head in a moment and then she was back to the bad news.

‘Yes, Mrs Metcalfe?’

‘I’m afraid that the agency cook we engaged is unable to come, Rose. It seems she has caught a chill and it’s gone to her lungs, poor woman. I’m so sorry, but I’m afraid you won’t be able to have your holiday after all. You’re needed here. The agency can’t find another cook for us at such short notice, what with it being this time of year, and, well, there it is.’

‘Oh! Oh, no!’ The words shot out of Rose’s mouth before she could stop them. She had been so looking forward to seeing Louisa and Daisy again that for a few seconds she thought she might actually cry with disappointment.

‘I’m very sorry, Rose,’ said Emma Metcalfe again. ‘But you see, we can’t do without a cook, can we? You are crucial to us. Were you to spend your holiday with your family?’

Rose nodded, almost too stricken to speak. Eventually she gathered herself. ‘I was. I ... I’ve been looking forward to it. They are expecting me tomorrow. They will feel so disappointed – I feel so disappointed – and let down.’ She couldn’t find it in herself to be gracious – why should she?

‘Well, you write and explain, and I will send a telegram to let them know you won’t be there, so they won’t worry. That’s the main thing, isn’t it?’ Emma Metcalfe smiled, trying to jolly Rose out of her consternation. ‘I’m sure they’ll understand how important you are to us. Let Terry know the address, please, Rose, and I’ll compose a message and ask him to go and send it this morning. We’ll arrange another time when the agency has someone available. Don’t worry, Rose, you won’t miss out on your holiday altogether.’

‘... how important you are to us’? Not as a person, with a family to visit. No, Mrs Metcalfe, just a useful person to cook for you, someone so ‘important’ that I’m valued at just thirteen shillings a week. Absolutely invaluable!

Rose was beyond caring that her anger and indignation must be apparent on her face. All her plans – everything she wanted to ask Louisa and Daisy about how they were managing; the Christmas bonus she’d put aside to help them; the little presents she’d been given and saved to pass on to them; best of all, just the wonderful prospect of seeing her favourite people in the world – all just swept out of reach at the last moment. All that work, all the planning of the orders and the advance preparations, all the organising of the food to make this a lovely Christmas and New Year for the Metcalfes. And in return: nothing. Complete disregard. Mrs Metcalfe couldn’t care less about Rose and her family. All she cared about was her own comfort and showing off her capacity to entertain in front of her guests.

‘I’ll make sure Terry has my address for you to send the telegram, Mrs Metcalfe,’ Rose said stiffly. ‘Thank you for doing that for me this morning

so my mother and sister are not worried when I don't turn up tomorrow, as we've been planning. I shall go and do that now, if I may?'

'Yes ... yes, of course, Rose.' Mrs Metcalfe sounded flustered now, as if she realised for the first time that Rose had been looking forward to her holiday, that it mattered to her even if it didn't matter to Emma herself.

Rose didn't know how she got herself back downstairs without slamming every door on her route. It was too bad, it really was! It was worse than too bad – it was cruel; selfish and cruel. She had thought the Metcalfes good people to work for, far better than her previous employers, the mean people in Roundhay with the dissatisfied staff. Well, the Metcalfes were no better; they just had longer arms and deeper pockets, but the same disregard for their servants when it came down to it. 'Crucial', 'important', but finally, 'well, there it is' – so telling.

Rose hurried to her bed-sitting room, where she shut her door firmly and locked it, then threw herself on her bed. She felt too angry to cry now. She wanted to pack her bags and go, just walk out and leave the Metcalfes to manage their own lunch, and their own dinner. See how quickly they found an agency cook then!

She knew she was being childish, that she was just the cook here and not anywhere near the top of the list of Mrs Metcalfe's considerations. The whole point of servants was to serve, not to be treated as family members by their employers. But the disappointment of having the holiday she had so looked forward to postponed to some unspecified future date was completely crushing.

There was nothing for it – she must keep saving up towards her own little business, her tearoom. Her freedom. She lay there, seething and resolving to save all the harder.

After a while there was a light tap on the door and Mary's voice outside, asking her if she was all right.

Rose got up and unbolted the door.

'Not really, Mary. The agency cook can't come so Mrs Metcalfe has postponed my holiday.'

'I heard. Oh, Rose ... I'm that sorry. I know how much you were looking forward to seeing your mam and your sister. But you will be going later, won't you? You'll see them in a few weeks?'

'I expect so. It's just ... well, you know.'

‘Aye, service has its drawbacks sure enough. Tell you what, come Sunday, when it’s our half-day, why don’t you and your friend Millicent come to our house? It’ll be a change for you, and my mam likes a houseful. She says it hasn’t been the same since my brothers left home. I’ll let her know this afternoon when I go to fetch Mr Metcalfe’s indigestion tablets from the chemist.’

Rose nodded, overcome with the unexpected kindness.

‘Thank you, Mary,’ she murmured. ‘I’d like that a lot.’

‘Good. Now c’mon out and give your address to Terry, who’s hovering like a wasp to send this telegram to your mother. I hope she doesn’t see the telegram lad and think you’ve died or owt.’

‘So do I. I suppose it had better go to the shop. And, thank you, Mary.’

That night, the holiday moved back to some unspecified date, and a letter to Louisa and Daisy with Rose’s own version of events posted, Rose locked her room door and quietly took the golden syrup tin from the back of her wardrobe. She tipped it out onto her bed, trying to keep the clink of the coins to a minimum. There was no one down here as far as she knew – Terry, Mary and Hannah slept in rooms off an attic corridor – but she wanted the tin of savings to remain a secret.

For the first time ever, she counted up the shillings and the odd sixpenny piece. There was just over a pound.

She lay back and stared dry-eyed at the ceiling, her fears confirmed. How could she ever save up enough to have her own tearoom, her freedom? There was so far to go – so very, very far.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT HAD BEEN a huge disappointment to Louisa and Daisy not to see Rose, as expected. The arrival of a telegram at the shop had sent Louisa's heart racing in panic for a few moments, until she had read it and seen that the news it bore was at least no worse than the postponement of Rose's holiday.

An angry letter from Rose had arrived to recount in seething detail the conversation in which Mrs Metcalfe had told her that her holiday was not to take place for now. Louisa herself was torn between anger, and recognition that Mrs Metcalfe was, to her mind, just a poor helpless woman who couldn't manage anything for herself, but provided employment for other women who did it for her. But it was a changing world, and Louisa also thought that the days of useless, idle women like Mrs Metcalfe were numbered. By the time Emma Metcalfe was a grandmother, her way of life as it was now would probably be ridiculed as a spoilt woman's indulgence.

Still, Louisa and Daisy had had plans for Rose's holiday, and they'd had to shelve them. It was a downright pity.

Now it was halfway through January and the days were not yet noticeably longer, the weather miserable. Louisa and Gertie had had hardly any customers for a couple of days, so they had been working by lamplight on the cloth caps that were the backbone of their stock, and a few ideas for inexpensive hats for spring weddings. Every woman liked to have a new hat for a special occasion but not many had much to spend. This was where Louisa, with her talent for sourcing bargain fabrics, won out. She had a few hat blocks on which to fashion the stiff bases, and with Gertie sketching ideas she'd garnered from magazines, and having an eye for making much of a little when it came to the trimmings, they made a good team. Louisa also offered a service making over old hats, steaming and retrimming to give them a new lease of life. This had proved to be a popular option for women on tight budgets.

'Why don't you go now, Gertie?' said Louisa, about halfway through the afternoon. 'I can finish these caps and deal with any customers who are

prepared to brave the rain. I doubt I'll be overwhelmed.'

'Probably not, but it's good of you all the same, Louisa. I'll take these magazines, have another look this evening, and we can start on the construction of the spring wedding hats tomorrow.'

Gertie departed, clutching her bag of magazines to her chest and angling her umbrella in the other hand to try to keep it dry.

Louisa propped the workroom door open so she could see as well as hear any customers arriving.

Within a couple of minutes of Gertie's departure, the shop doorbell rang and Mr Seymour, who collected Louisa's rent for Mr Lancaster, both here and at home, came in, dripping rainwater from his hat and jacket.

'Ah, Mrs Farlowe, all by yourself today?' he opened, which made Louisa think that he had seen Gertie leaving and maybe waited to make sure she was quite gone before he'd come in. Seymour had a shifty manner, not open and cheerful, and Louisa found it hard to like him, although she had no evidence that he was in any way dishonest. He had been doing the job for a year or two now.

'What can I do for you, Mr Seymour?' she asked.

'Well, it's the rent, Mrs Farlowe.'

'But it isn't due today, Mr Seymour. I'll have it for you at the end of the week as usual.'

'That's good to know, missis. But I've come to tell you that the amount due is increasing, beginning this week.'

Louisa's heart sank. Not more expense, and when she was hardly managing as it was. She swallowed and gathered herself for the bad news.

'How much will it be, Mr Seymour?'

'Ah, well, these premises in the centre of town are always in demand with businesses like yours and—'

'How much?'

'It's going up to six shillings. From Friday.'

'*What!*' Louisa clutched the side of the counter, hot and breathless, and she felt her cough squeezing her chest. 'But ... but that's double,' she said, reaching for the chair provided for the convenience of customers. She hoped she wasn't going to faint, alone with this man she didn't know and whom she instinctively did not like. She didn't want to cry either. She felt, if she started, she would be unable to stop.

This was the very worst news possible. It meant the end of her business. She could never keep on the shop and workshop, pay Gertie, pay for her overheads and everything else.

Overwhelmed, she reached for her handkerchief and allowed herself a lengthy cough while she fought down panic and decided what to say to Lancaster's man.

'But ... but can Mr Lancaster do that?' she asked eventually.

'His property, missis. He can charge what he wants. I'm just here to give you notice of the increase. I suppose you could take it up with Mr Lancaster himself, but he's a busy man and he'll just tell you to sling your hook if you can't pay. Oh, he'll say it politely, but it'll amount to the same: you'll be out. There might be cheaper shop premises and it's your choice if you want to go and find one.'

Louisa put her hands to her face and tried to think what to do, but her mind was scrambled with the shock of the size of the rent increase.

'Right ... well, Mr Seymour,' she said eventually, 'I shall have to think what I can do. I might have to leave here, but I need to ... to work out what my choices are. I ...' She stopped to gain control of her trembling voice. '... I will let you know on Friday, when you come to collect the rent.'

'Yes, Mrs Farlowe,' said Seymour. 'I'll see you then.'

He left, shutting the shop door very firmly behind him. The bell jangled loudly.

Only when the shop had been totally silent for ten minutes did Louisa find the strength to move from her chair and go to turn the sign on the door to 'Closed'.

'Mrs Farlowe! Mrs Farlowe!'

Louisa looked round under her umbrella to see who was calling her in the street. It was Mr Thomas – she hadn't seen him since that Sunday afternoon when he'd helped her home on his bicycle – and the sight of his gentle, intelligent face was a comfort to her. She tried to put the rent increase out of her mind for the moment, the probable death-blow to her business. She didn't know Mr Thomas well enough to confide in him, and it would be terrible, after his kindness to her, if he thought she was telling her story to try to get money out of him.

Forget the rent for the now. Shoulders back and a big smile ...

‘Mr Thomas, what a nice surprise to see you in the centre of town. I remember you live opposite my brother.’

‘Aye, Alec Gimson,’ said Thomas. It was impossible for Louisa to know what he thought of Alec from his neutral tone. ‘I’m meeting some fellas, who live nearer here, having a beer and some fish and chips,’ he said. ‘One of my friends has a birthday to celebrate. Poor night for it, though.’ He raised his eyes to the sky, and Louisa held her umbrella higher in a gesture of sharing. ‘What about you?’

‘Oh, just on my way home from my shop – *Louisa Farlowe – Hats.*’

‘Oh, yes, I remember you telling me.’

‘It’s just there, Millside Street.’ She pointed.

He nodded, then cleared his throat. ‘I hope you won’t think it too forward of me, Mrs Farlowe, if I say I’ve been thinking about you ... wondering how you’re getting on, like. What with the circumstances in which we first met.’ He looked almost shy, but concerned, too.

‘Thank you, Mr Thomas, my ankle is quite better. I’m sure it healed quicker with not walking home on it that day, so that’s all down to you. I’ve not forgotten your kindness and nor has Daisy.’

‘Think nowt of it. Anyone passing would have done the same. And you’ve got a grand lass in young Daisy.’

‘Well, we are both grateful to you.’

They chatted for a minute or two about Christmas. Mr Thomas had spent the day with a couple who also worked at the mill. He’d wanted to go to his sister in Rhyl but there hadn’t been time. Louisa told him how disappointed she was that Rose hadn’t been able to have the holiday the family had been looking forward to early in this new year.

‘That’s hard on you all,’ said Mr Thomas. ‘Service has its advantages, but you’re very much at the beck and call. I’m not sure it would suit me. I think a lot of folk are thinking that way these days.’

‘But isn’t it like that at the mill?’ asked Louisa. ‘You’re there long hours, and there are few holidays – just Wakes Week and the bank holidays.’

‘True enough, but the hours are very regular. No unwelcome surprises. Well, few, anyhow ... Right, this is where I need to be, Mrs Farlowe, so I’ll wish you a good evening. It’s nice to see you again.’

He held up his hand in a casual wave and turned off in the direction of King Street.

A few moments of friendly chat, a kind word – what a nice man Mr Thomas was. Louisa felt pleased to have seen him again, to brighten this most miserable of afternoons.

It had been fun at Mary Lawson's parents' house, drinking tea and chatting. Mary had enjoyed having Rose and Millicent there too – 'Mam and Dad can be a bit overwhelming when it's just me' – and this Sunday they repeated the outing. Rose took a tea loaf she had baked, having asked Mary if her mother would appreciate that.

'I don't want to tread on your mum's feet, but I'd prefer not to go empty-handed.'

'She'll be pleased to have your cake, Rose,' said Mary. 'Mam loves to cook, but she understands sharing.'

The tea at the Lawsons' was an afternoon full of laughter, with Mr Lawson, who was the stationmaster at Crossthwaite station, recounting the most ludicrous of incidents involving lost luggage on the trains.

'One fella turned up asking if we'd found a banana. Said he'd mislaid it the previous week – I ask you! Once we had a hysterical young couple rushing back to the station, saying they'd left their baby on the train. They returned just in time to see the train, baby on board, heading up the track. It all ended happily, but I reckon they remembered to take it with them after that.'

One of his tales was about a very uptight young man who had returned to the station, much concerned about his forgotten bag. Of course, Mr Lawson and his young deputy, Davy, had opened the bag when they'd found it, 'to make sure there was nowt in it that could endanger the public,' Mr Lawson explained. 'You read in the newspapers about anarchists and what-have-you, and it's my duty to protect the public. Anyway, what did we find? Nowt but a gigantic pair of lady's pink frilly bloomers.'

Rose, who was sitting across from her, saw Mary's eyes twinkle and her mouth move silently over the words 'gigantic pair of lady's pink frilly bloomers' in unison with her father. Rose realised this was a favourite tale, which had probably grown in the telling.

Of course, Mr Lawson and Davy had to pretend they knew nothing of the contents when the young man returned to retrieve his bag.

'Young Davy nearly burst himself, he was trying so hard not to laugh. I had to flap him out of sight until Mr Respectable had hurried away. Very

furtive, he looked, an' all.'

Everyone was laughing heartily when Mrs Lawson said, very reasonably, 'Now, Harold, I've been thinking, and I reckon as this young man was just some poor jobbing actor, whose role at the time was as a pantomime dame, and the bloomers were just part of the costume. In fact, all in a day's work for him.'

Mr Lawson gave this proper consideration. 'Could be, love, could be. But where was the rest of the costume? One bag only, devoted entirely to the conveyance of bloomers!'

The party erupted with laughter again.

'P'raps he was a door-to-door salesman and this was his sample,' suggested Millicent, mopping the tears of mirth from her eyes.

'Could be, young Millicent, could be.' Mr Lawson nodded. 'But did he specialise in massive bloomers only?'

The words 'massive bloomers' started everyone off again and the tea party got very lively before it was time for the young women to thank Mr and Mrs Lawson for their hospitality and depart.

'Well, thank you for the invitation, Mary,' said Millicent, when she came to the turn-off in the road. 'I'll write to your mam and dad to thank 'em properly. I'll think of this grand afternoon while I'm washing the glass of those wretched oil lamps. It'll keep me going.'

With a wave and a resigned smile, she set off towards the Naismiths' cold and rather dark home, and Rose and Mary continued on to the well-lit and up-to-date Elizabeth House.

'Poor Millicent does have a lot to put up with at the Naismiths', said Rose. 'They never seem to think of ways to make the lives of their staff any easier. It's as if they're not getting their money's worth if everything isn't old-fashioned and difficult. I wish there was a place for Millicent at Elizabeth House.'

'Well, she's not having my job, and I doubt you'd want to give up yours for her,' said Mary, which reminded Rose that Mary wasn't always easy-going. The hand of friendship was extended only so far and no further. Still, she had been very supportive over that awkwardness with Terry ...

The young women reached the steps down to the back door and let themselves in. One light was on in the kitchen and Hannah was sitting at the big table, her head down on her folded arms, her tiny shoulders heaving.

‘Ah, Hannah, what’s the matter?’ asked Rose, putting her coat over another chair, while Mary, with a roll of her eyes, went out to the corridor to hang hers up.

Rose’s first thought, perhaps because she’d been thinking about that time Terry had made a move to kiss her, was that he’d tried it on with Hannah; worse, had succeeded. Mary had said Hannah was safe from Terry’s attention, but what if she wasn’t?

‘Hannah, c’mon now.’ Rose offered a clean handkerchief from her dress pocket. ‘Dry your eyes and tell me what’s up.’

Hannah cried harder and Rose rubbed her back for a minute or two until she decided she really needed to get on with the cold supper the Metcalfes had on a Sunday.

‘Now, Hannah, if you’re not going to tell me what’s up, can you please go upstairs and lie down? You’re starting to worry me, but I can’t have you crying all over the table while I’m trying to prepare a salad.’

Realising time had been called on her weeping, Hannah looked up and mopped her eyes, which were swollen with crying hard for some time.

‘It’s me dad ...’ she gulped.

‘What about him?’ asked Mary, bluntly, coming back in. ‘He’s not dead, is he?’

‘N-no ...’

‘So? C’mon, Hannah, we haven’t got all day.’

‘He’s got me ... a new job.’

‘What? You’re leaving us?’ asked Rose.

‘Have you told Terry? He’s the one to tell Mrs Metcalfe,’ said Mary.

Hannah shook her head. ‘Terry’s not here yet. But I daren’t. I don’t want Mrs Metcalfe to be cross with me.’

Rose and Mary looked at each other. Really, Hannah had some very silly ideas sometimes.

‘She won’t be cross, Hannah. She’ll have to know, and you’ve a right to work where you want. Don’t worry,’ said Rose.

‘She’ll just get in another girl to take your place,’ said Mary, which made Hannah start to cry again.

‘Why don’t you tell us about your new job, Hannah, while you get that range stoked?’ said Rose pointedly.

‘It’s at a printworks,’ Hannah said, eventually. ‘Me dad reckons as the pay and *prospects* are better’n in service. He says the days when service

was summat to aim for have gone, and girls like me will do better in industry.'

'Did he, indeed? Well, then, there's nowt to cry over, is there?' said Mary.

'But I like it here,' wailed Hannah.

'Mebbe you'll like it at the printworks,' suggested Rose. She was fond of Hannah, but was realistic enough to know that skivvies came and went, and, with luck, someone with a bit more gumption might take up the job.

'I won't,' said Hannah. 'I know it! What use am I at a printworks when I can't even read?'

'Heck, really?' asked Mary. 'I can see what you mean.'

Rose and Mary looked at each other nonplussed. A printworks didn't sound like the obvious place of employment for someone who was illiterate. It was hard to know what to say now.

Then Rose decided Hannah's future career was nothing to do with her, and it really was time to tackle the cold poached chicken.

'I expect you'll be working where that isn't a problem if your dad's already secured the job,' she said encouragingly. 'So dry your eyes and let's have no more fuss. You might love your work there and make lots of new friends.'

Hannah started sniffing again. 'It won't be like here, though,' she lamented. 'And there won't be nice stuff to eat like you make, Miss Farlowe.'

'I'm sure someone will feed you until you learn to feed yourself,' Rose replied, her patience fraying.

Oh dear, she really should remember that Hannah was just a child, and not a very bright or confident one.

Terry arrived back then, moving in a cocky fashion and looking pleased with himself.

Neither Rose nor Mary asked him about his afternoon, but in the end he volunteered that he'd spent his half-day in Leeds and met a couple of dancers who were appearing at the Grand Theatre.

Before he could get to the point of this account, Mary interrupted with: 'Young Hannah's got a new job and is leaving us. We'll be sorry to see her go, won't we, Terry?' She looked at him hard while he stared at Hannah, flabbergasted. 'Won't we?'

'Aye, I reckon so,' he conceded. Then spoilt it by adding, 'Thought you'd be skivvying here for ever, Hannah. I could see you washing up the pots for

Mrs M's grandchildren. Never mind, I don't doubt we'll replace you easily enough.'

'Terry!' hissed Rose, as Hannah's face grew pinker and she looked as if she might start crying again. 'Hannah's feeling very upset to be going. It's her dad that's got her a new job and it's a big opportunity for her.'

'No doubt. Where you off to, Hannah?'

'Alf Cooke, the printworks south of Leeds.' She whispered the words like a confession. 'I'm starting a week tomorrow.'

'Ha! Well, good luck with that. I'll tell Mrs M, and we'll see about finding someone else. Now, I'm off to change my clothes.'

He went out and the women heard him opening the door to the back stairs.

'Right, Hannah, please would you make sure there's nowt needs washing up and then I could do with some help here,' said Rose.

Hannah disappeared to the scullery, leaving Rose and Mary alone.

'That's bad news,' murmured Rose. 'I know she's a bit slow and clumsy, but we were making real progress with training her up, and she's always willing. We'll have to find someone else quickly. We can't manage without.'

'Mam might know of someone – I'll ask. Although if Miss Langdale thinks she fits in down here, p'raps she might like the job.'

Rose raised her eyebrows. 'She has been hanging around here like left luggage, hasn't she? Poor woman, at home neither upstairs nor down.'

Mary smiled briefly at the reference to her father's entertainment. 'I reckon illiterate little Hannah will fit in at the printworks rather better than Amy Langdale does in Elizabeth House,' she said quietly. 'And I don't like the look of what might be developing between her and Terry. I just hope there's not some massive trouble brewing.'

'Mm. I know what you mean. We both saw her standing around in the yard while Terry was cleaning the car yesterday.'

'Batting her eyelashes and making herself look ridiculous. And it's all "Terry says ..." upstairs. I wonder Mrs Metcalfe hasn't warned her off, but mebbe she doesn't think owt of it; or thinks nowt will come of it.'

'Well, in that case let's hope she's right,' said Rose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘GOODBYE, HANNAH. COME back and see us when you get the chance,’ said Rose, waving off the child for good the following Sunday morning. She turned back into the kitchen with a sigh. ‘I wish she hadn’t gone. She was doing all right. Also, I’m still owed my holiday, it’s nearly February, and now I can’t take time off until we’ve got the new girl up and running. I’d really like to see my mum and sister.’

‘That’s the problem with there being so few of us,’ said Terry. ‘We’re now equal in number to the Metcalfes, if you count Amy.’

‘Which I don’t,’ said Mary.

‘Shush ...’ warned Rose, as they all heard the now-familiar tread of Amy’s feet along the corridor.

‘Good morning,’ said Amy, aiming her greeting at Terry and smiling coyly. ‘I thought I’d just come to see Hannah off.’

Rose didn’t believe this for a moment. Amy was here to make cow eyes at Terry. This morning she wore, as so often these days, a dress that had been Mrs Metcalfe’s. This one was navy blue piped with scarlet to suggest a military kind of look. It had been dramatically stylish on Mrs Metcalfe, Rose remembered. On Amy, with her short neck and sloping shoulders, it looked as if it was out of the dressing-up box.

‘I’m afraid Hannah’s already gone, Miss Langdale,’ said Rose.

‘Oh, no!’ gasped Amy, grabbing Terry’s arm as if in anguish. ‘Oh, I am sorry to have missed her. I should have come down before we went to church.’ She made a ludicrously misjudged show of reaching for her handkerchief from her sleeve.

‘Don’t overdo it now,’ murmured Mary, raising her eyebrows.

‘You haven’t missed her by long,’ said Rose. ‘You could always go after her. I expect she’s still walking down the drive.’ She hoped she hadn’t overstepped into rudeness, but Amy’s silliness was starting to get on her nerves.

‘Perhaps I should. Come with me, Terry?’

‘I’m afraid, Miss Langdale, I was just on my way upstairs to see about the decanters. Here, though, let me get the door for you.’ He went over to the back door to the stable yard, through which Hannah had left three minutes earlier, and opened it politely. ‘Not too cold today so you won’t need a coat just to go down the drive. Not with that fine warm dress,’ he added.

Amy’s face betrayed uncertainty: had she been complimented or not? She clearly didn’t even want to go running after the kitchen maid, but she had put herself in this position by inventing this whole charade to be here now, to look like she cared about Hannah and was one of this company, alongside Terry.

‘Oh, I expect she’s gone now, while we’ve been talking,’ she said.

‘Er, right then ...’ said Rose, ‘I’d better be getting on.’

‘I was hoping you’d help me with the decanters,’ joked Terry.

‘Go on with you,’ Rose replied, rolling her eyes, and both Terry and Mary smiled.

Amy found herself standing alone in the kitchen. Terry had gone upstairs, Rose had disappeared to do something in one of the larders and Mary had gone to tidy the sitting room. It was infuriating, the easy way these servants talked among themselves, leaving her out of their circle. Terry and Rose – Amy was sure Terry looked at Rose with admiration, and why would he not, when her dark hair curled so prettily around her face and somehow her clothes, for all they were so plain, always looked right on her? She seemed to have an easy way with Terry and Mary, and had been kind to little Hannah, and she got on with Mrs Metcalfe, too, treading the fine line between ease and respect perfectly. No doubt she was very pleased with herself, ruling the roost down here. ‘I’d better be getting on,’ she’d said, as if Amy were a waste of her time. And now she considered it, Amy thought she’d seen a little exchange of pitying smiles between Mary and Rose.

So I’m a figure of fun, am I? she thought. Well, Rose Farlowe, just see who has the last laugh. You might be the queen of the kitchen, but I have a position both here and upstairs.

She looked around the empty room and, just out of spite, picked up the little collection of cooking utensils Rose had laid out on the table ready to use, opened one of the deep drawers underneath, in which the board games

were kept, and dropped them in. It was petty and pointless, she knew, but it made her feel superior to Rose ... for about two minutes.

‘Now, this new girl – what’s she like?’ Terry asked Mary while they ate their lunch before taking their afternoon off.

Lunch had been rushed because Rose couldn’t find her implements, which, after she had searched all over, she found in the pastimes drawer in the kitchen table. Rose suspected a pointless act of spite, and the only candidate was Amy, but she shrugged it off.

Mrs Lawson’s neighbour’s sister had recommended the new skivvy and Mary had approached Mrs Metcalfe directly with this girl as a replacement for Hannah.

‘Her name’s Augusta Foggerty. She’s aged thirteen and ... well, while I’m not sure she’s my ideal skivvy—’

‘Do you have an ideal skivvy?’ asked Terry.

‘Aye. It’s someone who doesn’t keep interrupting,’ retorted Mary. ‘She’s quite big and strong for her age – the opposite of Hannah – so that’s good. And she’s very keen, so that’s two good things.’

‘Mary, for some reason I think you’re about to say “But ...”,’ said Rose. ‘What’s the thing that isn’t good?’

‘Well, she is a bit of a talker.’

‘A gossip?’ asked Terry. ‘We can’t have that.’

‘No, I mean she speaks a lot. And her voice ... it’s quite loud. But I reckon we’ll get her to keep the volume down before she’s been here a day or two.’

‘Mary, now I’m beginning to feel anxious,’ said Rose. ‘Hannah was largely silent, except when she’d broken summat. We’re all pretty quiet down here.’

‘Oh, but Augusta will be well up for carrying the coal scuttles,’ said Mary. ‘And we were desperate. Mam says she asked loads of folk in Crossthwaite if they knew of anyone wanting the job, but all the young girls are looking to work in factories, if they’re not there already. Better pay, better hours, and they get to live at home with their mams.’

‘Oh dear ...’ sighed Rose. ‘I think I’m missing Hannah already.’

Augusta Foggerty announced herself with a very loud knock on the back door at the appointed time late that afternoon.

‘Eh up, this is grand,’ she practically shouted, when Rose showed her into the servants’ hall-cum-kitchen. ‘How do? I’m Augusta Foggerty. I expect you’re Rose, aren’t you? Or should I call you Cook? Or Miss Farlowe? See, I’ve learned all your names already. And I met you t’other day, Mary Lawson. My aunt’s sister-in-law is your mam’s neighbour – see, I’ve remembered; I’m not daft. And, Terry! Sorry – Mr Ecclestone. I gather you’re in charge. When do I get to meet Mr and Mrs Metcalfe, because—’

‘Stop! Augusta, I know you’re excited to be starting your new job, but can you please pipe down?’ said Mary.

‘But—’

‘Now, immediately!’

Silence settled over the room. Rose felt her eyes were wide with dismay at the sheer energy fizzing around Augusta and the noise she made, and she looked at Terry and saw he looked as horrified as she felt. Mary’s face was pink, as if she was embarrassed and would like to apologise.

‘Augusta, we go about our work quietly,’ said Mary. ‘You are the youngest and newest, and you answer to all of us, but mostly to me and Miss Farlowe. This means you listen, but you say nowt unless you are asked to. Is that clear?’

‘Oh, yes, of course, Miss Lawson. See, I thought, with me just arriving, I’d get to know you all quickly, like,’ Augusta boomed. Her voice carried as if she were trained for the stage.

‘Augusta,’ said Rose, trying not to raise her volume to match the girl’s now that normal speech sounded like a murmur in comparison, ‘please will you just be quiet for a moment? We’ll give you a week’s trial and see if you suit. If, after that, we think you aren’t for us, or we aren’t for you, then we’ll let Mrs Metcalfe know and you will be allowed to leave.’

‘Yes, Miss Farlowe.’

Rose, Mary and Terry all looked at her as if expecting her to continue. Thankfully, she didn’t. Perhaps she was a quick learner.

‘Now then, Augusta, if you can come with me and bring your bag, I’ll show you your room and explain where some of these doors lead,’ said Mary, and quickly led the way to the back stairs.

‘Heaven help us,’ muttered Rose. ‘I think I’ll ask again how Mrs Metcalfe is getting on with engaging the agency cook.’

Terry laughed sarcastically. ‘Oh dear, baling out within ten minutes. I hope you’ll remember that this is all down to Mary. It’s her that’s landed

you with Augusta Foghorn. Now, I'm off to set the table. I don't doubt Amy'll be haunting the dining room, waiting for me.' He laughed again, clearly indicating he thought Amy Langdale was something of a joke.

It was rude and unkind. Rose thought of Amy, wearing Mrs Metcalfe's cast-offs, flouncing about in what was probably the first pretty dress she had ever worn, trying to attract the admiring glance of the only young and single man in the house – her cousin's footman.

'Terry ... about Miss Langdale. I've seen the way she ... hangs around you, how she tries to flirt. I don't think she's had the chance to meet many young men, and I reckon she's mebbe a bit innocent. It would be awkward if she didn't realise her manner could be ... misunderstood, don't you think?'

There was a pause while Terry looked at Rose with an expression that was very hard to read. He wasn't angry, as she thought he might be; more considered, even calculating.

'Don't worry, Rose,' he said. 'I'll make sure there's no misunderstandings.' Then he straightened his striped waistcoat, pulled back his shoulders and went out to the stairs to the green baize door to the hall without looking back.

Louisa was very anxious about the shop. The rent for the premises was due tomorrow. Sales were down in January. Perhaps everyone was being thrifty after the expense of Christmas and New Year. Louisa had told Gertie the bad news about the rent doubling. It was only fair to warn her that there was a chance the shop might have to close so that she would have time to make other plans for her working life.

Louisa debated with herself whether to tell Daisy about the shop rent, but it seemed unnecessary to burden her with that when Christmas had come and gone almost unnoticed at home, and Daisy had had so much more anxiety on her young shoulders than any sixteen-year-old should have. If Louisa did have to give up the shop, at least she would be able to work at her millinery alone in her sitting room. No, tell Daisy when she needed to know, but not just yet.

Louisa hadn't seen Alec since that fateful Sunday when he had thrown her and Daisy out of his house. She wouldn't go there again. She would rather he kept her money than he insulted her, bullied her with threats and lies and then behaved violently towards her.

She didn't know what she could believe of the things he had told her. She didn't even know whether he really worked for Mr Lancaster. It was Seymour who collected rent from her, both here at the shop and for her home. Supposing Alec did work for Mr Lancaster, why did he need money from her, and why now?

The sad truth, Louisa decided, having pondered this through various prisms of half-truths and lies from Alec, was that his jealousy of her, the youngest of the family, which had festered from their childhood, continued to nag him. Added to this, he had grown into a monster of hatred when she had made, but with the very best of intentions, a mistake that neither of them would ever forget. He had bided his time, living only across town, one eye on his little sister, waiting for the right moment to exact his revenge. Albert was no longer here to protect her and, ironically, it was his little rainy-day fund, which he had saved for her so carefully, that had led to the mess she was in. How she wished, when Alec had come to the shop that first time, pretending to care about her, asking if she was managing, that she had buttoned her lip about the money. Unintentionally, she had revealed to him that the time had come when he had something to gain, while she had everything to lose.

Now, not only had she given him most of Albert's little nest egg, but the secret Alec held against her was in danger of becoming known. For years at a stretch she had been a loving wife, a gentle and devoted mother, a milliner with a modest business she was proud to have established through her own hard work, and she had forged friendships with Gertie Pullinger and several of her neighbours in Shallow Street. Through all those years, the awful truth had lain dormant, buried so deep behind her respectable life, behind her good character, that it was as if it had faded to almost nothing; that it would never come to light. But now Alec had made clear that her secret wasn't buried deep at all. On the contrary, it lurked so close to the light that it was just a whisper away from being made public. It would be *her* shame and therefore her punishment, and he would be pointing the finger.

She wasn't sleeping well, and was starting to make mistakes at work, ruining one of the occasion hats with a clumsy spillage of glue, wasting precious time over another by stitching in the lining the wrong side out. These were basic mistakes. Gertie thought she was worrying about the rent increase and tried to reassure her.

But it wasn't only the rent increase, although this had been a blow at the worst possible time. It was the thought of what Alec could reveal if she didn't do as he asked. It was the fact she was waiting for him to turn up and ask for money from her, and then would have to face him down until the point, which they both knew would come, when she caved in to him. He could name his price and, in the end, she would have to pay or risk the consequences.

A week after Seymour had told Louisa that her rent on the shop was increasing, Alec came back. Strangely, just as Seymour had, he appeared almost as soon as Gertie had left for the evening.

'Hello, Louisa,' he said. 'Thought I'd just come by and see you. See how you're doing, like.'

Louisa was already twisting her hands together.

'No you didn't,' she said. 'What do you care about how I'm doing? Have you brought me the money I lent you?'

'So demanding! That's not very friendly, Lou,' he said, shutting the shop door behind him and turning the cardboard sign hanging on the door to 'Closed'. 'I think you've forgotten I told you I'm working for Mr Lancaster. Well now, he told me he has a mind to increase the rents on his houses. But, as a favour to you, I suggested he keep the rents along Shallow Street the same and raise 'em across town instead. Didn't like to think of you struggling. Now, I could have said nowt and just let him do as he was intending, couldn't I? But I thought of you and your girl and, well, it's better all round like this. Because, the way I see it: Lancaster keeps the rent down and you lend me a couple of pounds now you're not paying him extra, just to tide me over, like. What do you say?'

'Two pounds on top of what you already owe me? Don't be ridiculous! Where am I going to get that much? The rent's three shillings a week, not two pounds. And the rent on this place has gone up so much I don't think I'll be able to keep going very much longer.'

'Oh, what a shame. But you must still have *summat* of that little nest egg Albert left you, Lou? I remember you telling me about it when I first came by here. That day I bought a really nice cap off you, and you didn't even offer me a discount. Did I kick up a fuss about that? I did not, although some folk might have thought you a very shabby sister for charging me full whack. Anyway, here I am, just looking for a bit of a loan, and I'm seeing ungenerosity towards me again. Well, if word got out, most folk might think

it out of character, but they'd soon learn that it's not all sweetness and light with you. Is it, Louisa?'

Louisa swallowed. This looked like turning into the kind of encounter she'd imagined and dreaded. She found herself holding her breath, refusing to answer him. The shop was silent but for the ticking of the wall clock.

Then, just as Alec opened his mouth to speak, the door flew open and Daisy rushed in, her thin face pinched with cold but also with fury.

'Mum! Oh, Mum, that Mrs Chapman is the most hateful old baggage I've ... Uncle Alec! What are you doing here?' She glanced at him and at Louisa, pale and frightened, and read the situation immediately. 'You'd better not be sponging off Mum again.'

'Don't you speak to me like that, Daisy Farlowe,' Alec snarled.

'Like what? Like you're someone who's already borrowed far more than Mum can afford and left her all worried, and we hardly have owt to eat and the coalman doesn't deliver, even though it's winter, 'cos Mum wouldn't dream of having owt she can't afford to pay for, and making folk wait for their money. Not like you. And you threw us out of your stinky house when she went to ask for it back. *Her own money!* And looking at you now, I reckon you're trying it on again. Isn't that right, Mum?'

At last Daisy ran out of breath.

'He is asking for a loan, but it's all right, Daisy love. I don't want you involved with this. It's between him and me.'

'That's right,' said Alec. 'So you can stay out of it.'

'Rubbish!' yelled Daisy. 'How is owt just between you and him, Mum, when *neither of us* is warm and fed? He takes your money and doesn't care about us. He's shown that already. Well, Uncle Alec, you can just go and get lost 'cos I'll not let Mum be bullied by you any more. Go on, sling your hook!'

She pointed towards the shop door, standing back so he could leave unhindered. It was a magnificent display of righteous anger, but unfortunately Daisy lacked the size to back up her words with any action. She might be tall for her age, but she was like an overgrown waif. Alec could push her over with one hand if he wished, and he knew it.

'Now listen here, you little b—'

'Name calling?' said Daisy, fearless, planting her feet squarely, her hands on her hips. 'Aye, I've heard there's some names being hurled in your direction, and none of them nice.'

‘How dare—’

‘Because it’s the truth. Sponger and bully – those are my choice. Would you like to hear what other folk are calling you?’

‘I—’

‘No, Daisy, please,’ begged Louisa, but Daisy was unstoppable now.

‘Immoral! Pimp! Ex ... explor— exploiter!’

Louisa’s hand was over her mouth in shock that her daughter should know anything of that kind of man, more especially that she should shout those words in here – in Louisa’s respectable little shop – at her own uncle. Her precious flower had turned instantly from a bold but sweet girl into a brash young woman, a brazen hoyden. Did Daisy even know the meaning of that terrible word ‘pimp’? Was any of this true, or had Daisy somehow dug deep to get even with Alec and mined an unpleasant seam in her character that contained words she was old enough to know but too young to have the wisdom not to use. True or lies, it was awful, all of it!

At least she had shut Alec up. He looked ready to explode, but without a word he marched to the door and flung it open with such force that it crashed back against the casing around the shop window and the door glass cracked clean across. Then he turned and pointed a threatening finger at Daisy.

‘You ever speak that slander about me again, Daisy Farlowe, and I’ll have you and your mother evicted from Shallow Street. So just keep your traps shut in future, the pair of you.’

He marched out, leaving the broken door wide open.

Louisa shuffled wearily across to close it. She’d have to see if she could afford to have the door reglazed tomorrow. It looked a mess, as if the shop were derelict. Then she sat down on one of the chairs provided for customers, and Daisy took the other. A heavy silence descended. Louisa put her head in her hands. She was trembling.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ murmured Daisy eventually. ‘Didn’t mean to make it worse. It’s just that after this afternoon ...’

‘I know, love, I know. But such passion! Such terrible accusations!’

‘I reckon it’s all true. Betty told me the other week that Uncle Alec had been getting a bit of a reputation at the mill for ... taking advantage of the women who were finding it difficult to make ends meet.’

‘No, I can’t believe that.’ Even as she said it, Louisa realised that wasn’t true. She *could* believe it; she just didn’t want to.

‘Yes, fixing up these women with men who pay him, then paying the women just a bit of what they give him. He’s not at the mill himself now, but Betty says she thinks he’s still running this other business.’

‘Disgraceful. Oh, those poor girls. They must be desperate. They’re probably just women with unforeseen expenses to meet, not ... not the kind who hang around the streets touting for business.’

‘Then, today, Mrs Chapman’s sister, Sal, came in while I was dollying. She’d got herself an embroidered shawl and had only come by to show it off. Mrs C was getting snappy about it – they only ever try to score points off each other and be nasty – and I could hear them bickering. Next thing, it turns out Ma Chapman was accusing Sal of being a tart for “that piece of muck Alec Gimson” – except she didn’t say “muck” – and I was straining my ears, having heard Uncle Alec’s name, and it turns out Mrs C’s sister is the Sal who I think you told me cleans for Uncle Alec, except, turns out it isn’t the cleaning she does.’

‘Good gracious,’ said Louisa. ‘Well, that explains the state of his doorstep, anyway. I wondered why the place was so grubby. I thought Sal was mebbe old and decrepit, but now I see how you might be right. Oh dear.’

The sound from upstairs that bleak Sunday she’d gone to Alec’s house to ask for her money, and then he had become angrier and thrown her out – well, perhaps it had been Sal, plying her trade but not by cleaning the house.

Despite herself, Daisy smiled. ‘Ah, Mum, you’re too nice. Trust you to be concerned about his doorstep and pitying poor old Sal. Well, she’s not old and feeble at all, although she really is a disgusting creature, with a tattoo on her chest that says summat like “fun and games down here”; you can see it when she leans over because her dress is cut too low – and then Mrs C started getting snappy with me. Well, I’d had enough by then, what with Mrs C having a sneer on her face when she looked at me, as if I’m the same kind of person Uncle Alec is. Anyway, Mum, I couldn’t bear it any longer, so I picked up a cold, dripping-wet shirt and I flung it right in her face, and then I told her what she could do with her nasty job and I walked out.’

‘Oh, Daisy. Oh, love, you’ve left your job?’ For a moment Louisa found it difficult to take in. She relied on Daisy’s wage more with every passing

day, small though it was. She felt a stab of panic. They would be living on air and whatever Rose could send.

‘And flooded the place. I made sure to kick over the dolly bucket on my way out and the water went everywhere.’ Daisy looked defiant.

‘That was naughty. You know better than that, love. I don’t care one bit for Mrs Chapman and her wretched laundry, but you really shouldn’t have behaved like that. The woman’ll still be mopping up tomorrow morning.’

‘Good. I’d like to think she will.’ Daisy’s face crumpled then. ‘Oh, Mum, I’m sorry. I know I need the job and we can’t manage without my pay, but when I heard that vile witch talking about Uncle Alec, and she knew I could hear and it was like she was tarring us all with the same brush, it was like the last straw. I’ve been tempted to walk out a few times on account of her penny-pinching. Nowt I did was good enough, but I hadn’t the means to do it any better.’

Daisy sniffed into her handkerchief and mopped her eyes.

‘Anyway, that’s why I came round here: to tell you I won’t be going back to the laundry. I was going to try the mill, but I’m not sure I want to be linked to Uncle Alec there either. Good thing Betty warned me. Better look elsewhere for work. Then I find Uncle Alec here, being horrible to you, and, Mum, when I first came in you looked so frightened that I knew right off what he was up to. He’s not gone off with more of your money, has he?’

Louisa decided to come clean – at least about that.

‘No, but he’s working for Mr Lancaster, our landlord, and he hinted he could make trouble for us. I’m worried Lancaster will put up the rent at home’ – she didn’t mention the shop rent had doubled; that would only add to Daisy’s misery – ‘and I won’t be able to pay.’

‘Sorry, Mum. I’m sorry I left the laundry now, too. I was just so angry.’

‘I know, Daise. Tomorrow you’ll have to find another job, that’s all. Mebbe you’ll get summat you like and it will all work out.’

Daisy hugged her mother in acknowledgement of her encouraging words.

‘I’ll go and see the glass door man tomorrow, so you and Mrs Pullinger can get on with your hats straight away,’ she said. ‘At least I can make myself useful.’

‘Thanks, love.’

Louisa put out the lights and locked up. Then she and Daisy walked home almost in silence, their backs bent with the weight of their worries, their steps dragging.

Louisa feared that Alec would not give up on his sponging. Already he was back, and nastier than ever. Now Daisy was out of work and the situation was looking bleak indeed. A modest and decent life – that's all Louisa had ever wanted, for herself and her family. How was she to manage even that now?

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CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS SATURDAY morning, and as usual the servants at Elizabeth House were queueing up to receive their wages one by one. Mr Metcalfe made a point of wishing Rose a happy holiday. As Rose left Mr Metcalfe's study, she heard Augusta talking loudly and excitedly non-stop to Mary as the two of them waited, while Mary stood silently, her lips pursed as if she just wished Augusta wasn't there.

Rose was conscious every week that she no longer kept up her former ritual of putting away a little of her pay in her golden syrup tin. Now that Daisy had stormed out on Mrs Chapman, Rose knew it was important to send as much as she could to her mother.

When Louisa had written to tell Rose that Daisy had had a falling-out with Bertha Chapman and left the laundry, she hadn't gone into details, but Rose could imagine the scene: Daisy losing her temper and saying far too much, then flinging out in a whirlwind of defiance. Daisy had never been happy there but she had to work; she had to pay her way.

Since the day when she had made the mistake of counting her scant savings, Rose had decided that it was easier to hang onto the dream of one day owning the elegant tearoom if she didn't engage with the cold hand of reality, yet the dream was too precious to let slip away altogether. Without it, she was just a cook in a nice, although not grand, house, turning out delicious food month after month. Yes, the Metcalfes were, for the most part, good employers – now her holiday was actually to happen, Rose had put her previous disappointment behind her – and, yes, they were appreciative of Rose's skills, but the months would turn into years, and nothing would change. Terry had cruelly told Hannah that he'd envisaged she would be washing up for Mrs Metcalfe's grandchildren; Rose sometimes feared that she would eventually be cooking for them. The Metcalfes would move on in their lives, the dynamic upstairs evolving with babies, marriages and more babies, but down here life would be as if set in aspic, like one of Rose's veal terrines: everything always exactly the same. She had a good job here, but sometimes she felt like a caged bird and she

wanted to think there might one day be the opportunity to spread her wings and see where they would take her.

Rose tried not to feel resentful that she was sending so much of her pay home, but she was only human. She had a right to her ambition and to try to make her dreams come true, but at this rate she knew they never would. She might be living in Yorkshire, but she was and would always be a part of the family in Blackburn, and sometimes she felt as if they were tying her down.

Daisy had a new job, as a cleaner, but the prospect of her keeping this wasn't looking good. Louisa had reservations already, as she had written to Rose.

I reckon the work is not much different from working for Bertha Chapman. Daisy's boss is someone called Mr Tisbury. He employs quite a few women to clean houses and shops when there's a change of tenant. It's hard work as they don't have long to get everything done, and I gather Daisy is doing her best with just one bucket of water and a mop. Of course, the premises don't belong to Mr Tisbury. He just runs the cleaning business. Turns out quite a few of the buildings belong to Mr Lancaster – him that owns our house and the shop.

Well, I suspect your uncle Alec was in on what happened one day. There was a complaint from someone working for Lancaster to Tisbury about the standard of the cleaning, and Lancaster refused to pay. Turns out it was Daisy's work, so then she didn't get paid by Tisbury. She says there was nowt wrong with what she'd done and it was Alec's way of getting back at her for some quarrel they had in January. Since then it's happened again a time or two. I don't know what to do. Alec works for Lancaster. I don't want my lass to have to give up her job because her uncle has got it into his head to bully her too. Where will it end?

Rose wondered what the quarrel between Daisy and Uncle Alec had been about. She guessed it concerned him asking Louisa for more money. That was very bad news, and the first time Louisa had written with open acknowledgement of her brother's bullying, and real anxiety about it. Rose noticed Louisa had not mentioned anything in this letter about herself and how she was managing. That in itself spoke volumes.

Still, tomorrow Rose was going home for her delayed holiday at last. Her pay put safely away in her purse, Rose lay back on her bed and enjoyed a little frisson of joy at the thought of seeing her mother and sister again. It was time for her to be starting preparations for the lunches, but the feeling of excitement was too good not to enjoy wholeheartedly for a private minute or two. Home with Mum and Daisy ... the three of them together again after all these months. It was going to be wonderful.

There was a very loud knock on Rose's bed-sitting-room door.

'Miss Farlowe, shall I make us all a cup of tea?' boomed Augusta.

'Yes, please,' Rose called back, trying to keep her own voice low in the unlikely hope that Augusta would eventually start to copy her. Time to get up and begin roasting those potatoes.

Augusta was good-natured and willing, but, oh dear, she made so much noise. The one good thing about Augusta's voice was how peaceful it was whenever she stopped speaking. Unfortunately, this happened neither often nor for long.

While Rose was finding it difficult to cope with Augusta's volume, Mary had run out of patience altogether.

'Augusta, will you please, just once and for all, shut up?' she demanded the following morning, while Rose dished up the last breakfasts before her departure for Blackburn, and Augusta prattled on about her dislike of kipper bones. 'My head is splitting and you're driving me completely insane.'

Rose and Terry looked askance at her bluntness, but Mary really had reached the end of her tether and was beyond being kind or even reasonable.

'I'm sorry, Miss Lawson, but I've got to speak, like,' Augusta shouted. 'I can't help it if I'm naturally loud. That's what my mam says. She says—'

'Shut up! Shut up, and don't ever open your mouth in my presence again. You're not even trying to keep your voice low.'

'Neither are you!' snapped back Augusta, surprising everyone. She had been polite and biddable until now. 'I'd say yours is louder, and at least I'm trying to be quiet. You're just shouting at me. It isn't fair. I can't help being loud,' she wailed, loudly.

'Aaah!' screamed Mary, flinging her fists in the air. 'Get out, get out, get out. Go and don't come back. I'd rather lay the fires and wash up myself than put up with the row you make for one day longer.'

‘You can’t sack me,’ yelled Augusta, tears springing to her eyes. ‘I’ve done nowt wrong.’

‘I just have done,’ said Mary, red in the face with fury.

‘Mary—’

‘And you can be quiet too, Terry. I’m having none of your sarcasm.’

Rose and Terry exchanged glances again. Mary could be sharp, but they had never seen her angry like this before now.

Rose pulled Augusta into the scullery and closed the door.

‘What have I done? I can’t help my voice,’ Augusta yelled. ‘Please don’t let her sack me.’

‘Just wait here, Augusta, and I’ll see what I can do. Have you a handkerchief? Well, blow your nose and then please be quiet.’

Rose felt she was being two-faced, but she couldn’t help her reactions. She didn’t mind if Augusta left – she longed for the old days of the shy, softly spoken Hannah, and everyone going peaceably about their business – but she didn’t want Augusta to go now, immediately, and jeopardise her long-delayed holiday. If the agency cook refused at short notice to come to a house with no kitchen maid, then Rose would not be going to see her family. If the agency cook turned up and only then discovered, as she very quickly would, that the kitchen maid had left that morning, she would likely be leaving herself. Rose imagined a telegram from Mrs Metcalfe arriving at 26 Shallow Street within an hour of Rose herself reaching the house, summoning her back to Yorkshire without delay.

No, Augusta must stay, at least while the agency cook was there. It was only for a couple of days. In the meantime, Mary and Terry could see about finding a replacement for her.

Rose took a deep breath and went to find Mary to negotiate with her.

Rose passed by the pawnbroker’s shop on the way to her home, but the clock had gone from the window. She wasn’t surprised – it had been months since she’d seen it there – and she wouldn’t have been able to buy it and take it back to Louisa anyway. Every week she’d sent a postal order home and she now had little money left to brighten this holiday with a few special treats for her mother and sister.

At the top of Shallow Street, Rose paused, as usual, to look for the distinctive blue curtains, and so pick out her mother’s house in the row of identical dwellings.

From that distance the house appeared just as ever, but as she approached, she saw that it looked somehow sad and a bit scruffy, as if it was tired or defeated. She tried to pin down why this was. It might have been the dusty-looking windowsill ... or that the doorstep wasn't quite as bright as it usually was. It wasn't filthy, but it looked a little neglected.

Rose let herself in with her key and called out as she put her bag down at the bottom of the stairs.

'Mum, Daisy! I'm here.'

'Hello, love.' Louisa came out of the kitchen. 'I'm right glad to see you at last.' She was hugging Rose before Rose had time to look at her properly, but Rose felt how slight her mother's shoulders were, how bony her skinny arms.

When she pulled away Rose saw that her mother looked aged beyond her years, worry and hardship written clearly on her face.

'Mum, I've been looking forward to this since before Christmas,' said Rose, trying to keep the conversation natural and cheerful rather than press Louisa into revealing how things were before Rose had hardly removed her coat. 'It's lovely to be home. Where's Daisy?' She hung her coat over Louisa's on a peg.

'She's gone to work. Tisbury – him that I mentioned in my letter – he sometimes asks the women to go to clean on a Sunday, and Daisy thought she could do with the money.'

Rose nodded. 'Still, I'll see her in a bit. Shall I make us a pot of tea?'

'I'll do it.'

'No, you go and sit down, Mum. You look tired.'

But Louisa followed Rose into the kitchen and sank down onto a chair there while Rose filled the kettle and set it on the range. All the time, Rose was trying surreptitiously to look around and assess the true state of her home.

She took the cups out of the cupboard and saw that a small set of 'best' cups and saucers was no longer behind them. Then she had a quick peep in the cupboard. Usually the little cake stand that Louisa and Albert had been given when they'd got married sat there, along with the ornate silver-plated salt-and-pepper pots that came out at Christmas, but which no one liked very much. They too were gone.

Rose bit her lip. *The pawnbroker – it has to be. Let's see what else ...*

Straight away she discovered that the tea caddy had just a teaspoonful of leaves in it.

‘Have you more tea, Mum?’ Rose was already at the pantry door as she asked.

There was a little pause and then Louisa said, ‘Should be on the shelf, love.’

‘Usual place? No, there isn’t any,’ said Rose, noticing that the pantry shelves were largely empty, not just of tea but also of almost everything.

‘Oh ... I must have forgotten to get it. We’ll have to make do and I’ll get some tomorrow. Just do your best with what we have, love.’

Rose half-filled the teapot and put the cosy over it to give the tea a chance to brew into something worth drinking.

Louisa asked about the train, about Mrs Metcalfe and her cousin, about Mary and whether Rose had seen much of Mrs Lawson recently, of whom Louisa liked the sound. But her voice was slow and her questions lacked any real sense of her being interested. She had a cough again – surely not the same one as before – and that was worrying.

All this was noted by Rose. She had also noticed that, behind the bread bin, the jam jar into which the rent money was always placed in advance was empty.

‘Let’s take our tea into the room and you can tell me all about the shop,’ said Rose, wanting to find out as much as she could before she had to ask outright.

Louisa got up slowly, coughing a little, and shuffled into the sitting room as if all her energy had been sapped away.

The usually pristine room was untidy, and it took Rose a moment to realise that the unruly piles of sewing and swatches of fabric were to do with the millinery business.

‘Mum, it’s not like you to bring the work home. What’s happened at the shop? It’s still going, isn’t it?’

‘I thought I’d just try to finish these today. I’ve been right busy and it seemed sensible to get on. It’s only a bit of sewing,’ Louisa added with obviously false brightness, when Rose looked disbelieving.

‘And Mrs Pullinger – is she all right?’

‘Yes ... yes, she’s fine, love. She says ... she’s going to live with her sister and get a job at the mill. You know she has a younger sister who

works at the mill already? Well, Gertie's going to live at Mildred's. She says it'll be cheaper, the two of them together.'

'Oh, no, why's Mrs Pullinger going there? You work together so well and she's a real part of the business.'

Louisa looked away. 'She thought it best,' she murmured.

'Mum ...? What's going on?'

Rose had her suspicions now, but she didn't want to admit to them aloud and make them real. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as she feared.

Perhaps it's a lot worse.

Louisa got up from her chair and went to stand in front of the window, looking out. She clutched her handkerchief and gave a little cough, or maybe it was a sob.

'Mum?'

'I've decided to close the shop, love—'

'Why? What's happened?'

'Well, it's never made much money, and it's been struggling a bit lately. A lot of work, but not a lot of sales. It never used to matter that it was a modest sort of a business, but now it looks silly to keep on the shop in the town centre and the workshop behind.'

'But what's changed? You've always managed before now. You always said the shop would never make you rich, but you and Mrs Pullinger were doing all right ... weren't you?'

'It's ... it's the rent on it, love. It's doubled and I can't afford to pay it any longer.'

'Mr Lancaster's *doubled* the rent? Is that allowed?'

'His property, Rose. He can do as he likes. So I'm having a closing-down sale at the shop and I've started moving the workshop here bit by bit. I know there's not much room – Daise and I will have to manage in the kitchen – but needs must. I can't afford to pay Gertie either, so I'm ... I'm ... oh, Rose, I'm that sorry to have to part with Gertie, but there's no room for her here, in my sitting room, even if I could afford to pay her. It just doesn't add up.' Louisa sank down into her chair and began to cry, her hankie to her mouth. 'None of it adds up,' she sobbed. 'I've struggled on as best I can, love, but I can't go on like this any longer.'

Rose was appalled. She knew how much Mrs Pullinger's friendship and support had meant to her mother over the years, most especially when Albert had died and Mrs Pullinger had quietly and sensitively steered

Louisa through the bleakest days until she felt strong enough to take charge of the shop again.

‘Mum, I’m very sorry. It’s awful, Mr Lancaster increasing the rent like that. Can’t you find cheaper premises? Mr Lancaster doesn’t own every shop in the town.’

‘I haven’t the money left to put down a deposit and secure a new place, even if I could find one suitable. The shop used to be at the cheaper end of the commercial market, which was the reason I could afford it at all. Now Mr Lancaster has a mind to put up the rents in Shallow Street, so I’m glad I won’t have to pay for the shop for much longer as well.’

‘Increase the rent here too, Mum?’

‘Alec said he was going to ages ago, but he persuaded Lancaster to set his sights on his places across town.’

“‘Alec said’”? But, Mum, when has Uncle Alec ever done you a favour? He was borrowing money off you before Christmas and you were all worried about that. Wouldn’t pay you back or owt, and treated you terribly when you went to ask. And didn’t you say he was making trouble for Daisy in her new job?’

‘Well, now Lancaster has doubled the shop rent, I’ve moved the workshop to here, I’m having a closing-down sale, Gertie is getting a new job and that’s how it’s got to be,’ said Louisa, shortly.

‘But where are you going to sell the hats?’ asked Rose. ‘You can’t have customers coming down here. They’d never find it, or they’d think they’d come to the wrong place—’

‘Yes, all right, Rose. You’ve made your point.’

‘But if you’re making them you have to sell them, Mum.’

‘I know, I know, I wasn’t born yesterday. I’ll be supplying Top Hats.’

‘You don’t make top hats, do you?’

‘No, Rose. The shop – it’s called Top Hats. It’s in King Street.’

Rose looked at her mother’s face. Louisa had stopped crying and had rallied, but Rose got the impression the arrangement with Top Hats wasn’t ideal. Well, perhaps she’d go and see what this place was like tomorrow. It was impossible to guess the style of business it was from the name, but at least it was an outlet for Louisa’s hats.

‘Ah, Mum, I hope it works out,’ said Rose, getting up from the sofa to perch on the chair side and put her arm around her mother’s shoulders. ‘I’m

sorry it's all been so difficult. Here, I've brought you a few shillings to help you and Daisy along. There's little I need at Elizabeth House.'

'Thank you, love. You're a good girl, and a kind one—'

Just at that moment the front door slammed and Rose could hear Daisy muttering under her breath in a venomous tone. Then there were two dull thuds as if she was flinging off her boots. Rose got up to greet her sister and see what the matter was.

'Rose! You're here. Just in time to hear I've got the sack.'

'What! But, Daisy, you've—'

'Don't go on. Don't say it at all. I don't know what to do. Nowt I try works out. I don't know how long you've been here but you must have seen Mum, all worn down with the shop rent doubling. She didn't even tell me the shop was closing down, or why, until she started moving the workshop in here. Half our stuff's at the pawnbroker's and we're back to eating ruddy cow heel and cabbage. I sent Uncle Alec packing when he came bullying Mum for a so-called loan at the shop, but since then nowt's gone right, like he's cursed us or summat. Not only did Lancaster increase the rent on the shop so Mum couldn't afford it—'

'Yes, I know.'

'—but he's put up the rent here, too.'

'No! Is that true, Mum? You said he was thinking about it, not he'd already done that.' Rose had left the room door open so Louisa had undoubtedly heard every word her daughters had exchanged just outside.

'Yes. Yes, it's true. I didn't want to worry you. And now Daisy's lost her job and we were really, really relying on her pay, little though it was. It was, with what you have sent, all that was keeping us together. Now what? Oh, my darling girls, what on earth am I going to do?'

She put her head on her knees and gave herself up to sobs of despair.

Rose and Daisy looked at each other, wide-eyed, fearful.

'All right, let me think,' said Rose, walking up and down, chewing her knuckles. She took a few rapid breaths, feeling her heart pounding. She didn't even live here; she had to go back to Yorkshire in a couple of days, but she couldn't just walk away and leave her mother and her sister like this.

'There's Dad's nest egg, isn't there, Mum? I can see how you don't want to draw from that, but it was always meant for rainy days and right now it looks pretty stormy to me. You can go to the post office tomorrow and draw

out enough for the rent, then what I've just given you will buy a bit of coal and some food. The closing-down sale won't make much, I imagine, but you'll be able to pay Mrs Pullinger for her work until she leaves, and that's important. You've got the arrangement with Top Hats and everything here to fulfil the order, haven't you?' She took a deep breath and tried to slow down. 'Shall we write down some figures and we can see how they look? Mum?'

'It's gone, love,' said Louisa, her palm to her forehead as if to slow the bad thoughts racing through her mind. 'It's all gone.'

Rose couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'Dad's nest egg? Gone? What, all of it?'

Louisa nodded, tears streaming down her face. 'I closed the account last week when I withdrew the last of it.'

'How ... how has that happened? What's become of it?'

'The rent ... Yes, mainly it was the rent. What with the rent doubling at the shop and then going up here too. And the cost of making the hats – that's increased a lot. These feathers—'

'Mum, you have to tell me the truth – all of it. Did you "lend" the money to Uncle Alec? Is that what happened?'

Louisa swallowed and looked cornered. 'Some of it. Quite a bit. But then, after we went round there, he stopped asking for any more, at least for a while. That was such a relief, although he paid none of it back. But then the rent at the shop doubled.'

Rose tried to think this through. 'What do you know about this, Daisy?'

'Only what Mum told me. But the day I walked out on Mrs Chapman, Alec was at the shop trying to get more money off Mum. He never really gave up. We argued and then the rent for here went up, too.'

'Mum, how did you hear of the rent increase on the shop? Did you get a letter?'

Louisa was trying to gather herself and get her head straight now her sensible daughter was here to take charge.

'No, love. The man who collects the rent, Seymour, came round and told me it would be double from the end of that week.'

'But it wasn't Uncle Alec? And you'd seen this man before?'

'Yes, I told you. He collects the rent on the shop, and for here. He's done so for a while now.'

'What did he say?'

‘Oh, I can’t remember exactly now. Summat about the rent going up. I asked how much, thinking to try to get the money together ready, and I was proper shocked when he said it was doubling. I was in a right tizzy and said I’d write to Mr Lancaster, and Seymour said I could do as I liked but Mr Lancaster hasn’t the time to be dealing with folk who can’t pay. It would be easier for everyone if I either paid or left, he said. ’Course, I have to sell off the remaining stock – I can hardly bring it here – and pay Gertie until the shop closes, and for heating the place and there are some suppliers with outstanding bills—’

‘Yes, all right, Mum. I can see that it’s costing you anyway, despite your efforts to wind up the shop business.’

Louisa nodded and mopped her tears away again.

‘I doubt writing down the figures is going to show any kind of income, love,’ she said. ‘Now Daisy has lost her job and I’m afraid we’re sunk.’

Rose and Daisy slumped down on the sofa and Daisy curled up in a ball as if she wanted to disappear.

‘Don’t blame yourself, flower,’ said Rose. ‘I reckon Uncle Alec had summat to do with you losing that job, from what Mum wrote to me. He’s been nasty to Mum for as long as she can remember, and I reckon he’s not the kind to forgive and forget if he’s been crossed.’

Louisa nodded. ‘You’re right, Rose. I, of all people, know that.’

Sometimes, Rose had found, if you slept on your problems they were less worrying in the morning. However, this proved to be far from the case now. There had been next to nothing to eat last night, there was nothing at all this morning; Louisa still had no money and Daisy still had no job.

Rose counted out three and six from the money she had brought from Saturday’s wages and put it in the jam jar. This is what Louisa had told her the rent now was for the house. Then she went out to buy a loaf of bread, a packet of tea and a few vegetables. There would be toast, soup and baked root vegetables, at least.

After that she left Louisa stitching the trim onto some hats and went out with Daisy to get some air, thinking this was far from the holiday she had hoped for.

‘So what happened with the cleaning job, Daise?’ she asked. ‘Mum didn’t seem surprised that you’d got the sack.’

‘No, she predicted it, really. When she found out that Tisbury’s cleaners were employed by Lancaster, she told me to keep my head down. But somehow Uncle Alec must have found out I was working for Tisbury, and I’ve been hounded out. There was nowt wrong with my work, but someone working for Lancaster complained every time, and I can guess who it was. It’s nowt more than another way of bringing us down – bringing *Mum* down.’

‘I’m sorry, love. You couldn’t go on like that. Best find another job where the bully has no influence.’

‘I suppose so. I’d help Mum with the hats but you know I’m hopeless at sewing. I’d just hold her back.’

‘Shall we walk over to King Street and see what this place Top Hats is like?’

They took a route to the town centre, then along King Street, looking in the shop windows. Rose noticed that Daisy’s coat, which was an old one, previously her own, was looking threadbare along the front and the edge of the sleeves, and the buttons were scratched. She could do with a new one, although Rose didn’t have hand-me-downs that she’d grown out of to pass on these days. Ordinary working people, once they’d stopped growing, wore their clothes until they were beyond repairing.

Top Hats turned out to be a ridiculously pretentious name for the kind of headwear sold there. The painted sign over the shop window was peeling and the windows were soot-encrusted. Rose pressed her nose up against the window to peer in and saw the display looked tired, as if it had been there all winter.

‘Heavens, it looks a bit grim. Shall we go in and have a look round?’

‘Like spies,’ said Daisy. ‘I’ll look at the prices and see how much they charge for the kind of hat Mum makes.’

‘Good idea. We’re just looking, though. I know you like a pretty hat but we’re definitely not buying owt.’

‘No need to remind me,’ said Daisy, ‘although it doesn’t look like there’s owt here I’d want anyway.’ She followed Rose inside.

The interior was so dim that it was difficult to tell the exact colour of some of the darker hats on sale. There were caps in the usual everyday styles that most working men wore, but when Rose examined one, she saw the fabric was thin and inferior to those at Louisa Farlowe’s, the stitching less robust. The women’s ‘occasion’ hats looked garish, the trimmings

cheap and common, and the prices were low. It was as if Top Hats was content to make little effort, to aim at the bottom of the market.

‘May I help you, madam?’ asked the saleswoman, addressing Rose and ignoring Daisy.

‘I ... think not, thank you,’ said Rose, and Daisy followed her out.

‘Lordy Lord,’ said Daisy, ‘I reckon Mum’s going down in the world. I wonder if she knows.’

‘I think I should be the one to mention what we found at Top Hats,’ cautioned Rose.

‘Top Hats, indeed!’ Daisy gave a mirthless laugh.

However, when the girls got back home, neither of them had chance to discuss Top Hats with their mother.

‘Come in here, girls, and sit yourselves down,’ Louisa said, beckoning them into the kitchen, the only vaguely warm room in the house, and pouring a cup of tea for each of them. Louisa looked very pale and tired this morning, but she seemed to have gathered a new sense of purpose since her daughters had gone for their walk.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ she began. ‘I reckon you should take our Daisy back to Elizabeth House with you, Rose.’

‘What, and leave you here on your own, Mum? No, I can’t go,’ declared Daisy.

‘Shush, love, and listen, will you? Money’s a bit tight at the moment and I can’t ...’ She took a deep breath, fighting back tears. ‘I never thought I’d say this, girls, but I can’t afford to keep you, Daisy, or to feed you.’

‘Oh, Mum.’ Rose stood up and stepped over to put her arm around her mother. ‘Please don’t cry, Mum. We know this is not your fault. None of it is.’

‘I’ll get another job, Mum. I’ll do owt I can. I’ll work in the mill and it doesn’t matter what the women say about Uncle Alec. I shan’t mind.’

What? Rose was looking at Daisy, her eyebrows raised in question, but Daisy ignored her.

‘Oh, love, I know you’re a good girl, but I told you: Alec – he’s not a man to forgive and forget now you’ve crossed him. He’s lost you the job with Mr Tisbury already. All the more reason to keep away from where your uncle is known. Who knows what difficulties he can make for you, and I’d hate young Betty to be drawn into his nastiness too, just ’cos she’s friends with you. No, love, the best thing you can do is to forget about

Blackburn and go with Rose when she returns to Yorkshire. It'll be a new start for you,' she added, trying for a smile and failing.

'But, Mum, I don't want a new start away from you. I want to stay here, in Shallow Street, where I know folk, and where I've got you. Please don't send me away. *Please.*'

Rose had remained silent, trying to think through this new and drastic development. Never would she have thought she'd be returning to Crossthwaite with her sister, leaving their mother alone, but it made a kind of sense.

Rose noticed that Louisa had not been at all forthcoming with the figures that Rose had suggested they set down yesterday. All along, her mother had been evasive about the extent of her financial difficulties. Rose remembered the pawned clock and the lie about it being broken and discarded; even yesterday, Louisa had tried to avoid explaining that she was having to close the shop, and that the rent for the house had already been increased. At least the money to pay that was now sitting in the jam jar, but that was only for this next week. Rose just hoped her mother had told her the truth about how much the rent now was. One thing was plain, however: the presence of Daisy was only adding to Louisa's difficulties.

'Daisy, I think Mum's right. You come with me to Elizabeth House. Then Mum can get on with her work without having to worry about you.'

'I'm not a worry to her.'

'Oh, but you are, love, while I can't afford to keep you,' said Louisa. 'Mrs Metcalfe will either find a place for you, or one of her friends will, I'm sure. These big houses always employ a lot of folk, and you'll be fed and warm, too.'

'Well, there's only four of us at Elizabeth House,' Rose pointed out. Then: 'Augusta! Of course. I'd forgotten, with all that's happened. Mary sacked her yesterday morning, but I persuaded Mary to let her stay until I return so the agency cook has some help.'

'Why did she sack her?' asked Daisy cautiously.

'She's got a voice like a foghorn and it was driving us all mad. In the end Mary snapped first, but it could have been any of us. Augusta's a good girl, but her place is in the middle of a huge field, herding cows, not in service.'

Daisy looked half persuaded and half tearful to be leaving her mother.

'I don't know. What if the others don't like me?'

‘Why wouldn’t they? There’s only Mary and Terry, and I reckon I can put up with you.’

‘Oh, but Mum, I’d be worried about you. How will I know you’re all right?’

‘Daft lass, I’ll be here, as always, but only myself to think about, knowing you are safe with our Rose. It’ll be easier for me to move to a smaller, cheaper place if it comes to that, too.’

And so it was decided. The next day Rose and Daisy would both set off for Yorkshire.

As soon as she had a moment’s privacy, Rose checked her purse to make sure she had enough money left to pay for Daisy’s train ticket. There was, she thought, but nothing more in case of any unforeseen expense on the journey.

Goodness only knew what they would find when they next returned to Shallow Street.

CHAPTER TEN

ROSE SAT WITH her head resting against the train carriage window, fighting the sadness that threatened to overwhelm her. She had Daisy to take care of now, and it was no use caving in and weeping. It had been awful, saying goodbye to Louisa and leaving her by herself, but Rose knew she must – she simply *must* – stay strong. Louisa would manage her financial difficulties better if she had only herself to think about. She was adamant about that.

‘Write to the aunts, Mum,’ Rose had advised. ‘I’m sure Sissy, Maud or Clara will want to help if they can. They are your sisters, after all.’

‘I’ll see, love,’ Louisa had replied. She didn’t sound keen on the idea.

Rose knew her mother wasn’t close to these much-older women, but surely the aunts would not turn their backs on their own little sister.

Louisa hadn’t gone to the station, but waved Rose and Daisy off down Shallow Street from her doorstep, trying to put on a brave face but certainly not fooling Rose.

Rose had made the mistake of looking back when she and Daisy had got only as far as Mrs Palmer’s house. The sight of her thin and broken-looking mother, crying but trying to pretend she was smiling, nearly had Rose turning on her heel and running straight back. That image of Louisa would remain in her mind a long, long time.

‘Don’t look back,’ she murmured to Daisy. ‘Just wave over your shoulder so Mum doesn’t get upset. It’s hard, I know, but she wants us to be brave.’

She hoped the money she had left Louisa would be a real help. It was every last penny she could spare – yet it felt absurdly inadequate. Her pay as the Metcalfes’ cook had always seemed enough for her own immediate needs. Now she saw that, in the wider world, it was pathetic.

‘I promised to write to Betty,’ said Daisy, sitting beside Rose, looking bored. There had been no spare pennies left even to buy a magazine to read on the train. ‘Trouble is, I hate writing letters.’

‘Just think how pleased Betty will be to hear from you,’ said Rose.

‘I s’pose so, but I still hate doing it. It’s a right old chore.’

This was a dramatic change of heart for the girl who had gone out the previous afternoon to tell her friends she was leaving and to say goodbye, and had then come back swearing undying devotion to them.

‘Then send her a postcard and just write one sentence on the back so Betty knows she’s in your thoughts. That’s better than nowt at all, and I expect Betty will like a pretty picture.’

‘I expect so. I promised to write to Jonny Pickles, too.’

‘Who’s Jonny Pickles? I’ve never heard of him.’

‘Mum hasn’t either.’ Daisy gave a saucy little smirk.

‘Oh, I see ... Well, either write or don’t, Daisy, but don’t bother me about it. Mrs Metcalfe will expect you to keep your private life discreet and away from her house and your work, so please, let’s not have Jonny Pickles or anyone else hanging around outside the back door. Remember, what you do reflects on me, which is a problem I didn’t have with the previous kitchen maids.’

‘Don’t go on, Rose. You’ve made your point. Are they really going to employ me, do you think?’

‘I don’t know, Daise. When I left on Sunday, Augusta was staying only as long as the agency cook was there. But Mary and Terry were supposed to be finding someone else.’

‘So they might already have got someone?’ said Daisy, frowning. ‘And I won’t have a job at Elizabeth House at all.’

‘It’s possible, but try not to worry. Augusta took some finding, but then she turned out to have this voice none of us could cope with. It seems so many young girls want to work in factories these days. That’s how we lost Hannah: her father found her a job at a printer’s. Not sure how she’s going on, as she can’t read.’

‘But that’s daft.’

‘Well, daft or not, she’s gone. If there’s a new girl already, I’ll speak to Mrs Metcalfe. She has a lot of friends and one of them is bound to have a job for you, or at least know someone who does. And Mrs Metcalfe won’t put you out on the street in the meantime, I’m quite certain of that.’

‘I should think not,’ said Daisy, her usual spiritedness beginning to reassert itself. ‘So what are Mary and Terry like?’

‘Mary’s a bit moody, but she’s nice enough. I like her parents, who live in the village. With Mary, you just have to do as you’re told, and if she gets a

bit sharp, just be quiet, keep your head down, and get on with your work until she snaps out of it.'

'What about Terry?'

What about Terry indeed, thought Rose. She remembered his hand on her leg when she'd got in the car that time, and how he'd tried to kiss her, and how Mary had said he'd tried the same with her. Terry had not attempted anything since, but then he did seem to have excited the admiration of Amy Langdale. What was going on there? Probably nothing, but Terry was neither confirming nor denying anything, and Amy was possibly living in a fantasy world in which she was worshipped by the handsome footman, there being no other man in the house but Mr Metcalfe himself.

Mary had said Terry was a bit of a snob with his flirtations, and thought a kitchen maid was beneath him, but Hannah had been a skinny urchin, and Augusta a strapping lass with a voice not suitable for murmuring sweet nothings, whereas Daisy was a pert and pretty young woman, proud of her height and her tiny waist.

'Rose?'

'Terry's all right, but he likes to flirt. Just remember, if ever he starts to get too familiar, you must tell him very firmly that you're not interested. Then come and tell me and I will speak to him. Do you understand, Daisy?'

Daisy nodded solemnly. Then she smiled. 'Still, it'll be nice to be working where there's a least one young-ish man. Ma Chapman's laundry was just me and her, and Mr Tisbury's workers were all women.'

Rose knew her sister was deliberately winding her up and she resolved to keep Daisy busy for every waking moment.

When the girls emerged from the station at Crossthwaite, Rose looked for Mr Metcalfe's car just in case, but – as expected – there was no sign of it.

'I don't mind the walk,' said Daisy. 'One thing about having not much stuff is it's light to carry. It's so quiet, except for the birds I can hear singing. And the air here is very clean. It smells different from Blackburn air, too.'

'I can't argue with that,' said Rose. 'Your lungs will thank you for a few deep breaths.'

Daisy laughed and fell into step with Rose.

At Elizabeth House, Rose led the way round to the stable yard and then down the steps to the back door. All the while, Daisy was gawping wide-

eyed at the house, the garden, the courtyard.

Mary was in the kitchen, along with a woman who must be the agency cook, and Augusta.

‘Ah, Rose. Thank goodness. We’ve missed you terribly,’ said Mary pointedly.

Oh dear, there must have been a falling-out between Mary and the temporary woman, or maybe she was just keen to see the back of Augusta, whose time was now up.

‘I’m pleased to see you an’ all,’ said the agency cook, possibly to try to trump Mary for lack of diplomacy. ‘Right ...’ She started to untie her apron there and then. ‘I’ll leave you to it.’ She went out to the corridor to fetch her coat and hat, then came back with a little suitcase of her things, packed already, so eager was she to be off. ‘Good luck,’ were her parting words, and she left without looking back.

‘What was that about?’ asked Rose.

‘She didn’t like us, for some reason,’ said Mary.

‘Us? What, everyone?’

‘The whole set-up. She once filled in for a day or two at Castle Howard – she made sure we all knew about that – and nowt can ever live up,’ said Mary. ‘Good riddance. Now, who’s this?’

‘Daisy Farlowe,’ said Daisy, and offered her hand to shake. She could be disarmingly charming when she wanted to be. Mary had taken her hand before she knew it, although she might have been expecting a little bob of a curtsy or at least politely downcast eyes.

‘Come to be our kitchen maid,’ explained Rose. ‘You’ve not found anyone to take over from Augusta, have you?’

‘No. Terry and I have been running about after Mrs Pewsey’ – she nodded towards the back door – ‘since she arrived with her airs and graces. You’d think we all worked for her personally.’

All this time, Augusta was standing sturdily to one side, eyeing up Daisy but, for once in her life, not saying anything.

Mary turned to her. ‘Right, Augusta, time to go. Your replacement is here. Go and get your things and I’ve got a bit of pay for you for your time since Saturday.’

‘Thanks, Miss Lawson,’ boomed the sacked kitchen maid.

‘Do you have another job to go to?’ asked Rose. She didn’t know why she asked this as she was helpless to do anything about it if Augusta was

unemployed. It just seemed kinder to express some small degree of interest in the girl, who was now clearly reconciled to leaving Elizabeth House.

‘I have!’ Augusta said. ‘I’m going to help on a vegetable stall in Kirkgate Market. It belongs to a friend of my dad. He reckons I’m just the girl he needs to shout out the prices.’

Rose was pleased to hear this. Possibly Augusta had found her vocation.

Augusta had left, slamming the back door loudly behind her, her goodbyes ringing in everyone’s ears, when Terry appeared, wearing a green apron. Rose noticed he hadn’t bothered to come to say goodbye to either Mrs Pewsey or Augusta. He had been in the room off the corridor, in which silver was polished and shoes cleaned, but had not taken any trouble to be polite.

‘Well, well, who have we here?’ he asked, eyeing Daisy.

‘My sister, Daisy,’ said Rose. ‘She’s in want of a job and she’ll make a good kitchen maid.’

‘I’m sure she will,’ said Terry, grinning appreciatively. ‘You’re a few years older than Hannah or Augusta – what have you been doing up till now?’

‘Laundry work and then cleaning,’ Daisy didn’t mention the tea lady job, or the fishmonger’s, which Rose thought was wise.

‘And why did you leave?’

Rose hadn’t briefed Daisy for an impromptu interview, and now wished she had thought to do so. It would look bad if Daisy said she’d walked out of the laundry and been sacked from the cleaning job. But she needn’t have worried.

‘I fancied working in service, Mr Ecclestone,’ she said. ‘Rose likes it here and when she said Augusta was going to leave, I jumped at the chance of working here, too.’

Rose was impressed, despite herself. She hadn’t known her sister was such a slick liar. It might be as well to bear in mind this talent Daisy was showing.

Rose was pleased at the speed Daisy fitted in. She had energy and enthusiasm, and she didn’t need telling what to do, but showed initiative. Although she was only a kitchen maid, she was more comfortable with Mary and Terry than little Hannah and awkward Augusta had ever been. Maybe it was because she was older and more confident, Rose thought.

When it came to the first Saturday, Rose explained the ritual of the servants filing in to see Mr Metcalfe one by one.

‘He’ll ask you if you’re happy in your work and if everything is all right,’ Rose explained. ‘He doesn’t expect owt more than a “Yes, thank you, sir”.’

‘Then why is he asking?’

‘Because he’s a good employer and he wants to show he cares.’

‘But if I just say “Yes, thank you, sir” no matter what I really think, what is the point of him asking?’

Rose sighed. ‘Don’t be dense, Daisy. You know how it works, even if this is your first job in service. He just shows he cares enough to ask and we show we wouldn’t bother him with our own concerns, should we have any. You are happy with your work, aren’t you? You’ve certainly put your back into it so far, and you get on with everyone.’

‘Yes, yes, Rose. Don’t worry, I shan’t speak out of turn.’

As usual after she had been paid, Rose hurried away, passing Mary and Daisy standing outside Mr Metcalfe’s study, waiting for their turns.

Mary left the door open and told Daisy to go straight in.

‘Ah, our new kitchen maid, Daisy,’ said Mr Metcalfe, seated behind his desk.

Daisy gave a tiny curtsy. ‘Yes, sir.’

She thought Mr Metcalfe had a kind face. He was much older than Mrs Metcalfe, whom she’d seen getting into the motor car with Terry when she’d sneaked a look round the corner of the house one day. Mrs Metcalfe was a golden-haired beauty with an hour-glass figure. She had worn a very large hat, which Daisy thought Louisa would have admired but not copied; it wasn’t the kind of hat Louisa’s customers would buy. Amy Langdale had been in tow then. Daisy had met Miss Langdale when the companion had come down to the kitchen-cum-servants’ hall with some invented reason to be there, and Daisy thought her a sad and ridiculous woman, wearing a frock that didn’t suit her and sidling up to Terry flirtatiously, which was embarrassing to see. Daisy couldn’t resist rolling her eyes, and she thought Miss Langdale might have noticed as she looked cross and had blushed. Soon, thankfully, she had departed; she clearly had nothing to do and no one to do it with.

‘I hope you will be happy in your work, Daisy,’ Mr Metcalfe went on.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Daisy, dutifully, but then she decided to go off script. ‘I am happy, sir, but Mary and I occupy two of the attic rooms, as you know, sir, and it can get a little parky at night.’

‘Parky?’

‘Yes, sir. Chilly, like. I wonder, sir, as you asked, whether Mary and I might have an extra blanket or two, and mebbe a bigger piece of carpet on our floors than just the little rugs? If you wouldn’t mind, sir. As you asked.’

Mr Metcalfe looked taken aback, but only for a moment. Then: ‘I think we can manage that, Daisy. I’m sorry you and Mary have been cold. Mary should have said something earlier in the winter if that was the case. I shall mention this to Mr Ecclestone and he’ll arrange the carpet. And Miss Langdale might like to see about making sure your beds are warm and comfortable. It will be something for her to do.’ He added this last sentence in a lowered voice, as if talking to himself.

‘Thank you, sir.’

Daisy took the few shillings he handed her, thanked him again and left.

Mary and Rose were in the kitchen when Daisy returned there. Terry had just been summoned to see Mr Metcalfe.

‘Well, wasn’t too scary, was it?’ said Mary.

‘No, not at all,’ grinned Daisy. ‘Mr Metcalfe has promised you and me more carpet in our rooms and some extra blankets.’

‘He what?’

‘Yes. As he asked, I thought there was no point in not saying, and now we’re going to be warmer.’

‘Daisy, I hope you weren’t rude,’ said Rose.

‘Of course not. I told you – he asked and I answered. I was really polite and said “sir” a lot.’

‘Well, I never,’ muttered Mary.

‘Miss Langdale is going to see we have what we need.’

Mary narrowed her eyes. ‘Miss *poor little me*, I can manage with nothing Langdale? I shan’t expect much, then.’ She looked disbelieving now.

‘If you just tell her Mr Metcalfe promised quite a few extra blankets each,’ said Daisy, ‘she won’t question it, will she?’

The success of her first interview with Mr Metcalfe was going to Daisy’s head, Rose thought. Daisy was doing her work all right – she was never lazy, just distracted to more interesting tasks or the opportunity of a more

enjoyable time – but she was definitely airing her opinions, whether or not they were asked for. She liked to give the job of skivvy a slant that suited her. She was a much more prominent member of the servants' hall than Hannah and Augusta had been, suggesting when it was time for a cup of tea and speaking to Mary and Terry, if not as equals, then in a way that made sure her own views were known.

If Mary or Rose had some shopping to do, Daisy would volunteer to go instead. She returned with the right things but sometimes she took a little longer than they might have expected. There was always a reason for this: there had been a long queue, or someone ahead of her couldn't make up their mind, or the shopkeeper had had to go out the back to find the required goods.

One day Rose, looking out for Daisy's return, saw her being brought back to the stable yard in Mr Metcalfe's car, driven by Terry. Terry parked the car and then went round to open the passenger door for the kitchen maid, bowing in mock-deference to her. They both laughed, and Daisy got out with her nose in the air and a big smile upon her pretty face, then flounced across the courtyard to the back door as well as she could with her heavy shopping basket over her arm.

Rose, far from being amused at her sister's high jinks, felt the coldness of concern descending. She had had no idea that Daisy and Terry were on such relaxed terms with each other.

She remembered Terry's hand on her own knee and she wondered if he'd let his hand wander over Daisy's legs too. If he had, Daisy was clearly not letting it get in the way of their ... their what? Their friendship? Was it even that? It certainly was a more relaxed attitude than the standoffishness of a footman for a kitchen maid, or the respect of a skivvy for Mr Metcalfe's man.

This was bad news. Rose tried to remember just what she had said to Daisy about Terry. Certainly she hadn't wanted to worry her, but she had wanted to warn her to beware of him. *If he starts to get too familiar, you must tell him very firmly that you're not interested. Then come and tell me* – something like that. Now it looked as if Daisy and Terry might be moving towards being 'familiar' with each other and both very much enjoying it.

Daisy let herself into the kitchen, still smiling until she saw Rose standing at the window.

'What?'

‘Daisy! Riding in Mr Metcalfe’s car – did he say you could? And what was all that messing about with Terry?’

‘I don’t know if Mr Metcalfe said I could ride in his car, but Terry – Mr Ecclestone – was driving it and he said I could. He saw me hefting this great basket of shopping on the way back from Crossthwaite and took pity on me. I wasn’t going to say no, was I, and then have to walk all the way here with these two enormous joints of meat. There must be near-on half a cow here.’

That sounded perfectly reasonable, except the car was Mr Metcalfe’s and Rose thought it wasn’t Terry’s place to offer lifts, especially to the kitchen maid. But what if it had been raining and Daisy had had to walk from Crossthwaite in a downpour, her clothes wet through, and then she’d caught a chill, while Terry drove past her in Mr Metcalfe’s car, leaving her wet and struggling? Rose’s imagination took flight. Daisy could be laid up in her – admittedly now cosy – attic room with a terrible cold that threatened to undermine her health for weeks, while Terry confessed to Mrs Metcalfe that he had driven right by her in the foul weather without even stopping. Kind-hearted Mrs Metcalfe would be distraught and then there would be words between her and her husband about the conduct of his man, and the carefree atmosphere above stairs would be tainted with recrimination and ... oh dear.

‘Anyway, there’s no harm done, I’m here safely and so’s the meat,’ said Daisy, while Rose got her mind back to reality.

Well, that was true, or appeared to be.

‘Just tell me Terry didn’t try owt, Daisy. He didn’t put his hands on you or owt? He didn’t try to kiss you?’

‘No, Rose. But I’m not a baby, or a nun, you know. If Terry and I get on all right, it’s better than not getting on, wouldn’t you say? I didn’t get to be sixteen and know nowt.’

‘Just be careful, Daisy, that’s all. I don’t want you getting into any trouble. You know what I mean. Mum’s got enough to worry about and so have I.’

‘You’ve made your point, Rose,’ said Daisy, picking up the heavy basket from the floor and making a show of heaving it onto the table.

‘Good. Then go and hang up your coat and change your boots, then take that little lot through to the cold slab in the larder. Then you can fuel the range and set the kettle to boil. After that, you can get peeling those

potatoes. You were ages collecting that meat order, despite the lift back. We're behind now and we've no more time to waste.'

Daisy went to do as she was asked. Annoyingly, she had a little smile on her face, as if she were keeping something all to herself.

Rose knew she couldn't say anything more for now.

Mrs Metcalfe had invited five of her friends to tea and Rose was in her element, beating cake batter, making smoked trout pâté and constructing tiny individual glasses of sherry trifle.

'Daisy, I can get on with this quicker on my own if you'd just wash those bowls and spoons for me,' Rose told her sister.

'In that case,' said Mary, 'when she's done that, please can Daisy go into Crossthwaite and get Mrs Metcalfe's face powder and Mr Metcalfe's peppermint cordial from the chemist? I've got the tablecloths to iron and the sitting room needs a dust. I'll be glad when it's too warm for coal fires. The place'll be a lot cleaner. I'll write down exactly what you should get, Daisy, and you've to ask for them to be put on Mr and Mrs Metcalfe's account.'

'Can't Miss Langdale go?' asked Rose. 'I'd have thought it would be a job for her.'

Mary looked, for once, as if she didn't want to speak out of turn about Miss Langdale. 'Er, no, it seems not. But, Daisy, please don't be too long about it. We'll be ready to find you plenty to help us with once you're back.'

The washing-up done, Daisy set off on foot. It was a fine day with a promise of spring in the air.

'Is Miss Langdale all right?' asked Rose as soon as Daisy had closed the back door behind her.

'She is, but I heard Mrs Metcalfe suggesting our Amy might like to think about "spreading her wings" now she's over the deaths of her folks. Rather, I reckon, Mrs Metcalfe is finding her company wearing and wants her to leave. And who could blame her?'

'Oh dear, and so Miss Langdale has taken umbrage?'

'Summat like that. She went back to bed in a renewed bout of grief for her parents. When I went up with her cup of hot water she was weeping, but also hiding a big fat novel under her pillow.'

Mary and Rose exchanged exasperated looks.

‘For a woman in her thirties she really is like a great big, stupid child,’ said Mary, and went off to wrestle with the vacuum cleaner in the sitting room.

Daisy enjoyed the walk into Crossthwaite. Although an urban girl through and through, she was beginning to see the appeal of the countryside and the clean air. A blackbird with its bright yellow beak full of nesting material flew up into the hedge beside her, and she stopped to watch as it swooped into a spinney opposite. This was like a different planet from Blackburn, with its sooty streets, constant noise and not a bird or wild animal in sight.

In Crossthwaite Daisy did her errand at the chemist’s and put the brown-paper-wrapped box of face powder and the bottle of cordial in her basket. She didn’t own a watch and had no idea how long she had been, but she didn’t think it had been very long at all. There must be time to go to see Malcolm Gibson, who worked for his father in the newsagent’s. Daisy had first met him a few weeks before and had made a point of going in to see him whenever she was in Crossthwaite. This had lengthened the time she had spent doing her chores in the little town by rather longer than it should, but she always had an excuse to hand.

‘Hello, Daisy,’ said Malcolm, who was a big rosy-cheeked lad of about eighteen. ‘Nice to see you looking so well. What can I get for you?’

‘I’d like one of those tiny bars of chocolate, please,’ said Daisy. She felt around in her coat pocket for her purse, which she knew to be empty. ‘Oh, no! Oh dear, I thought I had a penny left, but I must have spent it. I’ve sent all the rest of my money home to my mum,’ she lied.

‘Your mam must be proper proud of you, Daisy, thinking of her and putting her first,’ said Malcom. ‘I tell you what, I’ll ask me dad if I can give you the chocolate.’

He went away, then came back directly, looking a bit put out.

‘Dad says I can buy it for you but you’re not getting it for nowt,’ he said. ‘Here, let me pay for it.’

‘Thank you, Malcom,’ she said, smiling at him prettily. She put the chocolate in her basket to enjoy in her room that evening.

Then Malcom asked Daisy about Elizabeth House, about which he had heard rumours.

‘I understand that Mr Metcalfe has made a fortune with his shops, selling posh writing paper. He’s got one of the first cars in Crossthwaite, and the

nicest. I expect they drink fancy wine and eat from gold plates,' he said.

'I haven't seen any gold plates,' said Daisy, 'but the food is lovely. My sister is the Metcalfes' cook. She trained in Paris and knows all sorts about delicious things to eat.'

Malcolm's eyes widened. 'Paris, eh?'

'Yes, and she's teaching me to cook. She reckons I'll be better than she is one day,' improvised Daisy.

'Well, I'll look forward to tucking into owt you offer me,' said a voice behind her, and Daisy turned, horrified to have been caught out boasting and lying by Terry, who was standing there, laughing.

'Just my *Daily Mail*, please, Malcom,' he said.

The young man handed over the paper, neatly folded, and took the money. Daisy saw that Malcolm looked very young and unsure of himself compared to the smart footman.

'Coming back now, are you, Daisy?' asked Terry. 'You'll be wanting to get on icing those eclairs I saw you making,' he added with a hint of a wink.

Daisy pursed her lips.

'Thank you, Mr Ecclestone. I am on my way back,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster. 'Thank you for the chocolate, Malcolm. I'll see you soon.'

They left the newsagent's together.

'Here, I'll just put my paper in your basket,' said Terry, doing so.

'I'm not carrying your newspaper. You can carry it yourself,' said Daisy, risking being pert.

'You don't have to,' said Terry. 'I've got the car. I've just taken Mr Metcalfe into Leeds and I'm on my way back.'

'Rose wasn't pleased that you gave me a ride in the car last time.'

'Come now, Daisy, don't pretend you care about that. I've been watching you and I can see that you pretty much do as you like, so far as the job allows. You've got all kinds of privileges that Hannah and Augusta never had – like being trusted with shopping trips. You've been making the most of those, haven't you? You've got Malcolm Gibson paying for your chocolate, and Jack Edmundson carrying your basket, and some lad from the grocer's blushing and making himself ridiculous whenever you lean over the counter. I think you know what you want and just how far you can go.'

'You've been following me?' gasped Daisy.

‘I get to know what’s happening,’ said Terry, modestly.

Daisy wasn’t sure what to make of this. That the good-looking and worldly footman should deign to look at a kitchen maid was flattering, but there was also something unnerving about it. She’d seen Amy Langdale simpering at Terry in the courtyard, and once, on her way down a corridor to make up a fire, she had passed by an open door and seen Terry and Miss Langdale kissing. She knew instinctively that this was their secret and she shouldn’t tell anyone what she had seen. It might be useful to remember it, however. Knowledge of other folk’s secrets could be useful. Perhaps Terry would kiss her; she was a lot prettier than Miss Langdale.

They reached the car, which was parked in the little town square, drawing the attention of passers-by, as usual. Daisy got in and Terry turned the starting handle and then quickly came to sit beside her.

‘Right, off we go,’ he said.

The sun shone with a little heat for the first time that year, and the day was as near perfect as Daisy could imagine. She didn’t want to rush off back to washing up Rose’s baking tins.

‘Please, Terry, can we just go for a little drive – just a very short one – as it’s such a nice day?’ Daisy turned to him and saw the smile in his strong profile. He didn’t take his eyes off the road.

‘Haven’t you work to do, Daisy? Rose must be busy with all that baking for Mrs Metcalfe’s tea party.’

‘I’ll just say I was delayed. I don’t think I’ve been long,’ said Daisy. Just saying it made it sound like the truth. ‘You could show me what a good driver you are, and how quick this car can go. I’d love to know what it feels like to go really fast.’

‘Really fast, eh? You are very persuasive, Daisy. Quite a practised temptress, I would say.’

‘Thank you,’ said Daisy. She thought this was the right answer.

‘I s’pose we can take the longer route, seeing as it’s such a nice day,’ Terry conceded. ‘But you’re the one who must explain why you took so long. I’m just saying I saw you in Crossthwaite and gave you a ride back, and that’s the truth.’ He turned off the road that led directly to the big houses where the Metcalfes and the Naismiths, who employed Rose’s friend Millicent, lived, and sped out into more open countryside.

‘Oh, I love it here,’ breathed Daisy. ‘I wish I was a rich lady and could ride with you in this car every day and we could stop for a picnic or

summat, and spend the afternoon eating and drinking and just lying in a field, watching the clouds go by.'

Terry laughed then. 'I don't reckon as a rich lady would be lying in a field with me,' he said, looking sidelong at her.

'Don't you? Well, I would,' said Daisy, boldly.

'Ah, but you aren't a rich lady,' said Terry.

'No,' said Daisy, her lower lip pouting. 'But mebbe we could pretend, like, on our day off.'

'Pretend?'

'Yes. On a Sunday afternoon, when we have time off, it would be easier then to pretend that we didn't have to go to work – because we didn't, if you see what I mean.'

'Ha, I do. But what I don't see, Daisy, is whether you're just a bold little girl who flirts a bit and likes the idea of a picnic and nowt more, or whether you're more of a woman, and prepared to see where that takes you ... where it takes us, Daisy.'

He turned to look at her directly and Daisy, her stomach doing a swoopy kind of flip, grinned at him.

Then: 'Lordy Lord, look out, Terry!'

He looked back at the road in time to see a fallow deer leaping from the path of the car and away over a high hedge, then the car swerved and came to a sudden and dramatic halt beside the hedge, the front wheel on the passenger side embedded in the drainage ditch that ran along the side of the road.

There was a long, long silence and then Terry, who had slumped over the steering wheel, sat up.

'Are you all right, Daisy?'

'Mm, I think so. I will be. Just give me a minute. What about you?'

'Aye, I'll live. Hell's bells, lass, this is going to take some explaining.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AMY DIDN'T LIKE the new kitchen maid, whom she gathered was the sister of Rose Farlowe. There was a similarity to their looks – both were tall and slim, with dark curly hair – but in character they were quite different from each other. Rose was all talent and self-possession, which Amy resented because Rose showed not the slightest interest in being her friend, even though Amy herself had made such an effort to be a part of the servants' hall. Rose obviously preferred to keep her at arm's length rather than welcoming her in. Worse, the cook was valued, respected, whereas Amy struggled to find a purpose, to have any point to her being here.

Amy had always felt envious of Rose's prettiness, and now there was the pert little sister here, too, just as pretty, but less under control. For some reason Terry didn't show much interest in Rose as a woman, from what Amy could see, but he very much had his eye on Daisy, and Daisy didn't seem to mind that at all. They were always laughing whenever Amy, sneaking a peek through her room window, watched them together in the stable yard, or when she went down to the servants' hall, where she wanted to be made welcome but, so far, never really was. Perhaps it took a long time to become part of this community ...

Once, Daisy came out to the stable yard to give Terry a message while he was talking to Amy herself, and the kitchen maid completely ignored her; just looked at Terry and spoke as if she wasn't even there! It was very rude, especially as, the message delivered, Daisy chatted on with Terry – her back turned to Amy – about what Rose was cooking for lunch.

Amy resented being asked by Desmond if she would find some extra blankets for the servants' beds. She didn't mind fetching Emma's books or embroidery for her, or taking her letters to the post, or reading to her, but she did very much mind having to do anything for the staff. Except for Terry, of course. She would have been only too pleased to find some extra blankets for his bed, except he didn't want any. No, it was moody Mary Lawson and that cheeky kitchen maid for whom Amy had to fetch the blankets. Mary had asked for 'a few each', and Amy gathered from Emma

that the request had come originally from Daisy. So now Amy felt she was being treated as that rude skivvy's servant, too.

A week or two ago, from her room overlooking the old stable yard, Amy had watched, furious and tight-lipped, as Daisy had unfolded herself from the passenger seat of the car – from Desmond's car! – and Terry had actually bowed to her while she lowered her feet to the ground, her nose in the air, and taking care to show more of her slim legs than was at all necessary, and they had both laughed in a very free and easy way. A much freer and easier way than Terry laughed with Amy herself. Actually, he seldom laughed with Amy at all, except perhaps sardonically.

Terry's relationship with Amy always felt illicit and tense, in contrast to the open flirting she had observed between him and the skivvy. Amy wasn't a natural flirt, and somehow her assignations with Terry held a pervading sense of dissatisfaction. Afterwards Amy always somehow felt that she was barely tolerated, despite the effort she made to please him. She sought him out and yet he made her no happier.

Perhaps she should backtrack and keep Terry in his proper place: Emma's footman, whose job it was to open the door for her, clean her shoes, serve her at table ... But by now she was in love with him; he occupied her every waking thought, and quite a lot of her dreams at night, too. How Terry regarded her, she really didn't know.

Amy had thought life at Elizabeth House would be an endless round of social events in which she saw herself playing a central role. She would be this sociable, charming new woman, fêted and admired, not the same old Amy, with her awkward manner and dull personality. She would, in short, turn into her cousin Emma. But reality had not lived up to the fantasy.

Emma had started to become impatient of Amy's presence lately, and went out increasingly often with just her mother or by herself to visit her friends, go shopping or attend various events in Leeds or Harrogate. Then, just this morning, she had suggested that Amy must be recovering from her bereavement and feeling much more 'capable', and hinted that she should leave. 'Spread your wings' she had said with a smile of encouragement, as if she thought Amy should support herself. It was so unfair, so hard-hearted. The loss of Amy's parents was still very much at the forefront of her mind. In case anyone had any doubt about that, she had taken to her bed, weeping, for two hours.

Eventually, she had got up and come downstairs, wearing her mourning dress again, and a carefully cultivated air of desolation, but Emma had gone to Harrogate to buy some new gloves, Mary said, so the effort of trying to button up the old black dress, which was now a little too tight, such was the abundance and deliciousness of the food at Elizabeth House, was entirely a waste of time.

This afternoon Emma was having one of her frequent tea parties. That meant the presence of Emma's mother, Amy's cousin Pamela, which was always a trial. For commitment to the spotlight being on herself, Pamela was like Emma, but more so, so that Amy always felt herself retreating further and further into the corner of the room. These women were charming – golden – and Amy knew she was diminished by their polish and shine.

She decided to go down to the servants' hall rather than sit alone. There was always the chance that Terry would be around, as Emma had been taken into Harrogate by one of her many friends.

In the kitchen she found Rose whirling around like a dervish and doing about six things at once.

'If there's summat you need, Miss Langdale, mebbe you might ring for Mary to fetch it for you,' she said. 'She's taking the vacuum cleaner around upstairs. I'm a little short on help down here this morning.'

'Why, what's happened?' asked Amy. 'Where's the skivvy? And where is Terry?'

'I'm not sure, Miss Langdale,' said Rose. 'Daisy has gone into Crossthwaite on a little shopping errand, but she should have been back ages ago. Terry took Mr Metcalfe to Leeds in the car, I think, but he's taking his time about it too.'

'Oh, no, I hope nothing awful has happened to him,' said Amy. 'Or to Daisy,' she added as an afterthought.

'I don't suppose so, but Mary and I could do without them both being gone so long.' Rose gave each of the four pans on the range a quick stir before turning back to her pastry, rolled out on the table.

Both being gone so long. Amy remembered observing the easy humour between Terry and Daisy and she suddenly felt certain that the footman and the kitchen maid were together and had either helped themselves to a bit of time off work, or else some misadventure had befallen them.

Just then, the back door opened and Daisy limped through, looking sorry for herself.

‘Daise! Where have you been? I’ve been that worried,’ gasped Rose. ‘Are you all right? You look like you’ve hurt your leg.’

‘I’ll be all right, Rose,’ said Daisy. ‘I fell over on an uneven bit of road just as I was setting off back. After a while a farmer came by and helped me onto his cart, which was a bit smelly as it was heaped with crates of hens, and then he brought me here, but slowly, what with the hens on the back, and set me down at the gate. He was very kind but it all took a long time.’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, Daisy, can’t you just go to Crossthwaite and then come back without some mishap? I’ve never known anyone take so long over simple errands.’

‘I’m sorry, Rose. I couldn’t help it.’ Daisy put the basket on the floor and flopped down on a chair. She pulled up her skirt and petticoat, then rolled down her stocking to inspect her knee. It was dark purple with bruising.

‘Go and bathe that with a cold flannel, but hurry up about it. I’ve had to do all the vegetables for the lunches myself, when I really wanted to get on with my cakes for this afternoon,’ said Rose. ‘And wash your hands when you’ve bathed your knee, please.’

‘Can I help?’ asked Amy.

Rose was so desperate, she even considered this for about two seconds, but it would take longer to instruct and show Amy than it would to get on with the work herself. And anyway, Daisy would be back down here in a few minutes.

‘No, thank you, Miss Langdale. Now, if there’s owt I can get you ... ?’

The only thing Amy wanted was to see that Terry got back safely, and to try to work out whether Daisy’s very real accident could possibly be linked in any way to him.

Luckily, she didn’t even have to invent an excuse to loiter in the kitchen.

‘Ah, here’s Terry, at last,’ announced Rose, looking through the window onto the stable yard.

A couple of minutes elapsed before he opened the back door and came in.

‘Bloomin’ heck,’ he sighed. ‘Ran the car into a ditch to avoid hitting a deer. I’ve bashed in the front a bit. Mr M won’t be pleased.’

Amy was on her feet before she could stop herself. ‘Oh, but are you all right, Terry? You’re not hurt at all?’

‘As you can see, Miss Langdale, I’m all in one piece, thank you for asking,’ he said carefully. ‘No harm done to me, just the car.’

‘So no one else involved?’ asked Amy.

‘No, it was just me. I’d taken Mr Metcalfe into Leeds and was on my way back,’ said Terry, appearing puzzled as to why she should insist on asking again after he had just explained.

‘Where did this accident happen?’ asked Amy. She knew it sounded strange that she was so interested in pursuing the detail, but she very much wanted to gather the pieces of what might turn out to be an intriguing situation.

‘Just this side of those crossroads past Roundhay,’ said Terry. ‘Luckily there were no other vehicles on that stretch just then. I couldn’t get the car back on the road by myself, but then two men in a bakery van came by and they stopped to help. I’m fortunate it’s only the bodywork that’s dented and the engine still works all right.’

‘So there was no one else with you?’ asked Amy. She sounded like a police officer compiling evidence for an investigation, but she hoped that wasn’t obvious to Terry and Rose.

‘No, I told you: I’d taken Mr Metcalfe to work and was returning here. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Miss Langdale, I need to wash my hands and change my clothes ready to serve the lunches.’

Amy had got as much from Terry as she was going to. Thank goodness he wasn’t hurt, although Daisy’s knee was. Both late back, and Daisy with her bruised knee. She could easily have hurt her leg when the car went off the road if she had been in it.

Terry and Daisy had their stories, which could even be true, but Amy was filled with suspicion. Two accidents in one morning? That seemed rather too much of a coincidence.

‘I’m glad you’re back safely, Terry,’ she said to his retreating back, and turned to leave.

In the corridor she saw Daisy had returned down the back stairs, which led up to her attic room. Amy realised that this was an opportunity to get an advantage over her pretty young rival, maybe even thwart her completely.

‘Ah, Daisy, how is your knee now?’

‘It’ll get better, thanks, Miss Langdale.’

‘Terry told us *all* about the accident. Such a lucky escape. Are you sure you’re not feeling too shaken?’

Daisy's face was a picture of indecision. Her mouth moved and no sound came out. Then she said, 'My knee has nowt to do with Terry's car accident.'

'No, Daisy, I'm sure it hasn't,' said Amy, looking delighted, and she went along to the stairs at the other end of the corridor and disappeared through the green baize door at the top.

Aaah! Oh hell and damnation! How could I have been so stupid? Caught out by Amy Langdale, of all people.

Daisy leaned against the corridor wall to try to cool the heat that had rushed to her face when she realised how easily Amy had tricked her. Oh, Lordy Lord, this meant trouble.

Terry and Daisy, standing beside the car, its front passenger side tipped well into the ditch, had quickly fabricated a story to disguise that they had both been involved in the crash when they shouldn't have been together or even on that stretch of road.

'You tripped on the uneven surface on the walk back, Daise, and I was driving the motor car somewhere else entirely when the deer rushed out ahead of me.'

'Right. I'll set off back now and you turn up when you can, when someone's come along who can help you to get the car back on the road.'

'Remember, Daise, you know no more about the accident than Mary or Rose do.'

'I'll practise being concerned about you,' she said, miming wiping a tear from her eye. 'Ooh, but my knee does really hurt.'

'At least everyone will believe you fell over,' said Terry, and casually kissed her lips before pushing her on her way with a pat on her behind.

It had all gone perfectly, except Daisy had gone to bathe her knee and then had forgotten that she hadn't actually been present when Terry returned and related his own story. Then Amy had drawn her into a denial she need never have made, and which proved she knew all about the car accident. It was a disaster.

What would Amy do? Bribe her? Surely not. Amy would realise that the kitchen maid had nothing to give in return for Amy's silence. Perhaps ... oh, this was really, really bad news ... perhaps she would get Daisy the sack. But what had Amy got against her that she should want Daisy to lose her job?

The answer was, unfortunately, obvious: Terry. Amy must have seen Daisy clowning around with Terry in the yard, or else she had observed them being on affectionate and flirty terms some other time, and this was a chance for her to get rid of her rival. It would be so easy for her to do it, too. She clearly saw Terry as her beau and she didn't want to share him with a pretty girl less than half her age. She was probably deluded enough to see the footman as the love of her life. Stupid woman, why could Amy not see that Terry was just toying with her, probably so as not to offend her while she sat making cow eyes at him. Poor, pathetic Amy.

Possibly, Daisy had to admit, Amy had seen her smirking and rolling her eyes. It was too late now to wish she had shown more respect.

Oh, but Amy had been clever. Daisy had completely underestimated her and now she was powerless to take control of the situation she found herself in. She could disclose that she'd seen Terry and Amy kissing, but that was unlikely to save her own job. Amy's job, on the other hand, was of so vague and informal a kind that being sacked for flirting with the footman could never be how it ended. Daisy had to admit that she was, infuriatingly, at Amy's mercy.

Daisy didn't want to be dismissed – again. She liked working here, in this beautiful and comfortable house, with her own room and a warm bed. She liked working with Rose, and for the first time she had observed the respect that Rose's skill and also her character had earned her. She was proud of her sister. Daisy had learned the quirks of Mary's character and could ride the waves of her moods without minding them. Above all, she had a handsome admirer with a good job, who was highly respected by his employer; a man with the glamour that being ten years older than herself gave him, but who still liked to share a joke. A man who was up for a few high jinks, who admired her prettiness and knew how to kiss. Sometimes Daisy thought there might be some future together for herself and Terry. Surely the wretched Amy Langdale, the woman he took pity on, wasn't going to wreck that chance when there never could be a future for her with Terry? That would just be mean!

Daisy wondered whether to tell Rose the truth, but Rose was working her magic with a piping bag straight after the lunches had been eaten, and she hadn't time to talk about anything.

Then Daisy wondered if she ought to confide her worries to Terry, but he, too, was busy with the tea party preparations, and anyway, what good

would that do? It wouldn't be Amy's intention to get Terry sacked, and if Mr Metcalfe was to dismiss him, it would be for damaging the car. Mr Metcalfe would only be interested in what immediately concerned himself. He thought the world of Terry, who knew just the right way to iron and fold Mr Metcalfe's newspaper, polish his shoes and press his jacket, who ran 'Upstairs' at Elizabeth House with practised efficiency, as well as driving and maintaining the car.

Daisy was on tenterhooks for the rest of the day, waiting for the summons to see Mary in private and be told to go. She dropped and broke a milk jug, so distracted was she, and she didn't even think of filching one of the leftover cakes when the tea party remains came back downstairs.

'All right, Daise, what's matter?' said Rose that evening, after the kitchen was tidied. Mary had gone to make the drawing room ready for the next day, and Terry had reluctantly disappeared for a very serious discussion with Mr Metcalfe about the car. Rose beckoned her sister into her room and indicated that she was to sit on the bed. 'Better tell me as it's plain as it can be that summat's the matter.'

'I reckon I'm going to get the sack, Rose.'

'Why? What have you been up to?' Rose looked at her beadily. 'You haven't been doing owt you shouldn't, have you? Oh, Daise, I warned you about Terry, didn't I? You should have come straight to me if he took advantage, instead of all this joking and fooling around you get up to. I've told you a time or two to keep your distance, but you've taken no notice at all, with your flirting and pandering to his vanity. You don't need me to tell you where that leads, my girl.'

'Oh, Rose, it's nowt like that. Terry and me, we're ... well, we're ...'

'What?'

'I don't know ... but it's not what you think at all. It's Amy Langdale. She's going to get me the sack, I'm sure of it.'

Rose looked thoughtful. 'Are you saying she's jealous of you joking and flirting with Terry and she's plotted against you? Surely not. There can never be owt between her and Terry.'

'Honest truth, Rose, I saw them embracing. I reckon she thinks they have a relationship. We've all seen the way she looks at him. And now Amy's caught me out in a little fib and she's going to get me sacked, I just know it.' Daisy flung herself back on Rose's bed and heaved a huge sigh.

'Best tell me the truth from the beginning.'

Daisy told Rose the whole story of her shopping trip that morning: how she'd met Terry in the newsagent's shop and then urged him to take a long route back and drive far too fast; the near-miss with the deer and the car swerving off the road into the ditch.

'But it seems to me that *your* only real fault is telling lies about being in the car, Daise,' said Rose. 'Terry didn't have to do as you asked, did he? He's old enough to know better.'

'But it won't make any difference, Rose,' wailed Daisy. 'Miss Langdale will tell Mrs Metcalfe that I lied and make out it's all my fault, and I'll be out on my ear, I know it.'

'Then I shall tell Mrs Metcalfe the truth, Daisy. Don't worry, you probably won't lose your job. Let's say nowt to anyone until we see where the blade falls, eh?'

'I don't like the idea of a falling blade,' said Daisy. 'It already feels to me like I might be facing an execution.'

Rose, for once, was completely wrong.

The following morning, when she went to see Mrs Metcalfe to discuss the food she planned for that day, and the orders from the shops, Mrs Metcalfe asked her to sit down and then told Rose that Daisy was going to be asked to leave.

'I understand she was involved with Terry crashing Mr Metcalfe's car,' she said. 'This kind of thing never happened with the previous girls – what were their names – Helen and Gussie?'

'Hannah and Augusta, Mrs Metcalfe. And, no, it didn't,' agreed Rose. 'Daisy knows she's made a mistake and I promise it will never happen again. I shall make sure of that.'

'But, Rose, how are you to make sure?' asked Mrs Metcalfe. 'You see, Daisy is a pretty young woman with ridiculously high spirits and a strong will. You can't keep a girl like that on a tight leash. It just won't work. Of course, I know all about her requests for carpet in her room and the extra blankets—'

'But those were also for the benefit of Mary.'

'Yes, but we both know it was Daisy who spoke up about carpets and blankets. She could hardly request them for herself and not include Mary. You know, Rose, your sister could do with a little more of your modesty and good manners. She just doesn't seem to know where to draw the line,

does she? Even Miss Langdale has noticed Daisy's flirting with Terry. She most particularly told me of her concerns. Would he have been driving too fast, and where he shouldn't have been, if it hadn't been for Daisy egging him on?'

'Mebbe not, ma'am, but Terry has a mind of his own and could just have said no,' ventured Rose. 'It is he who is to blame for the accident. He is responsible for the motor car and he was driving it. Daisy is far younger and only the kitchen maid. She cannot be held responsible for the decisions of a man both older and of higher rank than herself, wouldn't you agree, Mrs Metcalfe?'

'Oh, but, Rose, men are such silly creatures,' Mrs Metcalfe replied, leaning in confidingly. 'So easily distracted and swayed to foolishness by a pretty ankle or a winsome glance. I'm afraid, Rose, that young Daisy is trouble, and I would be wise to dismiss her now, before she goes off like a firework and wreaks havoc over the whole household. She's too wilful, too confident, too distracting. Terry has worked here far longer and is highly valued by Mr Metcalfe.'

Rose wondered if Mrs Metcalfe thought her own husband was in danger of being 'distracted' by Daisy's looks and exuberance, yet he saw her only once a week, to give her her wage, so that would seem very unfair as well as ridiculous. Rose decided she had better not even allow that idea to cross her mind again while she sat with Mrs Metcalfe.

In the end she fell back on pleading. 'Please, Mrs Metcalfe, ma'am, let Daisy stay and redeem herself. My sister is only young but she's bright and learns quickly. She's learned her lesson from this silly caper and it won't happen again.'

'Silly caper? Rose, I'm afraid Mr Metcalfe sees the damage to his motor car as far more than a "silly caper". More distressingly, to my mind, your sister could have been killed and so could Terry. No, I'm afraid not only has Daisy shown herself the kind of girl who takes advantage of the foolishness of men, but she was dishonest about her role in the accident, and I find that very difficult to overlook. Terry confessed straight away to Mr Metcalfe about the accident. He was only trying to protect Daisy with his earlier story, he said.'

'I—'

'I'm sorry, Rose, but I shall ask Mary to give Daisy a week's notice.'

A week – to find Daisy another job. Mrs Metcalfe was hardly going to recommend Daisy to one of her friends now. And Rose was supposed to be taking care of Daisy while Louisa got back on her feet or wound up the millinery business and found another job. It wouldn't be fair on Louisa to send Daisy back to Blackburn to be the responsibility of her mother now. Louisa had last written that she was working as best she could from her sitting room, but that the terms and the standards at Top Hats had proved unsatisfactory and she was looking for another outlet. The last thing she needed now, Rose thought, was Daisy turning up, unemployed again.

All this passed through Rose's mind in moments.

'Yes, Mrs Metcalfe,' she said. 'I ... I ...'

'Now, don't take on, Rose. If your sister finds a job from an advertisement in the newspaper, and it's with someone I don't know personally, I shall be pleased to give her a reference. I can't say fairer than that, can I?'

Mary was sorry to have to sack Daisy. She told her she was sacked with her usual directness, but she added that she'd ask her mother if she would mention any work she heard of that Daisy might do.

'Thank you, Mary,' said Daisy, looking suitably subdued. 'A week's not long to find owt, though. I like it here, I like all of you down here, and I'm sorry to go. I reckon that Amy Langdale bribed Terry to squeal on me. I saw them kissing and now she'll have been bleating to Terry that if he didn't betray me and get me the sack, she'd tell Mrs Metcalfe he took advantage or summat. I wouldn't trust her.'

Mary was taken aback to think that her own disrespect for Amy had been so evident that Daisy could speak in such a tone and so freely about Mrs Metcalfe's companion, but perhaps Amy deserved it. Respect had to be earned, and that woman had done nothing but throw herself at the only single man in the house in a desperate and needy way, and take revenge on a harmless young kitchen maid who could never be a rival to her, mainly because any relationship between herself and Terry would never be a happy one and was going nowhere anyway.

The atmosphere below stairs was strained all that day. Mary was furious with Terry and avoided even looking at him. Rose, too, was disgusted that he hadn't stuck up for Daisy, but more, that he hadn't had the wisdom to

ignore the pleas of a pretty girl to enjoy a fast motor-car ride and just bring her safely straight back from Crossthwaite instead.

‘Immature showing off,’ she accused, as she poured cups of tea for the staff that afternoon, while Daisy was in the scullery and out of hearing.

‘Just the same as that time you took me to Leeds to get my train.’

‘Well, you needn’t think you’re getting a ride to Leeds with me again.’

‘That’s for Mr Metcalfe to decide, but in any case, I didn’t feel safe then and I certainly wouldn’t feel safe with you now.’

‘Oh, Rose, don’t flatter yourself,’ snapped back Terry. ‘You’re perfectly safe with me and you know it. I wouldn’t touch your skinny self if you were the last woman on earth.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ said Rose, wondering how the conversation had taken this unpleasant turn. ‘And that makes three of us: Mary, Daisy and me.’

‘Just shut up, Rose, and get your nose out of the air. Your trouble is that you think you’re better than the rest of us, and I’m blessed if I can see why.’

Rose poured him a cup of tea and passed it over, pulling the saucer away just as he reached for it so he had to look up at her.

‘Terry,’ she said, fixing him with her dark eyes blazing with anger, ‘you do know that you give yourself away with every stupid thing you say, don’t you?’

Terry grabbed his cup and marched off to clean the silver cutlery without another word.

Rose put her hands over her face. ‘I can’t stay, Mary,’ she said. ‘Mum trusted me to look after Daisy and I have to do that properly. If Daisy has to go, so do I. She thinks she knows it all, but she’s nowt but a babe as regards the ways of the world ... the ways of men like Terry. I can’t let her out of my sight, I can see that. If she got in any kind of ... trouble, I should never forgive myself for not minding her as I should. This stupid business with the car has been a warning to me – and to Daisy. Trouble is, I reckon I’m the only one who will learn from it. Nor do I want the bother of working beside Terry, with him snarling at me and giving everything I say some filthy twist of his own.’

‘I understand,’ said Mary, ‘but I’m right sorry you feel you have to go. As for Terry, I refuse to let him wear me down. When we have to do summat together, I never speak unless I have to. It helps to imagine he’s covered in boils.’

‘Good heavens! Boils?’

‘Why not? It works. To my mind he is now, and always will be, repellent.’

‘I don’t think I could keep that up. I haven’t your strength of will. In any case, I won’t have to now I’m going.’

‘But, Rose,’ piped up Daisy, coming back in to hear the end of this, ‘don’t go because I have to. No one’s sacked you. And how’s it going to help Mum if we’re both out of work? We can hardly hang around in Yorkshire with not a job between us.’

‘It won’t help her, but I won’t leave you to sink or swim alone. I have to keep an eye on you while Mum is busy trying to get back on her feet. You’ve nearly got out of hand here, working with me, so I’m not letting you loose in the world alone, I can tell you. You’ve proved yourself even wilder and dafter than I thought you were.’ She looked at Daisy with hard eyes, and Daisy felt sufficient shame and regret to lower her own.

‘But what if Mrs Metcalfe doesn’t let you leave?’ she asked quietly.

‘She’ll have to. She doesn’t own me. I shall give her my notice after dinner this evening. Then we’ll leave together. I hope she’ll give me a good reference. That should make finding a new job easy enough, and there may be summat for you too in my new place.’

‘I’ll be sorry to see you go, Rose, and I know my mam and dad and your friend Millicent will miss you, too,’ said Mary. ‘And, oh, I’ve just had a terrible thought. If Mrs Metcalfe doesn’t hurry up and find a permanent replacement for you, it’ll be the agency again. How on earth are we to put up with Mrs Pewsey?’

Mrs Metcalfe sat in the drawing room, in a high-back armchair, and Rose stood before her and delivered her resignation. Mrs Metcalfe didn’t want Rose to leave, but she wanted to be fair and so she promised her a glowing reference to help her find another job.

‘I just wish you’d consulted me before you made up your mind to leave, Rose,’ she said. ‘You are an important part of this household and we are lucky to have you. Can’t I persuade you to stay? There must be something I can offer you. How about I increase your pay? And perhaps allow you a couple of days more holiday a year. I’m sure we could manage that.’ She smiled encouragingly.

‘It’s not about the pay, Mrs Metcalfe,’ said Rose. ‘I promised my mother I would look after Daisy, so if Daisy goes, then I have to, too. I hope you understand.’

‘All too well, Rose. I’m afraid I can’t agree to Daisy staying, though, and you know why. I have been told there has been a lot of flirting with Terry, even lifts in my husband’s car without his permission, and now the crash ...’

Rose knew the source of this information, but Mrs Metcalfe would side with her cousin against her kitchen maid – of course she would. And it was true that the smooth running of the house *had* been disrupted by Daisy’s actions. And what if all this flirting with Terry led to a serious love affair? Now that really would undermine the stability of Elizabeth House.

‘I have to go, Mrs Metcalfe; I have no choice,’ said Rose, sorrowfully. ‘I can see now that it’s the only course of action.’

‘So can I, Rose, and I’m very sorry,’ said Mrs Metcalfe.

Rose and Daisy sat in the third-class carriage of the train. Rose hadn’t written to Louisa to tell her that her daughters were returning home. She was confident their mum would be there, at Shallow Street, working on the hats, and delighted to see them. Rose had got her pay, a little bonus from Mr Metcalfe, and the tin of shillings and sixpenny pieces that she had been saving up for months. She had wedged a handkerchief into the tin to stop the coins clinking together and announcing to her fellow train passengers that she was carrying her life savings. She had also got a reference from Mrs Metcalfe that was beyond good, saying how reliable and talented she was, how inventive and skilful, how honest and well-mannered.

Daisy’s reference merely stated that she was clean and hard-working. It said nothing of her honesty and good manners at all.

Daisy sat sighing in her seat, looking both cross and sad.

Once she started, ‘I wish me and Terry—’

‘Shut up about Terry, Daisy. I don’t want to hear about him again,’ said Rose snappily.

‘It was all the fault of Amy Langdale that—’

‘And I don’t want to hear owt more about her either.’

To pass the time on the journey and try to calm her anger towards Daisy, Rose closed her eyes and conjured up her vision of the perfect tearoom, with pretty tablecloths and that long counter with a beautifully tempting

array of cakes and savouries. She wasn't sure where this tearoom would be – maybe in Crossthwaite, or perhaps somewhere in Lancashire where people had money to spend on going out to tea: St Annes was nice, she'd heard, or Southport ...

By the time Rose and Daisy had walked from the station to home, carrying their cases, Rose was no longer dreaming about her smart little business. The sooty air, the noise of clogs on cobbles, the all-pervading although not unpleasant smell of coal fires, the volume of people in the street calling out to each other – all seemed astonishing after weeks in the Yorkshire countryside, and that drove all other thoughts from her mind.

But when Rose produced her key and opened the door of number 26 Shallow Street, her life and Daisy's changed for ever and Elizabeth House instantly retreated into a distant memory, seemingly as unreal as any daydream of pretty tearooms.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

‘MUM? HELLO, MUM? It’s us,’ called Daisy, setting her bag down on the floor.

‘Mum, we’re both home. Hello, are you there?’ Rose joined in.

‘I think she must have gone out,’ said Daisy.

‘Smells musty in here,’ Rose said. ‘Sort of closed-up and stale.’

She went through to the kitchen. There was a used teacup, the tidemarks dry around the rim and in the base, and a single small plate on which a corner of a piece of bread remained, grey with mould in the cold, damp house.

Rose felt panic starting to rise inside her. This didn’t look as if Louisa had gone shopping or to sell some hats and would be back soon; this looked as if she had been gone for some time; as if she might have gone for good. Yet it wouldn’t be like their mother to go out for even five minutes and leave anything unclean or not tidied away. And it certainly wouldn’t be like her not to inform her girls if she meant to leave.

Rose felt the temperature of the range: it was stone cold. Then she looked in the larder and found nothing but an almost empty bag of flour. There was no fresh food at all. The kitchen table had a fine layer of dust on it, she saw now, and the jam jar by the bread bin was empty of coins for the rent.

She tried to think when she had last heard from her mother. It must have been soon after she returned to Elizabeth House from her holiday, with Daisy in tow. None of them was a keen letter writer; they accepted that, with busy jobs, there were other things they would rather be doing. They’d heard from Louisa that one time since their return. It could be that she had left weeks ago.

In the meantime, Daisy had gone into the sitting room.

‘Rose,’ she called, ‘come here. There’s summat odd going on.’

Rose heard the edge of panic in Daisy’s voice, reflecting the turmoil in her own stomach, and she rushed into the room.

The millinery materials were still there, but some were strewn around the floor as if they had been swept off the sofa in a hurry.

Rose and Daisy looked at each other. Rose saw her fear reflected in Daisy's wide eyes and white face.

'She might be ill,' she said.

The girls looked at each other again and they both ran out and thundered up the stairs to Louisa's bedroom, Rose leading, half expecting to find their mother dead in her bed.

Louisa's bed was empty, but the sheets were grubby and crumpled, and – Rose picked it up and took it to the window to inspect it properly – there were flecks of blood spattered across her pillowcase.

'Oh dear Lord, what do you think's happened? Has she been murdered?' breathed Daisy.

'No ... no, of course not. Why would anyone do that to Mum? But I reckon she might be poorly and we need to find out what's happened to her.' Rose was trying to keep calm, half speaking to herself in an effort to conquer her panic. 'Think, think ... who would know?'

'Mrs Palmer?' suggested Daisy.

'Yes, p'raps. Yes ... let's ask her.' By now Rose felt she was almost breathless with anxiety.

'Keys, Rose,' reminded Daisy, just in time to stop her pulling the door to and shutting them out.

Rose, growing frantic, tried to think what she had done with her keys when she first opened the door. 'Where ... where ... ? Oh God, what I have done with them?'

'Here,' said Daisy, picking them off the kitchen table. 'Now, let's try to be calm. Mrs Palmer knows everything that happens hereabouts. She'll help us.'

'Yes, yes, of course.' Rose took a deep breath, and the sisters went out, down to number 18, and knocked on Mrs Palmer's door.

Seconds went by and there was no answer.

Rose could feel panic starting to boil up inside her again but, just as she was about to give way to tears of frustration, Mrs Palmer opened the door.

'Oh, Rose and Daisy. Sorry, loves, I was busy out the back. Come in. You'll have come about your mum, I don't doubt.'

Mrs Palmer led the girls into her sitting room in a house that was identical in layout to their own.

'Sit down, the both of you, and let me tell you what happened. Then I'll make us all a cup of tea and you can decide what to do.'

‘What to do?’ questioned Rose. ‘Oh, Mrs Palmer, please just tell us. Mum’s not ... she’s not dead, is she?’

‘Be calm, Rose. No, she’s not dead, but she is poorly. She’s got TB and I’m sorry to have to tell you, it looks bad.’

Rose reached out and squeezed Daisy’s hand.

‘Where is she?’ asked Daisy, struggling to hold back tears. ‘She’s not going to die, is she?’

‘Ah, love, I think she’s been ill for a while.’

‘I just thought her cough was with it being winter, and with the sooty air and the damp,’ said Rose, wishing she’d given Louisa’s cough more attention. Too late for regrets now.

‘You weren’t to know, and she made a good job of covering it up,’ said Mrs Palmer. ‘I thought the same. Anyway, she went with her sister. That’s who the woman said she was. She turned up with a motor car, would you believe – said it wasn’t hers but she’d borrowed it – and took Louisa off to somewhere near the Fell. This was a week or two since.’

‘The Fell? Longridge Fell, do you mean? But that’s miles away. I’ve never even been there,’ said Daisy. ‘How are we going to find Mum and bring her home from there?’

‘I think it must have been Aunt Clara who came here,’ Rose suggested, not wanting to address the idea that their mother might not ever be coming back to Shallow Street. ‘Mum never kept in close touch with the aunts, but I seem to remember Clara lives somewhere near Longridge Fell. Is that right, Mrs Palmer? Did the lady say her name was Clara Gimson?’

‘Aye ... that was the name, love. Very efficient she was; no nonsense. And she’d come all this way to collect Louisa and take her home to look after her. Said the fresh air would help her if owt could. This Clara Gimson came swooping in, gathered up your mother, and off they went in this borrowed motor car.’

‘Leaving no word for us?’ asked Rose, mystified as to why she and Daisy knew nothing of any of this until now.

‘She said she’d written a note to you.’

‘But two weeks ago?’ asked Rose. ‘We didn’t get owt, did we, Daisy?’

Daisy shook her head. ‘She wrote to us at Elizabeth House, where we worked?’

‘I don’t know, love. Just said she’d make sure you knew where your mum had gone. Now, let me make us all a cup of tea while you decide what

to do, eh?’

‘Thank you, Mrs Palmer, but I reckon we ought to see to the house, which looks kind of abandoned, and also try to find out where Mum has gone without delay. Daisy and I have left Yorkshire and are making a new start, but neither of us saw this is where we’d be starting from.’

Back at number 26, the girls soon wished they had taken up the offer of tea from Mrs Palmer. There was nothing to eat or drink in the house but water from the tap. Rose gave Daisy a little money and asked her to go to fetch a few basics from the nearby corner shop while she hunted for clues as to where Louisa might have been taken.

It didn’t take her long to find the note Mrs Palmer had said their aunt had written. It was scribbled on a scrap of paper torn from what looked like the book in which Louisa worked out her measurements, and simply folded over and weighted down with a pair of tailor’s shears on the mantelpiece.

Sure enough, there was an address near Longridge – Grimside Farm – at the top, and the date was a fortnight previously. Perhaps time had been short, but Aunt Clara appeared to be a woman of few words.

Dear Rose and Daisy,

Louisa has TB and I’m taking her home with me. I wanted to write to you where you work, but Louisa is feverish and confused, and I haven’t your address.

You’ll want to visit. You can take a train to Longridge and then ask the stationmaster how to find me at the farm.

I pray your mother will recover.

Your aunt Clara Gimson

Of course, Rose shared this with Daisy as soon as she returned.

‘Let’s just go now,’ said Daisy. ‘Our bags are still packed and there’s no need to delay.’

‘No, I think we should have summat to eat and then go and see Mrs Pullinger and see what’s happened to the shop. There might well be more to learn.’

‘Well, I’m not going to go and ask Uncle Alec,’ said Daisy.

‘Neither am I. I blame him for Mum’s illness. He wore her down with worry and left her without nourishing food and the means to keep warm. I

notice Aunt Clara doesn't mention him at all in her letter.'

Gertie Pullinger was pleased to see the girls but she had little to add beyond what Clara had written.

She was packing up the last of her own belongings to move in with her sister, and there were tea chests and boxes heaped up in the sitting room when she showed the girls in to sit down.

'The shop closed over two weeks ago, I'm afraid,' she said. 'Louisa moved her workshop to her house, as you know, and I stayed working in the shop while we sold off the stock. I know she was hoping to supply those Top Hats folk, but I have to say, I had my doubts. Louisa was better than that, but I reckon she lacked the energy and the resources to look any further for an outlet. She was so proud of her little business, but with the rent rise she just couldn't carry on.'

Rose nodded in agreement. 'We went to Top Hats and it wasn't nice. But when did Mum get so ill? I know she was worried about ... well, about the rent, about money generally – was that what made her unwell?'

'It didn't help, love,' said Gertie, sadly. 'She was always a worrier, and that brother of hers, Alec, he would keep coming round to the shop. I could always tell when he'd been – although I know he tried to avoid going when I was there – because your mum got more fretful. I know she didn't like to say, but I reckon he took more than she could afford from her. She was getting very thin, too, although she said she was eating plenty. Then the rent at the shop doubled, and that's when she had to wind down the business. I reckon that Alec Gimson had summat to do with that too – the rent rise, I mean – what with him boasting he worked for Mr Lancaster, the landlord. But Louisa said it wasn't him who had brought news of the rent increase.'

'I wondered about that myself,' said Rose. 'So what about Mum's illness? TB, our aunt said. She came and took Mum home with her. They were never very close so I don't know how good a thing that is, but at least Mum is at Aunt Clara's house, and our aunt did take the trouble to come to Blackburn to find her.'

'She'd had a cough for a while but it got suddenly worse.'

'I thought it was just the usual kind of winter illness, nowt to worry over,' said Daisy.

'Well, love, you can't be blamed. I reckon she was much more poorly than she let on and hid it from everyone,' said Gertie. 'When you go to see

her, give her my love and, if she asks, tell her I'm going on all right, will you?'

'And are you, Mrs Pullinger? Going on all right, I mean,' asked Rose.

'Oh, aye, love. I get on well with my sister. She's a widow, too, so we don't have any menfolk to be fussing about. We can do as we like. I'm getting a job in the mill alongside her, starting tomorrow, in fact. I expect we'll manage grand.'

She gave a little smile. Rose wasn't sure how Gertie would get on in the mill, where the hours were long and she'd have to keep up with the relentless pace of her fellow workers. Gertie was quite old to be taking up a new job, and one that would take a physical toll, and, despite her smile, the anxiety in her eyes told Rose that Gertie thought the same.

The following day, the girls alighted from the train at Longridge station and quickly identified the stationmaster by his uniform.

Rose mentioned the name Clara Gimson, and asked how to get to Grimside Farm.

'Straight up this road, then take the left fork, then the farm's on the right,' he said. 'Relations of Miss Gimson, are you?'

'Her nieces. She's looking after our mother, who's ill,' said Daisy, chattily.

'Oh dear, I'm sorry about that,' said the man, ambiguously.

Rose didn't want to question him further. She and Daisy would find out the situation for themselves if they got a move on instead of standing there.

'Is it far?' asked Daisy. It wasn't raining, but a blustery wind was blowing and the open countryside ahead looked as if it would afford little shelter if a shower came over.

'No distance,' the stationmaster replied. 'Mebbe about three miles.'

The girls looked at each other and decided there was nothing for it but to set out. Perhaps a farm cart would pass them and they could beg a lift.

'I'm sure this is a lot further than three miles,' said Rose, when they had been walking uphill for almost an hour. 'You don't think we've missed the farm, do you?'

'I can't see how we could have done. We've seen nowt at all but fells,' said Daisy. 'I'm sure there's been no farms. I'd expect a sign on a gate or summat ... like this one,' she grinned.

‘Oh, thank goodness. I was starting to worry we were lost,’ said Rose. ‘Come on.’ She made a big effort at a brave smile, but she felt nervous as she opened the five-bar gate with the name ‘Grimside Farm’ on it.

Having closed the gate, Rose led the way along a bumpy, potholed lane.

‘Careful you don’t fall,’ she warned Daisy with a sidelong look, ‘what with you having a bit of a reputation for tripping up along bumpy roads.’

Daisy grinned cheekily, despite the fact that her escapade had cost her her job and had led to Rose leaving Elizabeth House, too. Her bruised knee was now a yellowish colour but at least it no longer hurt very much.

Soon they rounded a bend in the lane and saw a small farmhouse ahead. Drystone walls separated a garden, in which daffodils bloomed, from the fields. Smoke rose from a chimney but there was no one in sight.

A black-and-white collie with a sharp, intelligent face came to stand in the lane and faced them. It gave one bark of greeting and stood its ground, and the girls approached slowly, unsure whether the dog would suddenly take on the character of a fierce guard dog and they’d be running for their lives.

Then their aunt came out from around the back of the house. She was a substantial woman, well into her fifties, with short hair, like a man’s, and dressed in an assortment of mismatched tweedy garments.

‘Mack, lie down,’ she instructed sharply, and the dog immediately obeyed.

‘Come on, girls,’ she said then. ‘Your mum will be pleased to see you.’

Rose’s first thought was: oh, thank God we’re in time and she’s not dead.

‘Hello, Aunt Clara,’ she said. ‘I’m Rose and this is Daisy.’

‘I guessed as much. It’s many years since I’ve seen you – or your mum, until she wrote.’

So Louisa had written and asked Clara to help her. Why Clara; why not Sissy or Maud? Perhaps Clara, being the youngest of the trio of sisters, had been closer to Louisa in her childhood.

‘Thank you for your letter,’ said Rose, as she and Daisy skirted slightly nervously past the dog and followed their aunt round to the back door of the house.

‘It was all I could do with Louisa too feverish to tell me your address, but I reckoned you’d turn up eventually. Sooner than I thought, really. It’s just as well.’

Inside the farmhouse kitchen, it was quite dark, and for a moment Rose thought she was seeing things. Two tiny lambs were sitting in a little pen in front of the range.

‘Orphans,’ said Aunt Clara. ‘I’m having to raise them myself. Put down your bags and I’ll take you up, then make us a pot of tea.’

Aunt Clara was not one for chat or polite enquiries, Rose thought. Perhaps this was as a result of living alone and having only Mack the dog and the sheep to speak to: not much conversation there.

Clara led the way through a door at the back of the kitchen, where the house was suddenly much cooler, and up some stairs to a bedroom just at the top. She opened the door and peered in.

‘Louisa, your girls are here,’ she said. Then to Rose and Daisy: ‘Don’t get too near. You don’t want the infection yourselves.’ Then she went back down and left Louisa’s daughters on the threshold, their eyes wide with shock at the deterioration in their mother’s appearance, even after just two months.

‘Girls? Oh, I’m that glad you’ve come.’

Despite their aunt’s warning, both Rose and Daisy rushed forward to hug their mother. She was lying propped up on several rather ancient-looking pillows, her complexion hectic and her arms, poking out of her nightdress, angular and twiglike, her skin opaque. The windows in the bedroom were wide open. Rose thought Louisa felt as light and as fragile as a baby bird.

‘Oh, Mum,’ wept Daisy. ‘We came home and you weren’t there. Mrs Palmer told us Aunt Clara came to fetch you. We’d have lost you for ever if it hadn’t been for the note she left.’

‘My sensible girls, you’d have found a way to find me,’ said Louisa, her voice croaky. ‘I’m so grateful you’ve come,’ she whispered.

‘Of course,’ said Rose. ‘Shall I close the windows? I don’t want you to feel cold.’

‘Clara says the fresh air is good for my lungs,’ murmured Louisa. ‘I’m warm enough. Too hot sometimes. She’s been good to me – Clara. I ... wasn’t sure ...’

‘No need to explain, Mum. We understand,’ said Rose. ‘Mrs Pullinger sends her love. We saw her yesterday.’

‘She’s very excited about starting work with her sister at the mill,’ added Daisy, in an effort to shine a cheerful light on Mrs Pullinger’s unlooked-for new career.

Louisa closed her eyes and sighed. ‘I doubt it,’ she said. ‘Dear Gertie, I am sorry to have let her down.’

There was a long pause and Rose and Daisy looked at each other. They could hear the breath in Louisa’s lungs rasping and grating. She turned her face away and coughed hard into a handkerchief.

‘Oh, Mum ...’ Rose struggled to hold back her tears. *Please, please, please don’t let her die.*

‘Aunt Clara’s making a pot of tea. Shall I bring you a cup?’ asked Daisy in a shaky little voice.

‘Mm, thank you, love,’ said Louisa.

Daisy nearly ran from the room to fetch it.

‘Rose,’ said Louisa, ‘I have to tell you—’

‘There’s no need to say owt, Mum. You just get better for now.’

Louisa shook her head minutely. ‘No, shush, love. There isn’t long. This might be my only chance to tell you summat that’s been on my conscience nearly all my life.’

‘What do you mean? There’s no need to tell me owt, Mum. I can’t believe owt bad of you.’

‘I need to ... to unburden myself. It’s too great a weight to carry now. And Alec, he knows, and I don’t want him giving you his version ... and using it against you in some way. He’s like that.’

‘He’s blackmailed you?’ Could anything be so bad that a quiet, hard-working, respectable woman like Louisa could be open to blackmail by her own brother?

‘Just listen.’

Louisa’s tone was urgent, and Rose sat on a chair beside her and prepared to do as she was asked.

‘Many years ago, when I was about Daisy’s age, I did a terrible thing. No one knows ’cept Alec and me. A friend of mine, Jess ... she was my best friend ... she got in trouble and I thought I was helping her.’

‘What kind of trouble?’ asked Rose, wide-eyed, hoping it wasn’t what she thought.

‘The worst kind for a girl. She was my age – just a young ’un – and not ready for a bairn of her own. I’d heard about this woman. Folk knew her as Ma Tucker and she sold remedies and the like. Colic, fatigue, swollen feet, unwanted babies – she had a “cure” for everything. So Jess and me saved up our wages as fast as we could – this was when I worked at the mill,

before I went to train with the milliner – and when we decided we had about enough, we went together to buy the medicine that would get rid of the baby.’ Louisa turned away to cough again, a horrible hacking that rattled her thin body.

‘Mum—’

‘Shush, love. I’ve not finished. So we went back to Jess’s home – she didn’t have a mum to guide her and her dad was often out drinking so it wasn’t difficult to be undisturbed – and she took the poison. When she started to feel it working, she told me to go, that I mustn’t be seen to be a party to what she’d done. I wanted to stay with her, but she begged me to go and I was that afraid, in the end I did go. Went and left her. I have never forgiven myself – for that and every part I had in this dreadful business. When I went to call for her next day to go to work – not knowing what I would find, trying to pretend I knew nowt of any of it – she was dead.’

‘Oh, no! Oh, Mum! But you were so young – both of you – and you didn’t know what would happen, and Jess going to have a baby was such a big thing. You weren’t to blame. It was that Ma Tucker, who sold you the poison.’

‘We were stupid, but we couldn’t see a better way. We were complete fools,’ said Louisa, lying back as if exhausted with reliving the horror of those terrible events.

‘But it’s all in the past now,’ said Rose, smoothing Louisa’s hair away from her sweaty face. ‘You can’t change it, Mum. If you hadn’t gone with Jess to the Tucker woman, she might have done summat else drastic. You weren’t to know. It seems to me there was never going to be a happy ending in this for poor Jess.’

‘That’s not all ...’ She took a raspy breath and reached to grasp Rose’s arm. ‘Alec – it was Alec’s. It was his baby that Jess was having.’

‘No!’

‘Yes. She was a very pretty girl, with lovely long red hair, but she didn’t care for Alec at all. He forced himself on her – the worst, the very worst kind of bullying – but she was the one facing the shame of the baby. After she died, I thought my heart would break with the grief of the terrible deed I’d been a part of, and I went into a ... a decline of sorts. Of course, my mother was in a right old flap about that, which made Alec jealous of the attention I was getting. He always resented how close I was to our mother. He hated the special bond between us – a mother and her youngest child –

and did everything he could to cast me in a bad light, to lay the blame for all the wrongs he did at my door. Of course, Mum was wise to him, but that probably made him worse. Anyway, he was smart enough to link the onset of my illness with around the time Jess died. He was always able to tell if I was hiding summat, and he twisted my arm – literally twisted my arm in a kind of torture – until I told him everything.’

‘I’m sorry, Mum. I can guess he’s used it to blackmail you with ever since.’

‘For a while, as you know, we never saw him. Then, after your father died, he turned up at the shop that time and ... and I have to do what he says. He reckons he and Jess were in love and I killed her. He says that if he tells anyone about me going with Jess to Ma Tucker’s, I’ll go to prison for my part. The sentence would be life imprisonment. He’s tried to make out it must have been all my idea and I made Jess do it. He hates me and now he’s started, he loses no chance to exact his revenge.’

‘The monster – to hound you like that. And Jess’s pregnancy was his fault!’

‘Shush, Rose, love. So now I’m telling you so you know exactly how things are. If you know it all, you will be armed against any tricks he plays.’

‘I reckon I’m having nowt to do with Uncle Alec ever again,’ said Rose.

‘Me neither,’ said Daisy, coming in in time to hear Rose’s last remark, with Aunt Clara, who was carrying a tray with a bowl of tea and a spoon on it.

‘That makes three,’ said Clara. ‘Oh, but he was a sly youth, a really nasty little blighter. He was part of the reason we were like separate families – it was also the age gap between the first three of us and the other two, but mainly that none of us could stand Alec. Now, c’mon, let’s get you sitting up higher, Louisa. I’ll help you.’

She sat on the bed and started slowly spooning the tea into Louisa’s mouth, while the girls went downstairs to drink their own.

It was the same at lunchtime, when Clara spoon-fed Louisa, although Rose and Daisy also took turns with the slow task.

‘Shall I draw the curtains, Mum? Is the sky too bright for you?’ asked Rose that afternoon, when she was sitting with her mother, who was staring out at the passing clouds.

‘No, love. Leave them,’ murmured Louisa. ‘I wish ... I wish I had found Clara again sooner. Too late now ...’

‘No, Mum. You’re united again now.’

Louisa shook her head slightly, then turned away and coughed hard until she had coughed up some dark blood.

Rose passed her another handkerchief and, with some tongs she found across the lid of a pail, took the bloodied handkerchief and plunged it into the bucket of what smelled like disinfectant. She deliberately didn’t inspect the other contents closely. Even at arm’s length it was too hopeless a sight.

Having soothed her mother’s brow with a cool flannel, Rose then rushed down to find her aunt, who was in a little barn behind the farmhouse, filling the mangers with hay, Daisy trying to help.

‘Mm, I reckon she’s not got long now,’ said Clara.

‘Shouldn’t she be in hospital?’ said Rose. In her panic the question came out as a shrill demand, but Clara was unperturbed.

‘Too late for that, and what would she want with strangers fussing round her? It’s better like this, Rose. We’ll be there at the end. I’m right glad you both came. It’s all she wants.’

Rose and Clara took turns to sit with Louisa that night, Daisy staying, too, until she was too tired. They kept the curtains open and the windows wide, and Rose, taking up her vigil just before dawn, put on her coat against the chill. Louisa’s face was flushed and she felt hot, but just as the first birds were beginning their dawn chorus, and Rose thought her mother had made it through the night, she heard her breathing change, the rhythm more hurried, the noise like a rattle.

She got up from her chair and went over to take her mother’s hand. It was stone cold.

Then she lifted the bedclothes and felt Louisa’s feet. They were equally as cold.

‘Mum,’ she whispered, ‘please don’t go.’

Louisa opened her eyes and turned towards the open window, where the first light of the new day showed in the sky.

‘My lovely Rose,’ she murmured. ‘The best of girls ...’

Then she closed her eyes again and, very soon, her breathing ceased.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROSE AND DAISY returned to the house in Shallow Street feeling that they might never smile again. When their father died they had been prepared; they had known for a while how ill he was and that the sad outcome was inevitable. But their mother's death was a complete shock. How had they not known she was so ill? Aunt Clara said she thought Louisa had something called 'galloping consumption' – 'It's an especially rapid and deadly sort' – and that the stress of her money worries had weakened her resistance to the terrible infection.

'By the time I went to see her it was too late to do owt,' Clara had explained. 'There's those fancy sanatoria being built now, where there's plenty of fresh air and wholesome food, but I reckon they're not for the likes of us. Not for folk with no money or sponsors. I tried to give Louisa that here – the air and the food – but I knew she was past help.'

Back in Blackburn, the girls set about arranging the funeral, which Clara had said she would pay for. Louisa was to be buried beside Albert. Once that was over, Rose and Daisy knew they would have to find work – and quickly. Daisy had no money at all and Rose's final wage and her bonus were fast running out. They also knew that they couldn't stay in the house for ever and just assume the tenancy without telling anyone, but the inertia of grief had set in, and it was difficult for them to raise the energy to do anything that wasn't immediately pressing.

'What shall we do with all this millinery stuff?' Daisy asked the day after they got home. 'We can't keep skirting round it, and yet ...' She shrugged and her face was a picture of misery.

'Let's just leave it for now,' said Rose, flopping down in Louisa's chair. 'If owt's in your way just put it in that corner. I can't face deciding what to do with it. I don't feel ready to ... to put it out just yet. I know it's daft but it would feel heartless, like we were getting rid of Mum. Like we didn't care.'

Tears sprang to her eyes, as they did so often these days, and Daisy sat on the arm of the chair and cried with her. Both girls felt exhausted with their sadness.

Rose found herself thinking of Louisa's confession when she woke in the night. She was glad that her mother had unburdened herself of the terrible secret that had weighed her down for most of her life, and so had, at last, felt lighter for confessing before she died, but the whole business was Uncle Alec's fault. Everything was Uncle Alec's fault! And he had got away scot-free with all his deceit, his bullying, and his betrayal of those he should have been protecting. Had he not come back into Louisa's life, it was possible that Louisa would still be alive. Certainly her struggles would have been far less severe.

Rose debated whether to go and confront him at his house across town, but look what had happened when Louisa and Daisy had gone there simply to ask for Louisa's money back: he'd thrown them out. No, it would be better to keep away from that disgraceful man. She hoped never to see him again, but, she vowed, should their paths ever cross, he would feel the full force of her anger.

Rose decided she would tell no one what Louisa had confided to her. The mother's secret would become the daughter's secret. It had lost its power to damage the living, but Rose didn't want anyone to think badly of her mother, however unjustly. Let it be as good as buried now.

The girls had been home almost a week, and the funeral was arranged. Clara wrote to say she would be there, and that she had informed Sissy and Maud of the place, date and time, should they wish to go. No one mentioned Alec.

Rose and Daisy felt as if they were waiting for the funeral to take place, marking time before their lives could take a new turn.

Mrs Palmer and Mrs Gale, who lived next door, were very kind and came by with little presents of food: a bit of stew in a dish, ready to reheat – 'I thought you might like summat to eat you didn't have to make an effort over' – or a bottle of sarsaparilla – 'to keep your strength up'.

'Just let me know if there's owt I can do,' said Mrs Palmer. 'I'll come and help you clean round if you let me know when.'

Rose thanked her and said goodbye with a brave smile, then closed the door and sank onto the bottom step of the stairs, sobbing. It was the kindness of people that could break you.

Louisa's funeral was not well attended. Gertie Pullinger was working at the mill now and couldn't get the time off. She sent a formal little card with a kind and heartfelt message she'd written inside. Mrs Palmer and Mrs Gale

turned up with little bunches of spring flowers to put on the grave, but their husbands were at work and so couldn't attend either.

Two old ladies, on the arms of two old men, arrived at the church and sat themselves near the front. Clara, who was sitting with Rose and Daisy, looked across.

'Sissy and Maud,' she whispered.

They all wore ancient, old-fashioned mourning that had taken on a greenish tinge with age. Afterwards, they said sympathetic words, but nothing more than duty required, and they didn't stay longer than strictly necessary.

Clara had come on the train from Longridge, and she was sorry to have to hurry back, too, afterwards.

'I've got the lad keeping an eye on the last of the lambing,' she said, as the attendees all walked away from the grave, 'but I don't trust anyone like I trust myself.'

Neither Rose nor Daisy had seen or heard of 'the lad', but they could imagine the situation. Aunt Clara had her own way of doing things and a strong belief in it being the right way.

'I'm glad Alec didn't show his face,' Clara said then.

'I don't think he knows about Mum,' said Daisy. 'I'm not going to tell him owt, either.'

Rose and Clara nodded. Rose thought again of Louisa's secret and how that vile man had used it to prey on her for monetary gain. In her eyes he was beyond forgiveness.

Then Aunt Clara said goodbye with surprising affection, and the girls thanked her for everything she had done for Louisa. Without Clara, Louisa's death might well have been even more distressing for everyone.

The following day, the girls felt they must pull themselves together, make a start on clearing the house and look for work before they ran out of money. They thought it would be safer to burn Louisa's clothes than give them to the rag-and-bone man, so as to be sure not to pass on the infection, although they didn't fear for their own health at all. Somehow it was the last thing they were worried about.

'We'll never get owt done if we disinfect everything and keep washing our hands,' said Daisy. 'All that water will be like being back at Bertha Chapman's laundry. Anyway, Mum will never let us catch TB. She's looking down and making sure we're all right.'

‘I expect so,’ said Rose. She wasn’t sure she believed that, but she was glad Daisy did, if it helped her.

Rose was half afraid she might uncover some other secret Louisa had kept close for years, so astonished did she feel by Louisa’s confession, and she undertook the task of clearing out the house with trepidation, trying to keep ahead of Daisy in case she found something she thought she ought to hide.

‘At least I’ve got the rent ready in the jam jar,’ she told Daisy, as they went through the kitchen cupboards. This was a very quick task because Louisa had already taken most of her crockery to the pawnbroker. ‘I expect there might be a bit owing that Mum wasn’t here to pay when Aunt Clara took her to the farm, but if I explain how things are now, I’m sure the rent collector will be reasonable.’

She crossed her fingers behind her back. She wasn’t sure at all, she just hoped so.

‘I can’t seem to find the rent book, which is a bit of a worry, but I’m hoping it will come to light as we go through the house. Anyway, I’ll need to get a new job quickly. I got derailed by everything, but when we left Elizabeth House I thought I’d have been back in service long before now. And you need to decide what it is you’re going to do and even where you live. If I get a live-in job, you can’t stay here and take over the tenancy from Mum – you’re too young.’

‘I know. I might have to go and ask Betty’s mum if I can go there, and pay her a bit, ’cept I don’t think there’s much room. But Betty might know of someone with more space. Anyway, let’s find the work first, and the rent book. With luck it will turn up before the rent man.’

Half an hour later there was a knock at the door.

‘Do you think that’s the rent man and we’ve conjured him up?’ joked Daisy. Then she saw Rose’s anxious face.

‘Well, if it is, he’s got to be faced,’ said Rose. ‘Let’s hope Mum wasn’t too far behind with her payments.’

‘I’ll go. You think what it is you need to say. And keep looking for that rent book.’

It was hard telling people that their mother had died, and neither of them had yet polished her presentation.

Daisy answered the door to a well-heeled-looking, middle-aged man in a smart hat and a nicely cut coat, both of which had the gloss of newness. His

shoes were very shiny. His hair was grey; his face was severe.

‘Yes, sir?’ she asked, thinking this couldn’t possibly be the rent man.

‘I’ve come to collect the rent,’ said the man.

Daisy looked at him carefully. The man who had come for the money before Daisy went to Yorkshire was rather scruffy and unshaven, with dark hair that was greying at the front. Daisy couldn’t remember his name. This man looked wealthy. Perhaps he was a confidence trickster. Daisy had heard about these swindlers. Bertha Chapman had been taken in by one years ago, who had somehow managed not to pay for his washing for several weeks, and then got clean away with not paying at all. Daisy knew nothing of this first-hand, but she had heard the tale so often she could recite it in unison with her former employer. The only charitable thought Daisy had about Mrs Chapman was that her meanness probably dated from the time of that bad experience.

‘I don’t know who you are,’ said Daisy. ‘Who are you expecting to pay you?’

‘Well, the tenants, of course,’ said the man.

Daisy was now sure this was a trick. ‘Tenants? What is the name on the rent book?’ she asked suspiciously. ‘I need a name.’

‘Louisa and Rose Farlowe,’ said the man.

Daisy was surprised into silence for a moment. Then: ‘Let me ask her,’ she said, and left him on the doorstep.

‘Rose, it’s the rent man.’

‘And I’ve just found the book – look.’ Rose held it up triumphantly. ‘Down the back of that drawer.’

‘It’s not the usual man. This is a posh sort of fella. He says your name is on the rent book alongside Mum’s.’

‘What? How can that be? No one knows we’re here. Even Mum wasn’t expecting us back. There must be some mistake.’

She opened the book and saw her name written beside her mother’s, and her heart gave a little flip of foreboding. ‘What on earth is going on?’

She hurried to the front doorstep where the ‘posh sort of fella’ was still standing.

‘I am Rose Farlowe,’ she said quietly. ‘This is my sister, Daisy. How can I help you, sir?’

‘I am James Lancaster, your landlord,’ said the man. ‘I’ve come to collect the rent myself today. Mrs Farlowe got behind with her rent and then,

several weeks ago, she agreed to a joint tenancy with her daughter Rose. Lately my man has been unable to collect any money at all as the house appears to have been empty. You are lucky I found you in today. I planned, should I not have seen anyone, to seize your belongings in lieu of unpaid rent, then board the place up until a new tenant could be found.'

'Oh, no! Mr Lancaster, I don't know owt about this. I'm sure there must be some misunderstanding. If you would like to come in, I reckon we can sort it out,' said Rose, sounding a lot braver and more optimistic than she felt.

Just when she thought she had emerged from the nightmarish succession of horrible events, the path ahead of her was twisting away again down a completely unforeseen route, and one that looked darker than ever.

Mr Lancaster was sitting in Louisa's armchair, drinking a cup of tea. If Daisy had hoped to persuade him to charm and reasonableness with a hot drink, she was sadly disillusioned.

'Mr Lancaster, our mother is dead – the funeral was only yesterday – and now we are trying to go through her belongings. I have the rent here, see?' Rose shook the jam jar, which she'd brought through from the kitchen to show willing. 'My sister and I came home from Yorkshire, where we were working, to learn that our mother was gravely ill and had been taken by our aunt to the country in the hope of saving her life, but it was too late. I knew nowt of my name being on the rent book until I found it, even as you were waiting on the doorstep. I have been worried Mum might have been a week or two behind with the payments, what with her ... her illness, but until very recently my sister and I lived where we were in service and not here at all.'

'Interesting,' said Mr Lancaster.

Rose didn't know if he was being sarcastic.

'I am sorry to hear that your mother has died. So you don't live in Yorkshire now? You no longer have those positions?'

'No, sir. We left.'

'May I ask why? It wasn't because your mother was ill, was it? You've already told me you returned to find your mother had gone unexpectedly, so that was not the case?'

Rose looked at Daisy and opened her mouth to speak. Daisy got in first.

‘What’s that got to do with the rent, Mr Lancaster?’ she asked. ‘How come Rose’s name is on the rent book and she didn’t even know?’

‘Your mother got behind with her payments, I’m afraid, Miss Farlowe,’ he said, addressing Rose. ‘Aware that she was a widow, I took pity on her and tried to think of a way for her to continue to live here. I learned that Mrs Farlowe had a daughter in service, a cook. In return for a week rent free, I suggested that she make you a joint tenant. That way, she could stay here and I would get my money.’

‘But that makes no sense. I didn’t know I was due to pay rent for this house, and I lived elsewhere anyway. You know nowt of me, as far as I’m aware, and I don’t understand why you thought I was in a position to pay you. No one told me any of this, and I didn’t agree to it either,’ said Rose, growing fearful while determined to have her say. Mr Lancaster was a powerful and rich man, a landlord with many properties, while she was an unemployed cook who, it now seemed likely, owed quite a bit of rent to him. The three and sixpence in the jam jar suddenly looked utterly pathetic.

‘Ah, now, my man Alec Gimson was the one who set all this up—’

‘Uncle Alec!’ gasped Daisy.

‘Alec Gimson is your uncle?’ asked Lancaster. He was clearly surprised.

‘He is indeed,’ said Rose.

‘Well, he said Mrs Farlowe told him her daughter had a regular job and was in a position to be joint tenant. She agreed with him to have your name added to the rent book, Miss Farlowe. It worked out well all round, as she could continue to live here, while I would get my money, if not immediately, at some point. I rather think we’ve reached that point now, don’t you?’

‘I might have guessed,’ snapped Rose, furious. ‘That man stopped at nowt to do down our mother, and now it appears he’s made trouble for me and my sister as well.’

Mr Lancaster was thoughtful. For the first time he seemed not entirely in control of the situation. ‘And why do you think that is, Miss Farlowe?’ he asked. At last he sounded as if he had some interest in what she had to say.

‘Because he’s hateful. Because he’s a thoroughly bad person. Because he likes to cause trouble and bully people, and it makes him feel strong if people, particularly women, are in his power. Our mother was his little sister, and he was jealous of her from the beginning, she being the baby and

getting the attention babies do, and he never got over that. I reckon that jealousy defined him, made him who he is today: a man who hates women.'

Far from looking perturbed by Rose's anger and her view of Alec Gimson, James Lancaster nodded slowly. 'Interesting,' he said again.

Daisy, however, was looking at Rose with an expression that said even she thought that outburst had been a bit much in front of a stranger.

'Even so,' Mr Lancaster continued, 'the situation is this. Rent is due on the house and on the shop—'

'The shop, too? No, no, that can't be right. I've nowt to do with the millinery,' said Rose, dismayed. 'Mum had to wind up the business when you increased the rent, and the shop is closed.'

'Really?' Lancaster raised an enquiring eyebrow, but he didn't pursue it. 'As I say, rent is due and your name is on the rent books alongside that of your mother. So, let us think of a way you can pay me what you owe, yes?'

'I can't,' said Rose, shakily. 'I mean to find a new job straight away, but if I owe you money already it will take me a very long time to catch up and be able to pay you.'

An image of a prison such as those she had seen in the newspaper, in which suffragettes were incarcerated, sprang into her mind. But their cause was brave and noble, whereas being in debt was a disgrace. How had control of her life slipped from her so quickly and so completely?

'Well, Miss Farlowe,' said Lancaster, sitting back and looking in complete control again, 'I have the perfect solution.' He turned to give Daisy a piercing look. 'For both of you. You owe me money and you also need work. I have work for you, which you can do until your debt is paid off.'

'Work? Doing what?' asked Daisy.

'What you can. You are a cook, Miss Farlowe – have I been told correctly?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, you will be my cook. And what about you, Daisy Farlowe? What can you do?'

'I worked in a laundry, then as a cleaner for ... for someone.' She realised it might not be a good idea to mention Mr Tisbury, by whom she'd been given the sack. 'Then I was a kitchen maid.'

'Quite a career for someone of ... what, about sixteen?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘Well, if you were to work for me too, that would pay off your sister’s debt all the sooner, wouldn’t it? I think I can accommodate a skivvy.’

‘I ... I don’t like the sound of working and receiving no wage at all,’ ventured Rose. ‘We’d be paupers. And how do we know when the debt is paid? You’d need to keep a record and let us see it.’

‘Ah, I can see you’re an intelligent woman, Miss Farlowe. I think that can be arranged. I’m a reasonable man.’

The girls looked at each other.

‘I reckon we need to discuss this in private,’ said Rose. ‘It’s a big decision and not one we thought we’d be facing.’

‘Of course,’ said Mr Lancaster. ‘But I cannot write off debts on the rents of my properties just because people say they cannot pay. Where would that end? I’ll tell you: my business run as some sort of debtors’ charity, that’s where. So, your choice is to take the work I have offered you or to pay the rent on the properties for which you are a joint tenant, Miss Farlowe. I’ll wait here while you and your sister discuss it, shall I? If it helps you make up your minds, the sum owing up to today is four pounds, nine shillings and a penny, including interest accrued so far.’

Rose had half risen to move into the kitchen. Now she sank down onto the sofa again. Her face was so white Daisy thought she was going to faint.

‘Four pounds ... and interest?’ she gasped. ‘Who said owt about interest?’

‘I did,’ said Lancaster in a tone of utter reasonableness. ‘I’m a businessman – when people owe me money, *of course* I charge interest. As I said just now, I’m not running some kind of charity.’

‘C’mon, Rose,’ said Daisy, urgently, fighting down panic. ‘Let’s go and talk about this in private.’ She gathered up Rose and practically pushed her into the kitchen, then closed the door.

Rose sank down at the table, her head in her hands.

‘Oh Lord, Daise, what on earth are we going to do? Interest? It’s some sort of awful nightmare, like being caught in a giant spiderweb. Everything we do to try to escape, it traps us tighter. It’s going to take me the rest of my life to pay off that much. All the time I’m working for next to nowt, the interest on what I haven’t yet repaid will keep mounting. I’ll never be free of the debt – *never*.’

‘I’ll help you, Rose,’ said Daisy. ‘I don’t see that we have a choice. At least in service we’ll have somewhere to live. The alternative is nowhere to

live and the debt still to pay.'

Rose was silent, thinking. 'Of course you're right,' she said eventually. 'Oh, but how did it come to this? It's all Uncle Alec's fault. What I said – it's the truth. He hated Mum.'

'I reckon he hates all women,' said Daisy. What Rose had just said reminded her of the gossip she had confided to her mother. 'At the mill where he used to work, the talk was that he was a pimp.'

'A *what*?' gasped Rose, thinking she must have misheard. Yet she half remembered Daisy saying something about the women at the mill talking disparagingly about Alec.

'Yes, a pimp. A man who—'

'Yes, yes, I know what you mean. Where did you learn that? I'm surprised you even know that terrible word.'

'Betty told me. She knows women who were involved, too desperate for money not to be drawn in. It was he who found them customers and paid the poor women out of what he received. Didn't pay them much either, from what I've heard.'

Rose took a huge breath and let it out slowly. Words failed her.

'We could make an escape,' murmured Daisy. 'Just rush out of the back door now, climb the fence and away.'

'It's almost tempting,' said Rose, 'but we'd be beggars, still in debt, and I don't want us to be the prey of men like Alec Gimson. I shan't call him "Uncle" ever again. I won't acknowledge him as a relation of ours.'

'We could go to Mrs Palmer or Mrs Gale.'

'No, flower, we wouldn't want them persecuted by Lancaster. He's their landlord too, remember. It wouldn't be far enough to get away, either.'

'We could go to Aunt Clara.'

'But what if Alec started bullying Aunt Clara like he did Mum, just to get at us? He has a sly way of finding things out and using them against folk. And what if Lancaster's property empire reaches as far as Longridge? Mebbe he owns the farm and Aunt Clara is his tenant, too – I've no idea what her arrangement is. I'd hate for Aunt Clara to be drawn into all this horribleness when she just wants to live a simple life on her little farm with her dog and her sheep.'

'No choice, then?'

'No, love, I'm afraid we've no choice.'

James Lancaster waited, sitting in Louisa's chair, while Rose and Daisy packed their belongings into suitcases and a couple of cardboard boxes they found. Everything else was to be left for Lancaster himself to dispose of, using any financial gain to offset the debt.

A motor car had drawn up outside number 26 to take him home, and was causing quite a stir, but he went out to have a word with the driver, who drove away, only to return half an hour or so later. Then a horse-drawn carriage appeared, too. Rose guessed this was to take her and Daisy to Lancaster's house.

'We have to say goodbye to our neighbours,' insisted Rose, when their bags were packed. 'If you don't let us do that, then we refuse to work for you.'

'Miss Farlowe, of course you must say goodbye to your friends,' smiled Lancaster. 'What do you think I am – some kind of monster? My man, here, will put your cases in the carriage and wait for you, to take you to my house, Viper's End. Now, close the door and give the keys to me.' He held out his hand and she did as he asked. He strode away to the motor car without looking back. His driver opened the door, he got in, and the vehicle was driven away.

His man sat on the box of the carriage, looking entirely uninterested.

'We could still just make our escape,' whispered Daisy, as she knocked on Mrs Gale's door.

'I reckon not,' said Rose, looking over her shoulder. 'There's the carriage driver watching us and he has all our things. I doubt we'd get far, anyway.'

Mrs Gale opened the door and Rose told her that she and Daisy had found new jobs and were leaving immediately.

'Well, that's good news, then, love,' said Mrs Gale. 'I hope you'll be happy in your new work, girls. I shall remember your mum with affection. She was a fine woman and a nice neighbour.'

'Thank you, Mrs Gale,' said Rose. There was no point in sharing any of the mess they were in with the kindly woman.

Then it was on to Mrs Palmer, who was a bit cannier.

'Hello, Rose and Daisy. Saw that motor car outside your house and that rich-looking fella getting in it just now. Mr Lancaster, if I'm not mistaken – am I right?'

'You are,' said Rose.

'Oh, aye? Everything all right, is it?'

‘I’m hoping so, Mrs Palmer. He’s ... he’s offered us jobs at his house and we’re leaving straight away.’

‘Well ... if that’s what you both want?’ She raised an eyebrow.

Daisy spoke up. ‘We don’t know if it is. It might turn out all right. It’s happened quite quickly.’

Mrs Palmer gave her a careful look. ‘Bit too quickly, would you say? Mebbe he gave you no choice?’

‘It was a bit like that, Mrs Palmer,’ Rose replied. ‘But we’re determined to make the best of it. At least we’ll both be together, and we’ll have work.’

‘Well, just you be careful, the pair of you,’ said their mother’s friend. ‘I get to hear all sorts from where my Sam works and that Mr Lancaster has a way of getting owt he wants. He’s got a bit of a reputation for brokering a hard deal, if you know what I mean. Count your wages carefully, girls. That’s all I’m saying.’

‘Thank you for the warning, Mrs Palmer. You were a good friend to Mum and we won’t forget that,’ said Rose.

When they had said their goodbyes, the girls walked slowly back to the carriage that was to take them away from Shallow Street for ever.

‘So, we were right to be cautious. Lancaster’s a tricky devil,’ said Rose.

‘The thing is, Rose,’ said Daisy, ‘have we been cautious enough or have we rushed into making a very big mistake? I’m worried.’

‘Me, too, flower. But it’s too late to change our minds now,’ sighed Rose, getting into the carriage.

Lancaster’s man slammed the door on the sisters, shutting them in the dark, old-fashioned carriage. It felt to them like a prison.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘**D** AISY, WOULD YOU make a start on those pans, please, while I just finish these little tarts? Patrick, will they be ready for them upstairs ... ?’

Rose sometimes felt almost content working at Viper’s End. The cavernous kitchen was not as light or as airy as that at Elizabeth House, but then this house was a great many years older. The floor was of thick flagstones, which, even in May, were of penetrating chilliness, and the range was enormous and a drain on Daisy’s energy to keep clean. The ceiling was black with countless years of smoke from the range and the fire, and had long since gone beyond the point when anyone would even think about cleaning it.

Yet Rose was back doing the job she knew she did well, and glad to have Daisy close by, where she could keep an eye on her and where she could make sure Daisy did not allow her grief for their mother to overwhelm her. They gained strength from each other. They had no money, they worked for a man who made it plain he would be keeping them there until they had worked off their debt, but they had each other and a home of sorts.

It was a relief to Rose that there was no handsome footman for Daisy to flirt with. At first Rose had been surprised by the small number of staff for a house the size of Viper’s End: herself and Daisy; Patrick, who did everything else, including driving Mr Lancaster around, and Dermot, a dour man who lived over the stables and looked after himself. It was he who had brought the girls to Viper’s End in the carriage. Two women came in to clean the house, with its labyrinthine corridors, most days of the week, and the laundry was sent out to be washed.

‘Who did the cooking and skivvying before Daisy and I came here?’ Rose asked Patrick.

The old man shook his head sadly. ‘Oh, ’twas a bad do, Rose,’ he said. ‘Mr Lancaster tried various cooks, but none of them would make any effort beyond the least acceptable. It’s my guess that they didn’t know how. There was none of them fancy puddings you make – nowt but plain stuff, and that

was badly done. Gravy that looked like summat dredged out of a drain. Grey potatoes. The smell of boiled cabbage all up the stairs. Mr Lancaster likes his food, as you know, and he expects summat decent, so it simply wouldn't do. He kept sacking these useless so-called cooks. In the end I had to do the cooking myself – just to fill in, mind. Same with the kitchen maids. The last skivvy was a silly lass who said she was frightened to work here because of the name of the house. Soft in the head, I reckon. Anyway, himself got rid of her the very day you and young Daisy turned up.'

'Oh, but I hope I haven't put *you* out of a cook's job you enjoyed,' said Rose politely.

'No you have not,' said Patrick. 'I was bloomin' rubbish at cooking, too. But I'm good at my real job, which is just as well. I'll never leave,' he added ambiguously.

Rose wondered if Patrick also owed Lancaster back rent and the interest on it, and was trapped in the same situation as herself and Daisy. She hoped not. It wasn't at all encouraging, as Patrick had said he'd been at Viper's End for thirty-seven years already.

Every week, when she, Daisy, Patrick and Dermot were each paid in turn, Rose asked how her account stood, and Mr Lancaster would take a gigantic ledger off the shelf behind his desk, turn to the page headed 'Farlowe', and add the wages she and Daisy never saw to the credit column, while adding interest to the debit side. The difference in Rose and Daisy's favour was mere pennies each time. Rose thought she would rather not have seen the glacial progress of their paying off the debt, but she didn't entirely trust Lancaster, so she felt she had to protect her and Daisy's interests by keeping a check on him.

Rose was longing to know if there were pages for Patrick and Dermot in the ledger, too, but of course she couldn't ask.

She still had her little tin of savings, but it had been months since she'd added anything to it. It was hard to let go of her dream, however. She knew if she gave Mr Lancaster all the coins in the tin, it would still not be nearly enough to pay off the debt, so she didn't rush into doing that. Despite the bleak circumstances, she and Daisy were employed, they were housed and fed, and she still had a faint hope at the back of her mind that her life would get back on track. She didn't know how, but she could not envisage living in this strange kind of slavery for ever more.

‘Upstairs’ comprised Mr Lancaster and his son, Gerald, whom Rose had never met. There was no Mrs Lancaster present and Rose thought she might have died. When she had been at Viper’s End long enough to form a kind of friendship with Patrick, she asked him about Gerald’s mother as they were taking a brief mid-morning break.

Patrick explained in his usual lugubrious way.

‘Oh, ’twas a tragedy, Rose,’ he began, predictably. ‘Missis fell down the stairs and was killed.’

‘What, here? Those stairs in the hall?’

‘The very same. ’Twas mebbe ten years ago or thereabouts. Reckon she tripped on her skirt. She was wearing one of those dresses that trailed behind.’

‘A skirt with a train?’

‘Aye, if that’s what it’s called. Must have caught her heel. They found it was ripped at the back so it did look to be the cause of the accident.’

‘What a terrible thing to happen. What was she like?’ Rose asked, passing a cup of tea over to Patrick. With Mr Lancaster and Gerald out about their business for much of the day, there wasn’t a constantly heavy workload for the live-in servants, hence the need for so few of them.

Patrick’s face took on a closed look, as if he didn’t want to say.

Rose waited.

‘She was all right,’ he said eventually, making it clear this was both an understatement and the end of the conversation.

Then Daisy came to join them.

‘I saw Gerald Lancaster when I was taking those peelings out earlier,’ she said. ‘I know it was him because I heard Dermot calling him by his name. When I take up the hot water of a morning, I only see the curtains drawn around the bed, but now I’ve seen him properly.’ Her eyes were shining with excitement.

Rose’s first thought was a hope that Daisy hadn’t found a new young man to flirt with. But Gerald Lancaster would be well out of her league, and probably he would not even notice the kitchen maid.

‘He’s mebbe about eight years older than me,’ went on Daisy.

Oh dear, was she already beginning to link herself with the young man? Terry Ecclestone was ten years older than Daisy, which age gap Daisy perhaps saw as a reflection of her own sophistication. How ironic that was! Rose felt anger rising again at Daisy’s part in their downfall and she fought

it down. If she held that against Daisy, it could cause a permanent rift between them, which would just make their circumstances here worse.

‘Well, never mind, Daisy,’ she said, trying to close down the subject.

‘He’s tall, very thin. Dark hair. Not especially good-looking, but nice clothes,’ Daisy went on regardless.

‘Nice clothes?’ When had Daisy ever noticed a man’s clothes?

‘Yes. Very smart, and a colourful tie.’

‘Mr Lancaster always looks smart, too. I’m guessing Gerald works in Blackburn, as he leaves for work every day. Is that right, Patrick?’

‘’Tis a right old bone of contention,’ said Patrick, keeping his voice low, although there were only the three of them in the kitchen. ‘Mr Gerald does work in Mr Lancaster’s office in Blackburn, but he really wants to be a painter – to try to earn a living from painting pictures. Of course, Mr Lancaster doesn’t reckon this is a good idea, what with it being an uncertain career, an’ all. Mr Gerald is his only child, and his heir, and himself fears his hard-earned money will be frittered away supporting Mr Gerald and his painting.’

‘Couldn’t Gerald paint in his own time and continue working for his father as his job?’ asked Rose.

‘You’d have thought so,’ said Patrick, stirring his tea slowly. ‘But it’s really about who’s in control, see?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Daisy.

‘It’s about Mr Lancaster getting his own way and Mr Gerald not getting his,’ explained Patrick. He drained his teacup in a couple of noisy gulps and stood up. ‘I’d best be off about my business. And I reckon you’ve plenty to do, too,’ he added mildly, and shuffled slowly out.

‘More family drama,’ said Daisy.

‘Patrick told me before you came through that Mrs Lancaster was killed when she tripped on the stairs. This was about ten years ago,’ said Rose.

‘Poor lady. There are an awful lot of stairs,’ Daisy said, with feeling. She had to carry up hot water and also lay the fires in the bedrooms, so she had quickly become familiar with just how very many steps there were, although she took the back stairs. ‘This big, draughty, creaky old place makes me long for Elizabeth House. I didn’t know how lucky I was to be there. I miss the house – and Terry.’

‘Terry? Surely not, Daise. He was only too keen to let the axe fall on you over the motor-car accident. He should have stuck up for you, taken the

blame himself, especially as Mr Metcalfe was never going to dismiss him.'

'Amy Langdale was to blame,' said Daisy. 'I'm certain of it. If there was the slightest chance of getting rid of me, she'd see it and make the most of it. Terry told me once that Amy was jealous of me, what with her being old and plain and desperate.'

Rose gave Daisy a severe look. 'Terry was very unkind about Amy behind her back. He was completely two-faced with her, just as he was only too willing to foist the blame for the accident on you. And remember, Amy is Mrs Metcalfe's cousin, while you were the kitchen maid, so I don't know why Amy would see you as a rival.'

'Don't you?' said Daisy with a little smile that implied she could have said a great deal more.

'No, Daisy, I don't, and I suggest you forget all about Terry Ecclestone and your very short career at Elizabeth House. I'd still be there now if it wasn't for you, so don't remind me how you let me down and wrecked a perfectly good job for me!' She took a deep breath and tried to be calm before her resentment bubbled up uncontrollably. 'Now, it's a stew of chicken and spring vegetables this evening, so you can get those giblets in a pan for the stock, please ...'

That evening, while Patrick read a book, his little round spectacles perched on the end of his long nose, and Daisy discontentedly played Patience and looked both sad and bored, Rose found her mind wandering from the *Northern Daily Telegraph* she was supposedly reading.

It wasn't like Daisy to dwell on past flirtations. Look at the speed with which she'd forgotten all about the lad in Blackburn – Jonny Pickles, was he called? – when she'd gone to work in Yorkshire. Perhaps her relationship with Terry had been more than a bit of silliness and flirting. Rose hoped not. Terry was not constant, not trustworthy – quite honestly, not very nice. Any single woman was the target for his attention, even if it was unwelcome. Rose had warned Daisy about him, but Daisy was too unworldly, too unruly, too headstrong to take the slightest notice. It was a worry that Daisy was still thinking of him. But then again, there was no likelihood that her fond regard could come to anything now.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Thomas Thomas was pedalling his bicycle out to Shallow Street. Lately on Sundays, now the weather was warmer, he had taken to riding into the countryside with a couple of the lads from the

mill. They liked to get out from under the feet of their wives, and Thomas, being a widower who lived alone, was glad of their company. Today, however, he had decided to go to visit Louisa. It was a while since he had seen her and he was beginning to wonder if all was well with her.

He had been past the shop a month or two ago. He'd planned just to say hello and ask how she was, nothing too pushy. If she'd looked pleased to see him, he had decided he would offer to walk her home, or perhaps buy her a cup of tea. But the shop had had a rundown air to it, the window pretty much empty but for a couple of cloth caps with handwritten labels saying their prices were reduced, and the 'Closed' sign was on the door. It hadn't looked at all as if her business was flourishing.

Now, there was nothing in the window but a stray feather from a hat and a few sheets of yellowed tissue paper. Thomas peered inside and saw the premises were completely empty. It looked as if *Louisa Farlowe – Hats* had closed for good.

He hoped Louisa was well. Perhaps she had simply relocated her business, although there was nothing to say where it had moved to.

Who was he fooling? It was undoubtedly bad news.

That was when he decided to ride on further to Shallow Street and hope she was in. Number 26, wasn't it? The houses were pretty much identical, but he did remember Louisa's had bright blue curtains. Now, though, as he neared, he saw that number 26 was the one that was boarded up.

For a moment Thomas stood outside, holding his bike, saddened, disappointed, and wondering what to do. Then a concerned-sounding voice called from behind him and he turned to see a woman in late middle age, her hair tied up in a scarf, a gigantic pinafore over her dress. She was standing on the doorstep of the house next door but three.

'Hello? Is it Mrs Farlowe you're looking for?'

'Good afternoon,' said Thomas. 'Yes. I'm an acquaintance of hers – Thomas. I saw that her shop looks as if it's closed down, and I just wondered if ... if she's all right.'

'Ah, Mr Thomas, I'm Doreen Palmer. Come in and I'll tell you. I'm right sorry to be the bearer of bad news ...'

Mrs Palmer had clearly been a good friend of Louisa's and it was with tears in her eyes that she told Thomas about Louisa's illness; how her sister had

come to take her to the country, but her lungs were too damaged and the TB too advanced for her to be saved.

‘I tried to help her as much as I could, but Louisa was stubborn – didn’t want to be a burden to anyone – and it’s hard to help those that refuse to be helped,’ she said.

‘I didn’t know she had a sister,’ was all Thomas could think of to say, so shocked was he by the sad news.

Mrs Palmer handed him a cup of strong tea.

‘Here you are, love. She had three, although the other two didn’t rally round. Nor did that brother of hers, Alec.’

Thomas was not surprised to hear that of Alec Gimson, but he refrained from comment. Instead he asked, ‘What’s happened to Daisy? I met her – quite a character, and very caring towards her mother.’

‘She and Rose, Louisa’s older daughter, have gone to work for our landlord, Mr Lancaster.’

‘I know of him. He’s my landlord, too, although I live on the other side of town. What kind of work?’

‘Domestic service. Daisy went away to skivvy in the same kitchen where Rose was the cook, but after Louisa went with her sister, both girls turned up back here. Rose said they’d left their places, although at first I thought they’d come home because they’d heard of Louisa’s illness from their aunt. Turns out they didn’t know their mother was so ill until they came back. Rushed off to out Longridge Fell way, and arrived just in time.’

‘Louisa would have been so pleased to see them for the last time,’ said Thomas. ‘I can hardly believe it – so quickly. I am sorry. Such a nice woman. I’d no idea she was ill.’

‘Made worse by’ – Mrs Palmer lowered her voice although there was only the two of them in her house – ‘money worries. That brother of hers borrowed what Louisa said was “a bit” before Christmas, but I reckon as it was more than she was letting on ’cos it caused her a lot of fretting. Then the rent on the shop doubled, she told me – that was Lancaster’s property, too – and it all got too much. She was that sorry to have to tell Gertie Pullinger, who’d been a true friend to her, that she was having to give up the shop and there wasn’t a job for her any longer. That burden made her more unwell, I don’t doubt. She hated to let down Gertie.’

‘Mm ...’ Thomas remembered that day he’d first met Louisa, and a clearer picture of the troubles of Louisa’s last months began to form.

Gimson borrowing more than his sister could afford, then Lancaster asking a lot more rent, and now Louisa's girls working for him. No doubt he had somehow transferred any debt to them and they were paying it off, forgoing their wages. 'Lancaster *doubled* the rent on the shop, you say, Mrs Palmer?'

'That's what she said.'

Thomas thought this sounded unreasonable. As luck would have it, the latest recruit to the looms he oversaw at the mill was a woman named Gertie Pullinger, who had previously worked in a shop. At first he'd been worried she wouldn't be quick on the uptake about learning her job, or that she wouldn't be able to keep up with her much younger colleagues, but Mrs Pullinger had already proved herself to be as able as anyone, and better than some. Who said older meant slower? The woman was not only an asset to production, but she had quickly become a popular member of the workforce as well.

Could there be two Gertie Pullingers? Surely this was the woman who had worked in Louisa's hat shop. If so, she might be able to verify the rent rise. Now he thought about it properly, it sounded so massive as to be far-fetched.

Thomas, living opposite Alec Gimson, had learned a lot about the kind of man he was, and the more Thomas observed, the less he liked. There were rumours about Gimson when he had worked at one of the other mills – very unpleasant rumours – and Thomas had noticed a number of women arriving at the house. Some of them had left with bruised faces or some other injury apparent in the way they moved furtively from the place. He remembered one woman clutching her side. He'd gone out to see if he could help her, but she'd scuttled off as quickly as she could, not wanting to engage with him, as if she was ashamed.

When Thomas left Mrs Palmer's house, he felt full of sadness. He'd thought a lot about Louisa Farlowe, but he had been too slow to do anything about building on this nascent friendship with her, and he regretted that. Why had he waited to better his acquaintance with her? Why delay until it was too late? Because now it was.

Well, he'd be asking Mrs Pullinger about the rent rise at the shop, and then, depending on what he learned, he would try to work out the best course of action. It was too late to help Louisa, but perhaps there was still a chance he could help her daughters.

It was a Saturday morning and there was a little tap at the inner kitchen door at Viper's End.

'Yes?' called Rose. Who could it be? The whole house belonged to Mr Lancaster, so there was no need for him to seek permission to enter. Everyone else worked here.

A thin young man in his mid-twenties sidled in and Rose guessed it was Gerald Lancaster. Daisy had been right about his clothes: beautiful; informal and brightly coloured today.

'Good morning, sir. How can I help you?' Rose asked stiffly. She wasn't keen on 'upstairs' coming 'downstairs'. She remembered those awful, awkward, long afternoons when Amy Langdale had imposed herself on the staff at Elizabeth House, spoiling their free time with her silliness around Terry.

'You must be Miss Farlowe,' he said, with a wide, disarming smile. 'My father said the new cook was "a young person", but I wasn't expecting someone quite so ... Well, anyway ...' He looked almost bashful for a moment, then rallied. 'I am Gerald Lancaster, and I'm pleased we've met at last. I can't tell you what a difference you've made to my life.'

'Really, sir?' Rose was taken aback. 'In what way?'

'Edible food, Miss Farlowe. Food that tastes delicious, that my father and I actually look forward to eating. Food that makes life pleasurable. Now, I bow to no one in my admiration of Patrick, but, oh dear ... Let's just say he's no cook and leave it at that. I'm sure he'd agree.'

'I remember he told me so himself, Mr Lancaster.' Rose was smiling now.

'And the series of so-called cooks we had before that ...' He mimed some violent attack to his throat to indicate the standard of cooking.

'Anyway, it is you I have to thank for putting my father in a very good mood. He's even thinking of taking a holiday, so at ease is he with the world. No doubt Patrick will tell you about any developments on that front. However, my father has gone to the races today, so I am thinking of having a few people over to play cricket. And, of course, cricket requires tea. In fact, the whole point of cricket, if the players are only as skilled as my friends and I are, is the tea. So what do you say, Miss Farlowe? Would you be able to conjure up a tea party by half past three this afternoon, please?'

By now Rose could see that Gerald Lancaster had a charming way of getting what he wanted and he was quite prepared to stoop to flattery.

‘I can, sir. But there was really no need to spin me a yarn. It is my job to provide any food that your father, you and your guests would like.’

Gerald looked contrite, and Rose thought it was odd that he should not simply ask her and expect the matter to be done.

‘I’m sorry, I meant to compliment with the truth, not to flatter to get my own way.’

‘Oh ... well, yes, sir. Thank you.’ Goodness, why didn’t he just say what he wanted? It would all be much easier. ‘So, sir, how many folk have you invited?’

‘About twelve.’ He looked faintly embarrassed. ‘I don’t know enough people to make up two full teams. It’s just meant to be fun.’

‘And what would you like to eat, Mr Lancaster?’

‘Well, er, nice things. I haven’t eaten anything you’ve prepared that hasn’t been delicious, so I’ll leave it to you.’

Rose smiled, charmed but unsure again if she wasn’t being flattered. ‘It’s too late to make bread now, but I can send Daisy to buy some. Should I charge the groceries to Mr Lancaster’s account in the usual way?’

Gerald looked undecided for a moment. ‘Yes ... yes, I’m sure that will be all right.’ He didn’t look sure, but it wasn’t for Rose to question this.

Daisy came in from the scullery then. She had undoubtedly heard voices and been curious. It wouldn’t be like her not to investigate.

‘Mr Lancaster, this is Daisy,’ said Rose. ‘Daisy, this is Mr Gerald Lancaster.’

‘I know,’ said Daisy. ‘How do, Mr Lancaster?’

‘Remarkably well, thank you, Daisy.’

Rose explained about the cricket tea and that she’d need a few groceries bought in, and quickly.

‘I’ll go as soon as you’ve done the list,’ said Daisy, looking pleased at the chance to get out of the kitchen. There was a lady’s bicycle that all the servants used to take them into Heathstone, the little village just outside Blackburn where Viper’s End was situated.

‘Thank you,’ said Gerald, smiling at Daisy and then more lingeringly at Rose, and left them to it.

Daisy was rolling her eyes and smirking by the time Gerald had closed the kitchen door and his footsteps echoed off down the corridor.

‘What?’ said Rose.

‘Nowt, Rose,’ said Daisy with a theatrical shrug.

‘What?’

‘The way he looked at you.’

‘Don’t be daft. Now, you’re going to have to help me with this tea party food as we haven’t long, so just think what you’re doing and don’t go falling off the bicycle or any other of your antics.’

Daisy went away to put her boots on, whistling in a very vulgar fashion.

The cricket tea was a huge success. A lively and noisy group of young men and women arrived and the cricket was played on the vast lawn at the back of the house. Rose, Daisy and Patrick were able to watch discreetly, getting up from their position, perched on a rockery wall, to fetch more food or make more tea, as was required. At first the match was taken very seriously, with sides picked and a coin tossed, but towards the end of the afternoon it descended into hilarity and chaos.

When it was all over and Gerald was seeing off his friends, Rose and Daisy cleared away the scant remains of the tea while Patrick moved the tea tables and packed away the deckchairs.

‘Good afternoon, Daisy?’ asked Rose.

Daisy was quieter and often sad-looking these days, and it made a change to see her enjoying herself.

‘One of the best for ages,’ said Daisy. *‘I should like a blouse like Miss Pennington’s. She looked really pretty.’*

‘She did,’ said Rose. *‘Patrick tells me she’s Mr Lancaster’s choice for Gerald. At least, that’s what I think he was implying.’*

‘Can’t Gerald make his own choice?’ said Daisy.

‘Oh, I expect so,’ Rose replied, busily wrapping up a few slices of sponge cake in greaseproof paper. *‘I was only saying. It’s not our business, Daise.’*

Later, when Mr Lancaster was back from the races, dinner had been eaten and Daisy was in the scullery washing up, there was a little tap at the inner kitchen door again.

Patrick got up from his reading to answer it.

‘Ah, Patrick,’ said Gerald, *‘I wonder if you would give these to Miss Farlowe for me, please? To thank her for the wonderful tea.’* He proffered a little posy of garden flowers.

‘She’s just here, sir, if you’d like to give them to her yourself,’ said Patrick. He opened the door to admit Gerald, then went out, closing it behind him.

Rose stood up.

‘Miss Farlowe,’ said Gerald, holding out the bouquet, ‘thank you for the cricket tea, and all done in next-to-no time. It was the tea that made the afternoon, really. I don’t think the county side have anything to fear. No Harry Deanses among us, although Miss Pennington was a surprisingly good slow bowler.’

‘That’s kind of you to say about the tea,’ said Rose. ‘I reckon it was all about the cricket, myself. It looked fun. But thank you, these are lovely.’

Gerald looked at her as if he was in half a mind to say something else, but thought better of it. Then he nodded and grinned almost shyly, wished her a good evening and went out, quietly closing the door behind him.

Rose looked at the flowers. There was a pale pink rose in the centre of the posy, with forget-me-nots and lavender. Gerald had obviously put some thought into it.

‘Told you,’ said Daisy, now standing beside her.

‘He was just being kind,’ said Rose, ‘but he really shouldn’t have given me these just for doing my job.’

‘They’re not for doing your job,’ said Daisy.

For the rest of the evening, Rose thought about that, and then worried that Daisy might be right.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GERTIE PULLINGER, ANXIOUS to begin her work, was surprised that her overlooker should know her much-missed friend and former employer, Louisa, and that he should call her in to his tiny cubbyhole of an office at the mill early one morning to enquire about the rent at the hat shop.

Gertie sat down slightly nervously to answer his questions.

‘I wasn’t there, Mr Thomas, but Louisa told me that the rent man came one day and said that the rent was doubling from the end of that week. She was in a bit of a flutter about it, as you might expect.’

‘Of course. Did she recognise this man? It wasn’t Mr Lancaster himself, was it?’

‘Oh, no, Mr Thomas. It was the usual scruffy fella, she said – Seymour, I think he’s called – and the rent was definitely twice as much after that. That was the beginning of the end for Louisa. She counted out the six shillings carefully and put it by, until she couldn’t afford to do it any longer, which wasn’t all that long after the rent rise, I’m afraid. That’s when she had to close down the shop.’

‘Well, thank you, Gertie. I shall let you go and get on with your work. You’ve been very helpful.’

Gertie couldn’t see how this could be true, but she nodded and went to join her fellow workers as the looms started their tremendous clattering once again.

Thomas tried to think where to go from there. He had a horrible suspicion at the back of his mind that Alec Gimson was at the root of all Louisa’s problems with money, which had hastened her demise, although perhaps Lancaster really had doubled the rent at the shop and it was nothing to do with Gimson at all. But Gimson worked for Lancaster, and Gimson had caused anguish for Louisa by borrowing money from her that she couldn’t afford to lend. Then her rent had doubled. It seemed to Thomas too much of a coincidence.

Thomas wondered about the rents on other commercial property owned by Mr Lancaster. If there had been no rent rise there, or any increase had been of a much more reasonable amount, would that prove that Louisa had been singled out for unfair treatment? That she had been exploited? Possibly. But how was he to go about discovering that? Even if the shop next to the former hat shop was owned by Lancaster, Thomas could hardly go round there and start asking the proprietor about the rent.

No, he seemed to have reached a dead end, for now, and had only his suspicions to go on. But he was certain there was more to discover, and possibly some of it would be unpleasant.

Emma Metcalfe was feeling a little out of sorts. The cook who had replaced the talented Rose Farlowe had been in the job for a few weeks now, and although she was adequate at the job, this Mrs Draper did not please Emma nearly as much as Rose had done. Her cooking style tended towards the plain, unimaginative and, frankly, heavy, whereas Rose's food had always had a touch of lightness, the look of a special treat about it; something to look forward to. It was hard to sit comfortably in one's corset when dinner weighed so heavily on one's stomach. Desmond had always been at the mercy of his digestion, and was suffering a great deal more since Mrs Draper had taken over from Rose.

Emma was beginning to wish that she had not been quite so hasty about sacking Daisy. If she had insisted that Daisy should stay, then Rose would not have felt the need to leave, too, and everything would have been as it was. It was true that Daisy Farlowe had far overstepped the mark of what behaviour one might expect of a kitchen maid, the lowliest of the servants, but Emma had learned from Desmond that Terry had been very quick to put the blame firmly on Daisy. Typical, really: the powerless young woman – little more than a girl – taking the punishment, while a man with far broader shoulders – who should have known better than to indulge in some silliness with his employer's motor car, and, because of his favoured position, could have borne the blame without much damage to character, reputation or his job – got away scot-free. It was disappointing, but a trained footman was worth hanging onto, whereas a kitchen skivvy was – fairly – easily replaced. Yet sacking Daisy had meant losing Rose, and with every passing week Emma realised what a loss the talented and agreeable cook was. By

now Emma was vowing not to forget Terry's lack of backbone over this incident, should his behaviour ever fall short again.

She was also surprised that Amy had been quite so exercised by the motor-car accident. For a little while, not a day went by without Amy mentioning how 'poor Terry' might have lost his life in the crash, and that she placed the blame firmly at the door of 'that little madam Daisy Farlowe'.

Emma had soon become bored and then impatient of her cousin.

'Heavens, Amy dear,' she said one morning over breakfast when Amy had brought up the subject again, 'how you go on about that silly incident when everyone else has put it behind them. And why you should be so envious of Daisy Farlowe, I can only speculate. Yes, she is only sixteen, and remarkably pretty, but now she's gone, I think it would be more dignified for you to forget all about her, don't you? And I'm sure Terry can manage without your constant concern over what might have happened, had the crash been worse. He was driving, after all.'

Emma had been very pleased that that had shut Amy up.

It wasn't only Emma and Desmond who were feeling the weight of Mrs Draper's pastry. Amy seemed to be suffering too. Emma noticed that she was beginning to appear pale and bloated. Really, it was better to pretend not to notice her, sitting looking miserable and lumpen, and occasionally holding her stomach.

'Amy, are you quite well?' Emma asked one day, eventually taking pity on her. 'You do look peaky. I can send for Dr Hadfield, if you wish. Shall I do that, dear?'

'No!' snapped Amy. 'No ... thank you. I shall be all right directly, I'm sure. It's just ... I shall be all right. It will pass.'

'Well, if you're certain it's only a mild malady ... You see, I've learned something that I think will interest you. There's a position available, teaching basic reading and writing to the little ones of a friend of a friend in Leeds, and I think you'd be perfect for the job.'

Amy's eyes widened in alarm.

'Of course, if you don't feel up to it, that's quite all right, but it would be a lovely opportunity for you. And you'd earn a little more, too. New people, nice children ...'

'No, Emma. I'm sorry, I can't,' said Amy. She got up from the table quickly, looking sweaty and white-faced. 'Please excuse ...' and she made a

dash from the room.

Well, I never, thought Emma. That was a bit of an overreaction to the merest mention of a perfectly good job. Really, the woman was becoming a ball and chain at Elizabeth House. Offer her a temporary home and this is what happened. Maybe it was true that no good deed ever went unpunished.



The pretty posy of flowers that Gerald Lancaster gave to Rose was not the last floral token she received.

The following weekend, she was in the little kitchen garden, picking some vegetables for that day's dinner and, while she went wandering along the rows of lettuces, a perfect red rose bud appeared alongside the tender spring cabbage in her trug, which she'd left by the gate.

Rose looked around and saw no one, but she guessed the source of the little gift and smiled to herself. Gerald Lancaster was a thoughtful gentleman, and it was kind of him to bring a little cheer to her day.

The day after, a Sunday, Mr Lancaster departed for his holiday, waved off by his son with some enthusiasm. Patrick took James Lancaster to Blackburn station in the car, from where he would travel to Scotland.

'Mr Lancaster has friends in Edinburgh with an estate further north,' said Patrick, when he got back. 'They go off to the country to fish for salmon. He goes every year.'

'That sounds very restful,' said Rose, remembering her last holiday of just two days, which ended with her having to take Daisy back to Elizabeth House with her. In her mind, that marked the beginning of the end of her old life, although she knew in truth that things had started to go wrong long before then. 'Was this summat Mr Lancaster took up after Mrs Lancaster died?'

'Nay, 'twas always what he did. Used to go and leave her here to mind herself,' said Patrick.

Rose thought this sounded mean – a holiday with friends, leaving his wife and son behind – but perhaps it was a holiday for them to be relieved of his company. She didn't voice this opinion, although it soon became apparent that was exactly how Gerald regarded his father's absence.

That afternoon he rang for Patrick, and then Patrick summoned Rose upstairs. Of course, she had been upstairs before to collect the meagre net balance of her and Daisy's pay and to view the credit and debt columns in

the enormous ledger, but she had never seen more than the hall and staircase and Mr Lancaster's study.

Gerald was in quite a large room to one side of the house. It was airy, with plenty of windows, and also cool because it faced north. He was wearing an overall of sorts over his rather sporty weekend clothes, the sleeves, particularly, stained with paint.

'Good afternoon, Rose. I'm hoping to get on with my painting after work while my father is away, so I'd like you to prepare a light supper for me to eat here, please. No need to have poor old Patrick set the table or polish the cutlery for me to sit in splendid isolation in the dining room.'

'Of course, sir. And what would you like?'

Gerald looked at her for a few seconds, not saying anything, and his gaze was intent, as if he was considering her and not thinking about food at all. Rose thought he had a nice face: kind. Perhaps he took after his mother. His father looked altogether more serious, almost fierce. It was hard to take to a man so gruff; to a man who added interest to a debt owed by a young woman through no fault of her own; to a man who doubled his rents.

'Make it a surprise, Rose,' Gerald said. 'I'd like you to bring it yourself – Patrick has various other tasks I'm sure he can be doing – but it has to be something delicious.' His eyes sparkled, as if he was setting her a light challenge to entertain them both.

Rose agreed to this and then she glanced about the room, taking in the pile of charcoal sketches, the untidy box of watercolour paints, the pretty paintings, many of flowers or with a garden theme. Ever the professional, she also looked to see that there was a table for Gerald to dine upon, a decent chair to sit on, somewhere clean and safe to put the tray down when she brought it in.

'I am allowed this room for its northern aspect,' explained Gerald. 'No harsh shadows or disturbing changes to the level of light in a day. This is my studio, I suppose, although it seems a little grand to call it that when I am just an amateur.' He laughed self-deprecatingly.

Rose wondered about the word 'allowed'. It sounded as if he had had to ask his father for the use of this cold, north-facing room in this big house where only the two of them lived, and that permission that been reluctantly granted.

There was a watercolour on an easel and Rose glanced at it.

‘What do you think?’ asked Gerald immediately. ‘Now I want your honest opinion, please. No need to fear embarrassing me.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Rose, going closer. ‘Where is this?’

‘Just a corner of the garden,’ said Gerald, shrugging modestly now that he knew she liked the painting. ‘I’d like to be able to travel and paint further afield, but my father keeps my nose to my desk so I haven’t had the opportunity yet. Maybe one day ...’

Rose felt sorry for him: his father treating his painting as an indulgence while Gerald wanted to break free from his desk at Lancaster Properties and make a happier life for himself. She supposed, however, this was the price of his earning his salary. Everyone had to earn a living. On the other hand, wasn’t Mr Lancaster fabulously wealthy, owning all that property? Did his son really have to work at a job he disliked rather than see if he could make a more enjoyable career from his painting? She remembered what Patrick had said about Mr Lancaster asserting his will.

Rose realised Gerald was waiting for her to say something else.

‘I shall prepare a light supper for you, sir, and bring it at, say, seven o’clock. Would that suit you?’

‘Perfectly,’ said Gerald, with a charming smile. ‘Thank you, Rose. I shall look forward to that.’

Downstairs, Daisy was in a sulky mood and doing her best to avoid any work at all, disappearing on the bicycle halfway through the afternoon for so long that Rose was worried she had run away. She had told Daisy about the debt following them everywhere until they had paid it, and that there was no point in trying to leave, but Daisy had just looked mutinous.

Eventually Daisy returned, angry and silent, defeated.

‘Where have you been, Daise? I was worried,’ Rose said.

‘Nowhere. I just ... I had to get out, to breathe air that doesn’t belong to Lancaster,’ said Daisy.

‘Oh, love ...’ Rose could sympathise. They might try to leave but the debt was a leash that would always tie them to Lancaster and pull them back to Viper’s End.

When Rose took the food up to the studio that evening, Gerald was busy painting and, although he thanked her nicely, his mind was on his picture. The next time he was on edge and distracted, although she didn’t know why. Perhaps he had had a hard time at the office that day. She imagined he

was in charge with his father away, and he'd already said he would rather be here in his studio than there.

The third evening he invited her to see how his painting was progressing. Very pretty, it was the kind of painting Mrs Metcalfe might display in her lovely sitting room, and while even Rose could see that it was accomplished, attractive, and every bit as good as any watercolour Mrs Metcalfe owned, she also knew it was no great masterpiece.

The next evening he was out seeing his friends, but the following one he had a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table where Rose was now accustomed to leave the tray of various plates and dishes covered with a starched cloth.

'I hope you will join me, Rose,' he said, indicating the glasses.

'Thank you, sir, but I have things to do in the kitchen,' she replied.

He looked so disappointed that she thought she'd made some social blunder. But it wasn't right to be drinking Mr Lancaster's wine with his son when she should have been finishing her own, Patrick and Daisy's more modest version of this supper, consisting of much the same food but with less emphasis on presentation, and with water and then tea to drink.

'Yes, yes, I expect you're right,' he said. 'Sensible and dedicated – that's what you are, Rose. No slacking for you, although, you know, you could not be blamed for taking a little time for enjoyment while my father's living it up in Scotland. I shan't tell him.'

Rose envisaged herself going back to the kitchen while Gerald spent the evening alone, painting and eating his chicken-and-ham pie. One glass wouldn't take long to drink, would it? Or maybe half a glass? Perhaps just a sip ...

The wine was very blond. Rose thought it tasted a little of gooseberries and suspected it was something special, although she had never drunk any wine before.

She had an idea. 'Sir, if you were to invite some of your friends here to eat dinner while your father is away, I shall be pleased to cook owt you'd like.' She thought of the dinner parties at Elizabeth House, and how the Metcalfes loved to entertain. There had been a thrilling sense of purpose to preparing everything, to making sure it was all perfect. Perhaps the cricket party would reassemble. Everyone had seemed to enjoy themselves.

Gerald looked regretful and Rose thought she had overstepped the mark. It wasn't for her to suggest anything at all. He could do exactly as he liked –

or exactly as his father liked – and of course she was obliged to cook anything he asked for.

‘Er, no, I think perhaps I won’t be holding a dinner party, Rose,’ he said. ‘My father was ... well, he wasn’t enormously impressed I’d invited so many people to the cricket tea that time ... without asking him first, and while he wasn’t here. He thought it “damned rude”, he said. I expect he was right. It’s his house, after all.’

‘But you could invite just another five people – three couples. A few friends?’

‘I think he would prefer me not to entertain on any scale while he’s away.’

‘I see. Well, that’s ... that’s a shame.’ Rose was beginning to feel uncomfortable; this was all becoming a little too confessional and not her business anyway. She forced a smile to lift the mood. ‘Thank you for the wine,’ she said, standing up from the chair to which Gerald had shown her so solicitously just a minute or two before. ‘It was delicious.’ She had drunk no more than a sip or two.

‘I’m glad you like it,’ said Gerald. ‘I’m sorry you have to go,’ he added quietly as she closed the door behind her.

Amy sidled into Emma’s pretty little sitting room, looking both agitated and sorry for herself.

‘Yes, Amy? What is it?’ asked Emma abruptly. She was just starting a novel by E. F. Benson, one of her favourite writers, and wanted to immerse herself in it. Really, couldn’t Cousin Amy entertain herself for a while?

‘Emma, I have something to tell you.’

‘What is it, Amy?’ Emma barely looked up from her reading.

‘It’s ... it’s ... Oh. I’m so sorry, Emma. I know it was wrong but I couldn’t help it. You see, I just love him so much ...’

Slowly, Emma put her book down, making sure she enclosed her bookmark, and turned to Amy. Then a truly horrible thought sprang into her mind and she felt a spark of fury igniting.

‘Sit down,’ she ordered. ‘Tell me the worst.’

Amy sat in the armchair opposite. However, she did not sit back, but reached out one hand beseechingly to Emma, the other clutching an already soggy and crumpled handkerchief.

‘Please don’t be angry,’ pleaded Amy. ‘I never meant to—’

‘What? You never meant to what? Amy, for goodness’ sake just tell me,’ barked Emma.

‘I am ... I am with child. I am to have a baby.’

For a moment there was silence in the room.

Then: ‘Aaaah!’ screamed Emma. ‘How *dare* you? Such betrayal! You stupid, stupid woman, how could you be so ... vindictive, so selfish, so slack in your morals? How could you do this – to *me*?’

Amy reeled back in horror, pinned to the chair with the force of Emma’s anger.

‘To you, Cousin Emma?’ she said, trembling. ‘How have I done this to you?’

But instead of answering Emma began rampaging about the room, kicking over the tiny side table on which she’d placed her book, hurling cushions, first at the walls and then one at Amy’s head.

‘How can you even ask, you cunning hussy?’ she growled. ‘Get out. Get out now! I never want to see your miserable face again as long as I live.’

Amy dodged another cushion and ran for the door, slamming it behind her.

Emma sank down onto the floor, too distraught to resume her chair.

A baby. That pathetic specimen of womanhood Amy Langdale was having a baby. A child of her very own.

It was all that Emma had ever really wanted.

Thomas Thomas was hoping to do a little research into the rent rise at the hat shop, which had taken Louisa into debt, and may have contributed to her speedy death. It was difficult for him to get to the office of Lancaster Properties during working hours, but by making some mumbled excuse to leave promptly at the end of the day, and cycling there as fast as he could, he thought he would be able to reach there in time to do what he wanted. He only hoped he didn’t bump into Alec Gimson, or Seymour, the man who regularly came to collect the rent on the house where he lived, as then he would be recognised. It would be better if as few people as possible knew he was there.

The office was in a road off Ainsworth Street. A clerk sat behind a large mahogany desk facing the door to the street.

‘Yes, sir?’ The clerk barely glanced up.

‘Good afternoon, I’m thinking of opening a shop. There are vacant premises on Millside Street, which I gather belong to Mr Lancaster. I’ve come to ask how much the rent is.’

Thomas didn’t like telling lies – it was his preferred way always to be honest and straight – but he thought it would be impossible to progress his enquiry without a little deception. He could hardly walk straight into his landlord’s office and demand to know if, and why, Louisa Farlowe had been singled out for a massive rent rise, the debt for which had hounded her to her grave and was, he believed, now hanging around the necks of her daughters.

‘I see, sir. If you’d like to take a seat, I will find out for you.’

The clerk rang a bell and another man came to sit at the front desk while the first took the steps two at a time to an office upstairs.

After a few minutes the man came down again.

‘Yes, sir, the former *Louisa Farlowe – Hats*. The rent for the shop is three and six a week, sir,’ he said. ‘Might I ask what kind of a business you intend to open? I can arrange for you to view the premises, if you would care to?’

‘Three and six,’ mused Thomas, ignoring the offer to view. ‘That seems not unreasonable for the size of shop I believe it to be. When was the rent last reviewed, please, and when is it due to be reviewed again?’

‘Ah, now that I don’t know, sir.’

‘You see, I will need to put the rent in my costings and if it were, for instance, to double very shortly, that would be far more than I could manage.’

‘Oh, no, sir, I can tell you now that we have never doubled our rents in one go. People would not be able to afford that, and what would be the point of having a lot of tenants who can’t afford to pay?’

‘Quite,’ said Thomas. ‘But it would be helpful to me to know of recent and future rent rises.’

‘Please come this way, sir, and I’ll see if someone is available to answer all your questions about the rent.’

Thomas followed the clerk upstairs this time, and was shown into a large office with a window onto the street.

‘Mr Lancaster, this is Mr ... ?’

‘Thomas.’

‘... Mr Thomas, who is enquiring about the rent on some shop premises in Millside Street.’

For a moment Thomas thought he might be about to encounter Mr Lancaster, his landlord. He had a reputation for being ruthless, and Thomas feared his story would be blown out of the water in short order, but this Mr Lancaster was an amiable-looking man in his mid-twenties. He wore a brightly coloured tie and an expensive-looking suit in quite a bold check.

‘Please sit down, Mr Thomas,’ said Lancaster, as the clerk closed the door. ‘My father is away at the moment, but I hope I can help you. Millside Street. Now, let me see ...’ He took down a ledger from a row of such books on a shelf behind him and turned the pages.

Thomas thought Lancaster must own half of Blackburn, judging by the number and thickness of these books.

‘Yes, a former hat shop. Used to be ...’ he looked taken aback for a moment, ‘... *Louisa Farlowe – Hats.*’

Something in Gerald Lancaster’s demeanour made Thomas look at him carefully. Of course! Rose and Daisy Farlowe had gone into service at Lancaster’s house, possibly to work to pay off the back rent Louisa had been unable to pay herself. Maybe this man recognised the name. Maybe he had come across the young women at his home.

‘Your clerk said the rent on those premises is three and six,’ said Thomas. ‘I’m keen to know it’s not going to be increased very soon.’

‘No, Mr Thomas, we put the rent up by sixpence a few months ago. It was three shillings before that.’

‘Are you sure?’

Gerald Lancaster looked taken aback. ‘Yes, sir. Certainly I am. May I ask why you seem to doubt it?’ His questioning was perfectly friendly, not at all defensive, just puzzled.

Thomas now thought he knew why he’d heard two versions of the rent rise. He had never met Gerald Lancaster before, but he was coming across as a fair-minded and reasonable man. Thomas decided to risk confiding in him. He didn’t think he had anything to lose and, if this resulted in the outcome he wanted, quite a lot to gain in terms of justice, even freedom from debt, for Louisa’s daughters. Also the defeat of Alec Gimson.

‘Mr Lancaster, I am sorry to have deceived you. I haven’t come to ask about renting the former hat shop, but I have come to ask about the rent. You see, the lady – and she was a lady by nature, for all she wasn’t a well-to-do woman – who rented it, Louisa Farlowe, was an acquaintance of mine. She died in poverty several weeks ago, owing money to Mr

Lancaster. Now it seems her daughters, Rose and Daisy, are working for your father, I suspect to pay off the rent.'

'I know Rose – and Daisy – Farlowe,' said Gerald. There was a gentleness to his voice as he said Rose's name, as if he actually did both know and like her. 'And yes, you are right. The back rent on Louisa Farlowe's house and shop is owed to my father by Rose herself. Her name was added to the rent books beside that of her mother.'

'I know nowt of that,' said Thomas. 'But I have heard that Louisa's rent at the shop doubled and that's when she began to struggle. So now I'm thinking that if she hadn't fallen behind so drastically at the shop, she might not have put Rose's name on either of the rent books at all. That is a considerable rent rise, and yet the gentleman I spoke to at the desk downstairs just now told me that Lancaster Properties have never doubled their rents. So, you see, sir, there are two versions of what happened to Louisa Farlowe's shop rent.'

'That is very strange. I can assure you, Mr Thomas, that Mrs Farlowe's rent rise was sixpence on the shop and the same at the house in Shallow Street. Could you have been misinformed?'

'I doubt it, sir. Two women who have nowt to gain by lying to me have told me independently that Mrs Farlowe's shop rent doubled. One was her friend and neighbour and the other her employee. That Louisa Farlowe died with nowt would indicate that this is true. I find it very difficult to believe that a woman who had made her way independently for so long, who ran a little business under her own name for several years, suddenly sank into poverty and debt because the rent on her house and the rent on her shop were each increased by sixpence. It makes more sense that, as I have heard, the shop rent was doubled, but that Mr Lancaster received only the three and six that he asked for. The rest went to someone else. Do you agree?'

'You mean someone who works for Lancaster Properties was making money on the side, creaming off an income for himself, and that he had singled out Mrs Farlowe to be the victim of his dishonesty?'

'Yes, sir. I think it was someone who knew Mrs Farlowe and that this fraud was not only to gain money but also, and possibly more importantly, to relieve the poor woman of her life savings and to bring her to destitution. Her daughters are now also debtors to Lancaster Properties. Who was in a position to bring that about?'

Gerald Lancaster got up and went to stand at the window while he thought this through.

‘Mr Thomas, I don’t know if you are right, but I think your theory is worth looking into.’

‘May I suggest a name?’ asked Thomas. ‘Mebbe I’m wrong, but I reckon not. Louisa Farlowe has a brother, Alec Gimson. He works for Lancaster Properties, collecting rents, although he didn’t collect Louisa Farlowe’s rents himself. He lives opposite me and ... well, I have seen evidence of his behaviour towards women generally, and I hear of it towards his late sister in particular. I would say, from what I have learned, that he is despicable.’

‘That is a strong word, Mr Thomas.’

‘And not one I would use lightly, Mr Lancaster. Although Alec Gimson didn’t collect the rents himself, I suspect he had everything to do with the amount that was collected for Louisa Farlowe’s shop. He continually borrowed money from her – more than she could afford – and so brought her both worry and hardship. He is also known to exploit poor women for money in the vilest circumstances, engaging them in prostitution and acting as their pimp.’

‘Good heavens. Do you know this to be true?’

‘I have spoken with two of the women involved only this week.’

Gerald Lancaster looked deeply troubled and paced about in front of the window, rubbing his jaw in thought.

‘Ah, now I think I see a way forward with this,’ he said eventually. ‘If what you tell me is true – and until today I had heard nothing of it, so I must tread carefully – I need to do some investigating. At least I now know where to start.’ He extended his hand to Thomas. ‘If there has been sharp practice, I will see that those involved are held responsible.’

‘May I ask, Mr Lancaster, what will become of Rose and Daisy Farlowe if what I believe about their mother’s shop rent is true? If they are working for your father to pay off their mother’s debts, but those debts came about through their uncle’s dishonesty, will the debts be written off? Will they be free to go and work where they choose?’

‘I think not, Mr Thomas. You see, Lancaster Properties will still be owed the unpaid rent, the true amount she had yet to pay us. If Mrs Farlowe was tricked by her brother, who used our business illegally to profit himself, that has no bearing on the actual rent that Mrs Farlowe owed. And she did add

her daughter's name to the rent books, so Rose Farlowe ... I'm afraid the debt to Lancaster Properties still stands and is still hers.'

He looked genuinely sorry as he said this.

Thomas knew he had done all he could to help Louisa's daughters for now. He only hoped that Gerald Lancaster would investigate this very unpleasant business thoroughly and get to the heart of it: Alec Gimson and the financial ruination of his sister.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MR LANCASTER HAD been away for exactly a fortnight. When Rose took Gerald's dinner to his studio that evening, she thought that he looked a little preoccupied. She had noticed this change to his carefree demeanour a couple of days ago. It wasn't her place to ask what the matter was; she supposed it was something to do with his work at Lancaster Properties. He was, she suspected, finding being in charge while his father was away something of a burden.

Rose placed his tray down carefully, with the covered dishes of tender chicken in a tarragon butter sauce, new-crop potatoes and baby carrots, then watched him pour a small glass of the white wine Patrick had looked out of the cellar, which he handed to her. As he replenished his own glass, he sighed deeply.

'Oh, Rose. I wish I knew what to do.'

'About what, Gerald?'

They were 'Rose' and 'Gerald' now, but only in his studio. How quickly they had grown in understanding and affection. For Rose, this brought a pleasure to her life here at Viper's End that was as welcome as it was unexpected. She had had admirers before, of course, but no one she had been interested in. It seemed presumptuous even to think of being 'interested in' Gerald Lancaster, but he was both kind and gentle, and her feelings for him were deepening with every passing day.

She could not help contrasting Gerald's good manners and his considerateness for her with the attention she had received at her last place of work. Terry Ecclestone, although her social equal, had not shown her respectful admiration at all. His had been a selfish and predatory regard, and completely unwelcome. He had just hoped to get what he wanted, regardless of Rose's feelings. How wise she had been to slap him down at the outset. Mary had done the same, but not Daisy, despite Rose's warnings. She sometimes wondered if she had made a mistake in regarding Daisy as a responsible and sensible young woman rather than a wayward child when

she took her to Yorkshire. Of course, it was too late to change anything that had happened in the past.

Rose was aware that it was foolish to keep Gerald company, but she couldn't help herself. These days already felt to her like the summer holiday she would never take, a finite time and all the sweeter for that, with the prospect on the horizon of Mr Lancaster's return from Scotland and possibly of the beautiful and 'surprisingly good slow bowler' Miss Pennington featuring more prominently, even permanently, in Gerald's life, if that was what his father wished. Then it would be back to life here as it had been at first, with no chance of maintaining the friendship with Gerald, and the prospect of facing, week after week, the dismal columns in Mr Lancaster's ledger recording the slow, slow progress of the repayment of her debt.

Curiously, there had been no sign of Miss Pennington since Mr Lancaster went away, and Gerald had not spoken of her except as part of some social event. Rose was not going to ask him about her.

'I wish I knew what to do about everything, really,' Gerald said wanly.

'I reckon we all do, Gerald, but the pursuit of wisdom while floundering in ignorance is part of the human condition, isn't it?' Rose smiled.

For a moment Gerald looked at her with astonished disbelief, which made her giggle.

'Good grief, Rose, a brilliant cook and a philosopher too!'

'Not my own original thought. I once read it in a book,' she admitted. 'I do read books, you know. Just 'cos I'm a working-class woman, it doesn't mean I'm content to know nowt. That is, I used to read sometimes at Elizabeth House. There was a little shelf of books provided for all of us in the servants' hall. Now I have only the things I owned when I left there, and certainly no books among them.'

'Well, I must do something about that. I shall look out some of my favourite books for you. Daisy can read them too, if she likes. I'm sorry, I never thought. Patrick is a great reader, but then ...'

'What? Were you going to say: "but then he's a man"?''

'No, of course not. Actually, I was going to say that I know Patrick once worked in a bookshop, so I'd expect him to be interested in reading.'

'Really? That must have been a long time ago. He told me he's worked here for thirty-seven years.'

'I think he's either lost count or he was being ironic.'

‘Or mebbe it feels like thirty-seven years to him. That’s very sad. Does he owe back rent to your father, too?’ She wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to ask.

‘He does. So does Dermot. So do the gardeners and the women who come in to clean, and the ones who do the laundry. The outworkers live in cottages nearby, which my father also owns. They are as beholden to him for their jobs and the roofs over their heads as you, Daisy, Patrick and Dermot are.’

‘Heavens, that’s awful. What happened to the ones who used to work in the kitchen and got the sack before Daisy and I came here?’

‘I don’t know. I expect they were found other work. My father owns a lot of properties and there’s always somewhere that needs cleaning or maintaining.’

Rose slumped down on the nearest chair, her cheerfulness evaporating. ‘We are all prisoners of a kind. Daisy and I can never leave. Even if we could, we have nowhere to go to, and nowt to take with us – not even the means to get away.’

She deliberately put all thought of her meagre savings out of her mind. They might fund train fares for herself and Daisy, but they would make very little of a repayment of the debt, the weight of which would still be on their shoulders, no matter where they went.

‘We’re bound to Viper’s End, and the outside world will become stranger and stranger to us over time until it becomes more forbidding in our eyes than staying. Like Patrick, we will never leave, and mebbe never want to in the end.’

Tears sprang to her eyes and Gerald, kneeling down beside her, hurriedly felt in his pockets for a clean handkerchief.

‘Please don’t cry, Rose. I hope the prospect of staying here with me isn’t so very awful to you?’

Rose took the handkerchief – laundered and starched by people whom Mr Lancaster effectively owned – and mopped her eyes.

‘No, not at all, except I am not with you, but rather working as your cook. Your friendship has brightened these last weeks. However, you can come and go as you like, but I must stay,’ she sniffed, ‘and it’s being unable to leave – to make my own choice – that makes me unhappy. If I leave, your father has every right to have me arrested for debt, and I could be

imprisoned – in one of His Majesty’s prisons, I mean; not here – and that will be worse.’

‘Ah, Rose, it’s true. My father likes to have control of situations and of people, and here, no one but he is entirely free. This studio is a bargaining counter. If I do as he says, I can keep it; if I step out of line and do as I like, such as entertain my friends when he has forbidden it, then the privilege could be withdrawn.’

‘And has it been, before now? Or do you always do as he wishes?’

‘I am learning to choose my fights, but mostly, I regret to say, I pick the easier ones. My father knows how to hit where it hurts. There was one time when I went against him – I can’t even remember what I did, it was so unimportant – and he burned all my paintings.’

Rose gasped in consternation. She had had no idea that Gerald was kept on such a short leash. James Lancaster was wealthy beyond anything Rose and Daisy’s own parents would have been able to imagine, yet what a cruel, vindictive and implacable man he appeared to be, a sorry example of humanity when compared to her own loving and sympathetic parents. There was a saying that money didn’t buy happiness, and that appeared to be all too true, for how could Mr Lancaster be content when he was constantly looking to defeat and control people?

She put down the handkerchief and reached out to grasp Gerald’s hand in support.

‘I am so sorry,’ she said. ‘I can see you are summat of a prisoner too.’

They were silent for a few moments, and then Gerald leaned down and kissed Rose’s hand, where she held his. Then he slowly raised her to her feet and held her close in his arms.

‘Dear Rose,’ he murmured into her hair. He tilted up her face and gazed into her eyes, and Rose thought that no man had ever looked at her with anything like that intensity of admiration. Then he kissed her very, very gently.

They held each other again silently for a minute or two, and then Rose pulled away reluctantly.

‘I must go,’ she said, with a little smile to show she was not unhappy about the kiss.

‘No, Rose, please don’t. I hope I have not embarrassed you. I hope my ... my feelings for you are not unwelcome.’

How different this gentle man was from Terry Ecclestone!

‘No, of course not, Gerald. How could you think that? But I do have dinner to serve downstairs. Ours is keeping warm over simmering pans.’

‘No it isn’t. You see, I slipped Patrick half a crown and asked him to serve his own dinner, and Daisy’s.’

‘But it’s my job—’

‘What, to slip Patrick a little extra?’

She laughed. ‘I meant ... you know what I meant. So I’m to do without my own dinner altogether, am I?’

‘Not at all. I told you I was hungry and asked you to bring up plenty. And Patrick has already provided two place settings.’ Smiling, he indicated the little table. ‘Ha, my father can hardly call this “entertaining”, when you already live here and were going to eat anyway, just at a different table.’

‘Mm, I can see I underestimated you, Gerald Lancaster. You’ve gone to a lot of bother to organise the evening. Thank you, it is a lovely treat for me, and much as I like Patrick and I love Daisy, I think I shall enjoy your company this evening even more. But, please, let’s be cheerful. Let’s talk only of our favourite things and our best memories while we eat. Then afterwards, if you like, you can tell me what it is you were fretting over when I brought the tray in – when you said you wished you knew what to do.’

‘There, you see, I just knew I wouldn’t regret all the endless planning and deviousness this evening has involved ... well, the tipping of half a crown to Patrick. It was so simple I wonder it’s taken me until today to think of it.’

They laughed together, and then Rose uncovered the dishes while Gerald took the glasses to the table.

‘Mm, smells delicious, Rose. Thank you. Now, sit down and let’s eat. Here, let me top up your glass ... Now, tell me what I would really like to know: all about your dreams. You cook like an angel, but if you could do anything you wanted, Rose, what would you like to do?’

‘Ah, that’s easy to answer,’ said Rose. ‘Let me tell you about my tearoom ...’

They did not get on to discussing what had been bothering Gerald earlier that evening. By the time the chicken was eaten, and then they had shared the little dish of chocolate-coated strawberries Rose had thought she was preparing only for Gerald, and the subjects of tearooms and paintings were

exhausted, and they had delighted in sharing all their secret ambitions with each other, it was getting late.

‘Thank you for inviting me,’ said Rose, as she gathered up the plates and dishes to stack on her tray. ‘It’s been a grand evening.’

‘Yes, I agree,’ said Gerald. ‘One of the nicest I can remember, and that is all down to you, Rose.’

He kissed her properly then, with more than a little passion, and Rose responded with enthusiasm. Just then she didn’t care that this budding romance could go nowhere, that she might soon regret her growing feelings for Gerald. She was happy to live in the moment. It had indeed been the best of evenings.

‘I’ll ring for Patrick to take that heavy tray,’ offered Gerald.

‘No, don’t bother him. I can manage,’ said Rose.

‘I’ll carry it for you.’

‘Don’t be daft. It’s my job – well, Patrick’s. Not yours, in any case,’ Rose said, and took up the tray. ‘Good night, Gerald.’

‘Good night, sweet Rose. And thank you for staying.’ He opened the door for her, then followed her out and pushed open the door in the hall that led to below stairs.

‘Gerald,’ hissed Rose, ‘we must practise being Mr Lancaster and Cook.’

‘Dash it,’ said Gerald, with mock dismay. ‘How will you ever be Cook again in my eyes? I fear I will betray my feelings every time I look at you.’

‘So do I,’ said Rose, laughing.

‘Be careful on the stairs.’

‘Yes, yes, now go, or I won’t be thinking what I’m doing, and both me and the tray will be in a heap at the bottom.’

Rose, having got downstairs safely, pushed open the kitchen door, expecting to find the kitchen deserted and the lamp turned low, but instead saw Patrick sitting at the table, reading. She got the impression he was waiting for her, like a father seeing his daughter got home all right. This was borne out by his question.

‘Did you have a good evening?’ he asked, looking at her over the top of his spectacles.

‘Yes, and it was all thanks to you, Patrick. Thank you for making such a nice time possible for me.’

‘Well, that lad needs a bit of bringing out of himself,’ said Patrick. ‘He’s a good sort, not ruthless like his father. He just needs to find the courage to

seek his freedom. He doesn't see that yet, but he will in time, I reckon.'

'Mebbe ...' Rose started taking the crockery through to the scullery.

'But I'm not sure Miss Pennington will be by his side when he does break free ... if he does.'

Rose was so surprised to hear Patrick express this opinion that she didn't even think to close down his indiscretion.

'No?'

'No. Oh, she likes him, sure enough. Everyone does. But if you marry the son, you get the father too, in this case. As I said before, himself likes to be in control, and control of Miss Pennington and her fortune is a pretty prize to land, wouldn't you say? The big man won't be able to resist interfering.'

'You reckon?'

'I do. Still, she'll see that for herself, long before she's in danger of being netted, if she hasn't already.'

Rose cleared her throat. Heavens, this was an evening for revelations, all right. She went to put the last of the dishes to soak in the sink.

'Where is Daisy?' she asked when she came back.

'Gone to bed.'

'She wasn't in a sulk or owt because I wasn't here?'

'No, but I reckon this kitchen is getting her down.'

'This kitchen?'

'The work. The lack of pay. That there range, with all the black-leading it needs, and the job never finished but it needs starting again. The old-fashioned nature of the place. She was fond of that house in Yorkshire where you both worked before, you know. She's told me a time or two. She's mentioned a young fella there she misses, too. It's hard to be parted from your sweetheart, especially when you're young. Daisy is a girl who won't be kept under anyone's thumb indefinitely. Even I can see that. I reckon she's getting rebellious.'

'But, Patrick,' said Rose, noting but not remarking on what must surely be a reference to Terry Ecclestone, 'there's no point being rebellious if she's nowhere to go if she rebels, is there? She can take on all she likes, but we're bloomin' well stuck with this – all of us are. At least it's a job with a place to live.'

'She's a caged bird,' said Patrick, shaking his head dolefully. 'She'll break the cage to get her freedom if she wants it that badly, you mark my words, young Rose. I'd keep a close eye on her if I were you.'

The next morning Gerald was up early. As he was eating his breakfast, he rang for Patrick to ask him to bring the car to the front in five minutes. He had a spring in his step, a real sense of purpose, and he was bounding down the steps before Patrick had brought the car to a halt.

‘Lots to do this morning, Patrick,’ he said, getting in.

‘May I ask if you have heard from your father, Mr Gerald?’ asked Patrick, while he drove into town. ‘His holiday rarely lasts more than a fortnight, so mebbe he’s expected back soon?’

‘Not a word, Patrick,’ said Gerald. ‘Perhaps the fishing is especially good this year. In the meantime, I’ve something to do that I really should have tackled before now. I’m hoping it will all be dealt with by the time Father is home.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Patrick. He hadn’t the slightest idea what Gerald Lancaster was talking about, but even he could hardly ask with so little to go on.

‘Mr Cummings,’ said Gerald, entering the office of Lancaster Properties like a whirlwind, the front door swinging wide, his shoes clipping loudly on the stone floor, ‘please will you ask Mr Seymour to come up to my office as soon as he appears?’

‘Of course, sir,’ said Cummings.

‘And I’d also like to see Mr Gimson. But please have Gimson wait down here until I ask for him.’

It wasn’t long before Seymour knocked and came into Gerald’s office, clutching his cap and looking a bit shifty, Gerald thought.

‘Ah, Mr Seymour. Please sit down.’ Gerald indicated a hard, straight-backed chair, which he’d already set in the middle of the floor a little distance in front of his desk.

Seymour sat down uncomfortably. There was nowhere to hide. He tried to lean back, to lounge, to put himself at ease, but the chair did not allow this and he was forced to sit up straight.

‘Mr Seymour, I understand you collected the rent at some shop premises of ours in Millside Street: *Louisa Farlowe – Hats*. Is that right?’

Seymour’s face betrayed his discomfort that this was the line of questioning. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘May I ask, please, exactly how much rent you collected each week from Mrs Farlowe between the start of this year and the end of her tenancy at the shop?’

Seymour hesitated. 'I don't rightly remember, Mr Lancaster. It's a while since now. She left the shop not long after Easter.'

'But you must have an idea?'

'No, sir. I collect rents all over for Lancaster Properties. I can't remember them all.'

'And yet you tell me straight off that Mrs Farlowe gave up her tenancy not long after Easter. So you clearly remember the lady?'

'I ... I do, now I come to think of her, yes.'

'Then you'll recall that Mrs Farlowe also rented a house from Lancaster Properties.'

Seymour looked reluctant to commit himself to an answer, but possibly he knew there was nowhere to hide. 'In Shallow Street, yes,' he admitted at last.

'Quite right, Mr Seymour. In that very street. And do you just happen to remember how much Mrs Farlowe paid in rent for her house?'

'It was three and six, sir,' Seymour muttered.

'Was it indeed? Are you sure, Mr Seymour?'

Seymour started fidgeting on the hard chair. 'Yes. It's the same for the whole of Shallow Street.'

'It is indeed. And the same for the tiny shop in Millside Street, too – and the other shops my father owns in that street, which makes that very easy to remember, I would say. Both Mrs Farlowe's rents were three and six a week. I have her rent books here.'

'Then why are you asking me?' demanded Seymour belligerently.

'Because Mrs Farlowe told both her employee at the shop and her neighbour in Shallow Street that the shop rent had increased to an astonishing six shillings last winter, and not the three and six it actually was. And that you were the man who had told her of the increase, and you were the man who collected the six shillings. Do you remember that, Mr Seymour?'

Seymour looked furtive. 'They are mistaken. Or else Mrs Farlowe told them lies to play the victim when she couldn't pay the sixpence increase. I expect she was trying to make out it was Lancaster Properties' fault and not her own that she couldn't meet the rent any longer. A couple of old biddies – why would you believe what they said or what they were told?'

Gerald considered this for a moment. He could see Seymour was looking increasingly unhappy. Gerald decided to go with his gut instinct. He

believed what Mr Thomas had told him. He could see that Thomas was trying to do his best for Rose and Daisy, now that their mother was beyond help. Louisa Farlowe had clearly been a lady who had inspired loyal friendships, and Thomas was the kind of man who had taken the time to listen to her friends rather than dismissing them as 'old biddies'. Louisa had been a good tenant of Lancaster Properties for many years. It was not too big a step to imagine she had been very like her daughter Rose: hard-working, decent and honest; a good woman.

Louisa's brother, however, was a man Mr Thomas had described as 'despicable'. He had preyed on his sister, and on many women, according to Thomas. Gerald had met him on occasion in this very office and did not like the way he spoke of the female tenants – rather like Seymour, just now, dismissing Mrs Farlowe's employee and her neighbour so disrespectfully. There was far too much of this kind of attitude towards women for no reason at all, in Gerald's opinion.

He made up his mind to put his cards on the table.

'Mr Seymour,' he said, 'how much did Alec Gimson pay you to swindle Mrs Farlowe? The rent was three and six. She paid six shillings. How much of the two and six a week extra went into your pocket?'

Seymour said nothing, but the fearful look in his eyes gave him away.

Gerald could feel his heart beating hard and fast, and he knew he must remain calm. He must hold his nerve. He suspected Alec Gimson had issued a false rent book to his sister Louisa when he started taking the six shillings from her, but then filled in the old one he'd swapped it for, showing the three and sixpence rent, and brought that one here when Louisa vacated the Millside Street shop. Gimson might have kept the counterfeit rent book, or destroyed it. Either way, Gerald had not seen it, so he had no proof. But, seeing Seymour squirming before him now, he knew without doubt that Mr Thomas had told him nothing but the truth.

He looked straight at Seymour and simply raised an enquiring eyebrow.

The silence stretched out to a minute.

Seymour blinked first.

'Eightpence,' he mumbled. 'Gimson gave me eightpence a week.'

'So you were aware that Mrs Farlowe's actual rent was three and six, and that you and Gimson were stealing two and six from her every week? You knowingly stole Mrs Farlowe's hard-earned money, Seymour?'

‘It was Gimson who set it all up. Said his sister owed him. She’d had all the advantages and attention from their parents in her childhood, and he’d had nowt, so now he was making her pay. He said she’d done summat terrible to someone he loved beyond life itself – those were his words: “beyond life itself” – and he was making her pay for that too, until she could pay no more. He’d bided his time until he could be sure of defeating her and gain summat for himself, too. She was a widow and her husband had left her a little nest egg, so Gimson said now the time had come.’

‘I find it hard to listen to you, Seymour. What “advantages” did she have? None that I have heard of that she didn’t work for: a widow with a very small business and one loyal employee. Her daughters work in service. It doesn’t sound to me as if Mrs Farlowe had a world of advantages. Rather the reverse. As for Gimson’s vendetta against her, that reeks of bitterness and jealousy, of small-minded nastiness. It tells me Gimson has a twisted mind and an exaggerated sense of his own importance. An older brother should take care of a younger sibling, not hold a grudge for years on end. You were taken in by such a man, Seymour, and you were too stupid and too greedy to resist him.’

Seymour looked down at the floor. He had nothing more to say.

‘Now, sit over there and keep your mouth shut. And remember, you broke the spirit, the financial security and possibly the health of an honest woman for just eightpence a week. Is that really your price? Because any right-thinking person would think it a shameful disgrace.’

Gerald pointed to another upright chair set a few feet behind the one Seymour had just been squirming in, and Seymour got up stiffly and shuffled towards it. He no longer attempted to lean back and lounge, but sat bent over, wringing his hands.

Gerald took a deep breath and opened his office door. Mr Cummings, the clerk whose desk was in the hall downstairs, was hovering on the landing outside.

‘Ah, Mr Cummings, please will you tell Gimson to come up?’ said Gerald.

‘I’m sorry, sir. I’m afraid Gimson isn’t here.’

‘What, not arrived yet, you mean? Doesn’t he come in to the office at the start of every day?’

‘Yes, sir. He came in and waited downstairs as I asked. But then he overheard someone say that you had Mr Seymour in your office, and that

he'd been in here for a while, and one of the other clerks said he thought Seymour was in deep trouble. Next thing I knew, Gimson had taken himself off. He went at speed, too.'

'Where did he go – do you know?'

'I rushed out after him, but he was already off down Ainsworth Street and a good distance ahead, even then. I called out, but he didn't stop.'

'How long ago was this?'

'About five minutes, sir.'

Gerald pursed his lips, wondering what to do. Seymour had already confessed the whole rent swindle business, and now Gimson had proved himself guilty by running away instead of facing the accusations and giving his answers. Where would he run to? It was unlikely that he'd be lying low at home – a home rented from Lancaster Properties.

It was then that Gerald remembered again what Mr Thomas had said about Gimson acting as a pimp. He might not be found hiding at home, but there surely would be something there to interest the police.

'Mr Cummings, I would like you to go to Northgate, to the police station in Sessions House, and ask for an officer to come here, please. I believe at least two quite disgraceful crimes have been committed by Alec Gimson. I'm sure Seymour will be, if not happy, at least able to help with the inquiries.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘**Y**OU ALL RIGHT, flower?’ Rose asked Daisy.

The first thing Rose thought of this morning was not what an enjoyable evening she had had with Gerald, listening to him talking so enthusiastically about his painting and showing so attentive an interest in her own dreams, but about Daisy taking off on the bicycle all afternoon. Rose had gone to bed happier than she had been for a long time, but then woke in the night fretting about Daisy staging a rebellion – ‘breaking her cage’.

Of course Daisy was unhappy here. She had no choice about her work and hardly enough money in her hand to buy anything for herself, which also denied her the freedom to go where she wanted, to have any kind of choices. And she was still mourning Louisa’s untimely death, as was Rose. Not a day passed but one of them would say, ‘Mum said ...’ or ‘Mum would have thought ...’ But Rose was anxious that she’d failed to notice just how much Daisy was suffering; that, as at Elizabeth House, Daisy was going her own way. Daisy was a young woman of passions – an all-or-nothing kind of person – and if she felt anything at all, she felt it very deeply indeed.

Daisy shrugged. ‘Either I am all right or I’m not,’ she said. ‘What’s there to do about it either way?’

‘Well, nowt really, unless you’re ill. You’re not ill, are you, love? It’s just that I mebbe haven’t asked recently, but I do care. I don’t want you to be ill or unhappy.’

‘Is a prisoner *happy* in jail? Or a wild creature *happy* caged in a circus?’

‘No, Daisy. Of course not. I’m sorry, it was the wrong word. Mebbe I meant ... I just meant I care, that’s all. All of us are stuck here and we don’t know how long for.’

‘Ages. There’s no end in sight, Rose. I expect Patrick and Dermot will be dead and buried long before we’ve paid off the rent debts and are allowed to go.’

Rose tutted at her sister's blunt words. 'Really, Daisy, just think before you speak so loudly. Patrick's gone to get the motor car but what if he happened to come in and hear you?'

'Then he'd probably agree. Anyway, I don't want you going on at me any longer so let's talk of summat else. I expect you had a nice evening?'

'Thank you, I did.'

'I wish I had an admiring young man – or even any young man – to spend an evening with.'

'I wish you did, too, love, although Gerald Lancaster ... well, there can never be owt between us: Mr Lancaster's son and the cook.'

'Ha, like Terry and Amy Langdale,' muttered Daisy, and Rose deliberately ignored that.

They looked at each other with pursed lips, both acknowledging that their residence at Viper's End was indeed like a long prison sentence, and they might have missed their chance of husbands and children by the time they were free – if they ever were.

'No point moping,' said Daisy, wearily. 'I suppose I'd better get on with all those ruddy dishes.' And she stomped away to the scullery, looking burdened.

She was gone a long time, and when Rose went to look for her she wasn't at the sink at all.

Oh, no, I hope she hasn't gone off again like she did yesterday.

'Daisy. Daise, are you there?' She looked in all the little old-fashioned rooms, each originally designed for a specific purpose but now mostly superfluous and either empty or used for storage.

In the end she gave up searching for Daisy and took her trug out to the vegetable garden to pull some saladings. When she came back, Daisy was washing the last of the breakfast dishes in the scullery.

'I was looking for you. Where were you?' asked Rose. 'Are you all right, love?'

'I was always just here,' said Daisy. 'And I wish you'd stop asking me that,' she added despondently. 'I'll never be really all right while I'm here.'

Rose knew Daisy hadn't been there all this time but she decided, with the mood her sister was in, that she would say no more just now.

A telegram arrived from James Lancaster just as Patrick was finishing his lunch and had planned to spend the afternoon cleaning the car.

‘‘Tis the end of the holiday,’ he announced to Rose and Daisy, having taken the slip of paper from a boy at the back door and read it immediately. ‘No reply,’ he told the boy, handing him a very small tip from a dish where coins were kept for this purpose.

‘When is Mr Lancaster returning?’ asked Daisy.

‘This evening. I’m to collect him from the station. I’ll go and tell Dermot, who can fetch Mr Gerald from the office in the carriage.’

Rose’s first thought was that this meant the end of Gerald spending his evenings in his studio, and there would be no more occasions like yesterday. She felt ridiculously disappointed, despite knowing only too well that such times had been a mere interlude and a humdrum normality was always going to return very soon.

Her second thought was that she had better plan a welcoming dinner, given that Mr Lancaster would no doubt have dined splendidly at the estate of his wealthy friends. It was a matter of pride not to let herself down, for him not to regard his own cook as inferior. The salad leaves she had picked earlier were now relegated to a garnish.

‘Oh, and he says he’s bringing fish,’ added Patrick.

Rose was unsure whether this would be a good thing, given the train journey. It passed through her mind that Mr Lawson, Mary’s father, would be able to spin out an amusing tale about discovering a salmon in a suitcase, reeking in Left Luggage.



The salmon looked magnificent. Rose was soon busy with a fish kettle and the ingredients to make hollandaise sauce, but even so, she noticed that Daisy was distracted, not taking the initiative to get things done in her usual way.

‘Daise, what’s up? You’re not ill, are you?’

Rose was filled with fear even as she asked. Daisy had been out of sorts lately, unsettled and impatient of her work. What if she had caught the galloping consumption? They had not been especially careful around their mother – how could they have kept a distance from the person they loved best in the world in her final hours?

‘No, just tired. I think I’ll go to bed straight after I’ve done the dishes this evening.’

At last the dinner was served and eaten upstairs and down. Rose imagined Mr Lancaster grilling Gerald about what had happened at Lancaster Properties in his absence, and Gerald trying to raise some enthusiasm in his account of non-events while wishing his father was sufficiently interested in his painting to want to see the progress he had made in his studio.

Daisy disappeared up the back stairs to her attic room, and Rose followed an hour or so later, leaving Patrick grumbling about the state of Mr Lancaster's shoes.

Rose's room was next to Daisy's, and she looked in on Daisy to see if she was awake and needed anything, but in the shadowy summer twilight she saw Daisy was asleep and there was no answer to Rose's whispered enquiry.

In her own room, she was surprised to notice her bedcover was a little rumpled, as if someone had been sitting on it. That was odd: Rose always smoothed her covers flat to make them as neat and tidy as she could. Perhaps Daisy had come in, hoping to talk, but then had become too tired to wait for Rose to come up to bed.

It was late now and Daisy was asleep. Whatever it was about would wait until the morning.

The next morning, Rose was awake early, as usual. It was past midsummer now, and fully light long before six o'clock. She remembered her concerns about Daisy straight away. There had been no hot water brought up yet, which was unusual, so perhaps Daisy really was ill. Rose put on her slippers, and her cardigan over her nightie, and went to see.

At the door, the figure huddled under the covers didn't look to have moved since last night.

Rose's stomach gave a lurch of alarm and she rushed to shake her sister, afraid she had died alone in the small hours and she'd find her lifeless and curled up stiffly in her bed.

The bed was empty. The 'figure' asleep wasn't Daisy at all, just her pillow and a blanket bundled up to form the shape of a person.

Rose looked all around the room, trying to keep calm, trying to think what might be going on. Daisy's few things had gone. In the wardrobe there was only her spare apron and the threadbare winter coat that had once belonged to Rose.

Stupid, stupid, stupid ... Why didn't she tell me she couldn't bear it any longer?

But Patrick told me, didn't he? Why didn't I just offer her some hope, a few words of comfort that we'd come through this together?

Rose rushed to put on her clothes. She pounded down the stairs to the kitchen, to find the range barely warm.

Automatically she fed fuel into the monstrous stove while her eyes darted around the room in the hope she'd see a note left for her by Daisy. There was nothing.

Rose's thoughts were in turmoil and she could feel the thudding of her heart, while her breath was shallow and panting. She should make a thorough search for Daisy before she did anything else, but there were the breakfasts to prepare, hot water to take up to Mr Lancaster and Gerald, which Patrick would have to do, although the range would take a while to get up to heat. What to do first? What?

No, enough! Daisy came before anything. A search should be done first in case Daisy was ill. But that couldn't be the case. All her things were gone so she must have gone too.

Oh, I just can't think straight ...

'What's matter, lass?' said Patrick, coming in then. 'You look like you're about to explode or expire, one or t'other.'

'Oh, Patrick, thank God you're here,' wailed Rose. 'You were right: I reckon Daisy's run away and I don't know what to do.'

'Well, I never,' said James Lancaster when Patrick explained why this morning the usual routine had not run like clockwork. 'Doesn't the silly girl realise that she's leaving her sister to pay off their mother's debt alone? It'll take longer with the repayments coming out of just the one wage.'

'I doubt Daisy thought of that, sir,' said Patrick, deadpan, withdrawing from the room.

He had served James and Gerald their breakfasts, which, with the combined efforts of Rose and Patrick, were only a little later than usual.

'I come back from my holiday and what do I find?' grumbled James, thoroughly irritated. 'The skivvy has absconded, and her uncle, a man I trusted to collect my rents and to keep an ear to the ground for me among the tenants, has been hiding behind the good name of Lancaster Properties to defraud his own sister, dressing the crime up as a rent rise. Not only that,

but he's run his own home – also owned by Lancaster Properties – as, well, quite honestly, as the counting house for his prostitution business, and as a gambling den, to boot. And now he's absconded too. Am I to find my cook has also run away by the time I get back here this evening?'

'Father, of course Cook will still be here,' said Gerald. 'She will be very worried about her young sister and hoping she thinks better of her flight and returns safely. As for their uncle, the police are now looking for Alec Gimson. I gave them a full description yesterday and I'm sure they will apprehend him very soon.'

'Are you indeed?' said James, heavily. 'And what do you know? If you'd just waited until my return, I would have dealt with this Gimson business myself and I would have handled it rather differently. Then we wouldn't be in this mess. Really, Gerald, you are incompetent. I go on holiday for a mere fortnight and chaos ensues.'

'I'm sorry, Father. I had hoped to deal with the matter completely and it would have all been settled by the time you came back. I was trying to do the right thing. I thought you'd be pleased.'

'The right thing? Settled? It's about as unsettled as it can be. Gimson is on the run and Lancaster Properties made to look as if we employ dishonest rent collectors and run houses of ill-repute and gambling dens.'

'I'm sure no one would think the fault lay at our door, Father.'

'Are you? Are you indeed? Well, I wouldn't be too sure. One rumour, one loose tongue – that's all it takes to destroy a reputation. Look at the vile goings-on at Gimson's. What did you tell me the police found when they went there? Certainly not the man himself.'

'No, Father. Not Gimson, but a woman known as Sal, who, from the account the policeman who arrested her gave me, is extremely coarse. She said a great deal, apparently, most of it unrepeatable, but it was clear that she was in on Gimson's pimping and even kept a list of his clients and the poor women he used so disgracefully. He took his clients' money, of which he kept a record, and kept most of it for himself and this Sal woman. Anyway, she is now in custody and the police have taken away the evidence of her vile betrayal of her own sex. I imagine it was the shame of the whole unsavoury business that prevented anyone speaking out. There were also decks of cards stacked up in one room, and several dice. No man needs all that for his own entertainment. Plus quite a bit of cash stashed under the mattress of Gimson's bed. The police think he was just hoarding the cash

there instead of taking it to a bank and so drawing attention to himself as a man with money, linking him to whatever rumours were circulating.'

'I'm not sure I really want to be reminded of this over my breakfast, Gerald. Especially about that Sal woman.'

'Well, you did ask, Father.'

'Which I now regret. Do you think you are up to asking Patrick or Cook or someone to find a new skivvy? Preferably this morning. I'm a busy man and I expect my home to be run impeccably, and that includes fires lit and hot water on time. Do not bother me with the details, just see that it's done. Have you made any start on appointing people to replace Gimson and Seymour?'

'Well, I only discovered—'

'I thought not. If I want anything done, I just have to do it myself. Really, Gerald, I wonder, as we're in a sacking mood this week, whether I ought to get rid of you. Hardly proving yourself much good, are you?'

Gerald declined to answer directly. After a moment he said, 'I shall speak with Cook.'

'Make sure you do,' barked his father, determined to have the last word.

Rose mopped her eyes and tried to pull herself together. If only she knew that Daisy was safe, but she had disappeared completely, leaving no word.

'Are there any friends she would go to?' asked Gerald.

They were sitting at the kitchen table with cups of tea. Patrick was driving James to his office so Gerald was able to come below stairs and hear Rose's account of her sister's disappearance.

'There's her friend Betty, in Blackburn. She works at one of the mills. But I know Betty's family is large so I doubt Daisy has gone there: she knows there's no room.'

'I met a man recently called – hard to forget once you've heard his name – Thomas Thomas, who is an overlooker at a mill. He might know Betty and can ask her if she's heard anything of Daisy.'

'Betty Parsons, she's called. How odd, it was Mr Thomas who once brought my mother home on his bicycle when ... well, when she suffered a sprained ankle. That is, it's the same name so I'm assuming it's the same person.'

'Not so odd, and I'll tell you why in a minute, Rose. But if Daisy really wanted to run away, she'd surely go further than Blackburn.'

‘I reckon you’re right. There’s our aunt Clara, who lives on a farm by Longridge Fell. She’s a good woman, very kind, but she lives alone and has her own way of going on. I’m not sure her way will be Daisy’s way, at least before Daisy has been there very long. If Daisy has gone there, Aunt Clara will let me know. But then how would Daisy have paid for the train?’

Then Rose’s eyes grew wide as she remembered her rumpled bedcover the previous night.

‘What?’ asked Gerald, looking at her face.

‘I think I know. Please excuse me, Gerald, while I go and look for summat.’

‘Tell me. Let me help you.’

‘You know I told you my dream of having a little tearoom – well, it sounds daft, but I was putting money aside in a little tin. It’s taken months to save even a tiny amount, but it makes me think I’ve made a start. I wonder if Daisy found the tin.’

‘That would explain her flight. Let’s go and look ...’

‘I don’t think I’ve been up here for years,’ said Gerald when they reached the top of the three flights of stairs.

‘My room is just here,’ said Rose.

She went to her wardrobe, while Gerald hovered at the door, mindful of the etiquette of being in a woman’s bedroom. She pulled the golden syrup tin out from the back and knew immediately from its weight and hollow rattle that her suspicions were correct. She eased off the lid with her nail file. There was just one and sixpence left.

Rose tossed the tin onto the bed and then sat down heavily beside it.

‘I’m so sorry, Rose. How much has she taken?’ asked Gerald.

‘Summat over a pound. Nice of her to leave me owt at all.’ For a moment Rose found it difficult to be the bigger person. Then she rallied. ‘No, I’m pleased she hasn’t run away with nowt in her pocket at all. I don’t want her sleeping under hedges and risking being preyed on by vagrants and ne’er-do-wells. I want her to be safe and get where she wants to go.’

‘If she has a pound, she can take a train and get right away. But, Rose, don’t you think she will have run to someone? Could it be your aunt? I think I should go to this farm and see.’

‘It might just be a wild-goose chase. But please would you be kind enough to send her a telegram? At least then I can quickly know for sure.’

‘Of course. Is there anyone else, though? Did Daisy have some admirer to whom she could turn?’

‘Admirer? None that I know about.’

She thought of Terry Ecclestone at Elizabeth House, but that had never been serious ... had it? But then Daisy had mentioned Terry a time or two since, so perhaps he *had* meant more to her, even though he’d betrayed her after the accident. Foolish girl, what would she have to do with him now?

Oh dear, what to do? Better see if Aunt Clara knows owt before we assume the worst.

‘If I can help with anything, you must let me know,’ said Gerald. ‘I’m sorry about your little savings.’

‘They were *very* little, and I reckon Daisy’s need of them is greater than mine. I only hope she’s discreet when she spends the money so she doesn’t get robbed or summat. Oh, Gerald, I just wish she hadn’t gone. Now neither of us has the other, and I do need her here.’

Gerald sat down on Rose’s bed and held her tightly in his arms. ‘You do have me, Rose,’ he said.

‘I ... I don’t know. I can’t see how that can be.’

‘I mean it. Let me show you.’

He kissed her long and passionately then, and his kisses were so wonderful that she could not help but respond.

In the end it was Gerald who tried to be sensible.

‘Rose, I must go and send a telegram to your aunt. If Daisy is with her, then you have far less cause for worry.’

‘Thank you. I’m sorry, I can’t pay you for the telegram.’

‘Of course not. I just want to help.’

Back in the kitchen, Gerald remembered he hadn’t told Rose about Mr Thomas.

‘It isn’t such a coincidence that I should have met Thomas Thomas,’ he explained, while Rose set about tidying away the breakfast things. ‘The connection is your uncle, Alec Gimson.’

‘Him? Yes ... yes, I remember Daisy told me that Mr Thomas lives opposite Alec Gimson. I don’t refer to him as my uncle now. The way he treated my mother was appalling and I prefer not to regard him as a part of my family. He disgusts me.’

‘I can understand that, Rose, and I’m afraid there is more bad news for you. Gimson was employed by Lancaster Properties to collect rents, and

also, according to my father, to “keep an ear to the ground”, presumably to pass on any useful information about any of the tenants, should he happen to hear it. Anyway, I was going to tell you this but Daisy’s disappearance has rather taken precedence ...’

Gerald told Rose how, having learned from Mr Thomas that Gimson had cheated his sister, and also that Gimson had run immoral practices from his house rented from Lancaster Properties, Gerald had got a confession from Seymour and had planned to confront Gimson. But Gimson had got wind of it and fled.

‘When the police went to his house he was not there. It seems he has disappeared to evade arrest and questioning. The person the police did have the dubious pleasure of arresting, however, was a woman of quite spectacular vulgarity.’

‘Let me guess – a tattoo on her ... on her chest, and a foul mouth. Sal, I think she’s called. Daisy has mentioned her. Daise used to work for her sister, Bertha Chapman. In her laundry, I hasten to add.’

Gerald smiled. ‘This Sal is a very rough sort, I gather from the arresting police officer. He did mention a tattoo, and that he couldn’t imagine what kind of lowlife would be taking up what it was offering. Quite honestly, Rose, I’d rather not think about that.’

Rose shook her head. ‘Awful. And now Alec Gimson is on the run, and Daisy is out there somewhere too. Oh, Gerald, what if she were to meet him – say, she was sheltering somewhere and he turned up? He might harm her. They have clashed before and he’s not above hitting a young girl. He’s a bully, a really vile man.’

‘I know that from what he did to your mother, Rose,’ said Gerald, reaching out over the table and taking her hand. ‘But please try not to worry. Daisy planned her disappearance and will, I’m sure, be following her plan, whereas Gimson just fled in a desperate moment.’

‘I expect you’re right.’

‘Now, give me your aunt Clara’s address and I shall organise that telegram.’

Rose pulled a piece of paper from the notebook she used for her shopping list and wrote down Clara’s name and the address of Grimside Farm. She handed the paper to Gerald.

‘Oh, and I’ve been tasked with finding a new kitchen maid,’ he added, looking a little panic-stricken. ‘My father was in a very bad mood this

morning, especially considering he's just spent a fortnight in Scotland. Perhaps he came back too soon. Ought I to suggest he returns there? He's gone off to his office to put right all the things he thinks I messed up while he was away, and he's asked me to employ a new kitchen maid. How on earth am I to do that?'

'If you'll forgive my interruption, leave it to me, Mr Gerald,' said Patrick, coming in in time to hear the end of the conversation. 'Cook and I will find someone.'

'Thank you, Patrick.'

Gerald disappeared to find Dermot then, leaving Rose feeling overwhelmed with all that had happened. No help in the kitchen seemed the least of her worries. What if Aunt Clara wasn't sheltering Daisy? What if Alec Gimson was roaming the countryside around Blackburn, evading arrest but intent on avenging himself on Gerald? He was unhinged enough to lash out and hurt anyone he thought was against him.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

D AISY WAS HUNGRY. The money she had stolen from Rose had paid for the train to take her to Yorkshire, but she knew she must eke out the rest until she was settled and had a job. She hoped that would be very soon, but she'd be wise to be careful, just in case it took a little longer than she anticipated. So far today she had eaten only some bread she had stuffed into the top of her bag before she left Viper's End very early in the morning. For ten mad seconds she had contemplated stealing some of the delicious poached salmon that was left over from dinner, but that might have proved an unwise choice for a train journey.

She had a plan, but she knew it wasn't certain to work out. The uncertain parts were the ones that involved other people, and unfortunately quite a lot of her plan fell into that category.

Throughout the train journey from Blackburn to Crossthwaite, Daisy imagined the very best that could happen. She was determined not to allow doubts into her head, which would sap her courage.

The ideal situation was that when she arrived at Elizabeth House, Terry would envelop her in his arms and plead for forgiveness that he had foisted the blame for the motor-car accident onto her, which meant she had lost her job. He would tell her he had been pining for her, his true love, and his life had been utter misery, empty of meaning, since she had been asked to leave. The new kitchen maid, proving to be even more disastrous than Augusta Foggerty, would be immediately dismissed, and Daisy would be welcomed back in the servants' hall to take up her old job, to the huge relief of everyone. Mrs Metcalfe would acknowledge that Daisy was irreplaceable, and Daisy would be given a pay rise and a hot dinner with extra Yorkshire pudding.

Don't think of food. You're not even there yet ...

By now, in Daisy's imagination, Mrs Metcalfe had run out of patience with Amy Langdale, especially as it had been Amy's jealousy that had stirred the pot over the accident and led to Daisy having to leave. Amy had been found a job as the sole companion to another distant cousin who ...

who was senile and lived somewhere remote on the moors ... in a very cold house.

Serves Amy bloomin' Langdale right.

At Crossthwaite station, Daisy managed to evade the notice of Mr Lawson, the stationmaster. She wasn't sure enough of the success of her plan to want her presence back in Crossthwaite to be widely known just yet. Better to see how things worked out first.

At the gate to Elizabeth House, Daisy stopped to gaze at the pretty home the Metcalfes had made for themselves, and the large garden, now hugely lush and green, and colourful with summer flowers. She remembered her arrival here with Rose in spring, after they had left Blackburn and their mother. Was it only a few months ago? It felt like years had passed. Daisy had ruined her chance then, but now she vowed to do better, if only the other people here would let her.

Please, Mum, just make it all work out for me ...

She set off down the drive and then round to the stable yard. She had hoped that Terry would be there, doing something with the car, now restored to splendour after the crash, and they would run into each other's arms. But neither Terry nor the car was visible.

Daisy descended the steps to the back door, gave a little knock on it and waited. No one answered. She wondered whether just to open the door and go into the kitchen, but she didn't work here any longer ... well, not just yet.

She knocked again and a plain middle-aged woman in a pinafore opened the door.

'Yes?' She looked Daisy up and down as if she didn't like what she was seeing.

'I'm Daisy – Daisy Farlowe. I've come to see Terry ... and Mary.'

The woman, who Daisy guessed was the cook, looked at her severely. 'They're not here,' she said. She peered closely and suspiciously at Daisy. 'What do you want with them?'

Who is this and why is she so rude? And where are Terry and Mary?

'Look here, Mrs ... ?'

'Mrs Bishop, and I'll thank you not to address me with "look here". Now, tell me what you want or sling your hook, but don't waste my time.'

'I used to work here. I know Terry and Mary. I've come to see them. I ... I hoped Mrs Metcalfe ... that is, I hoped Mary might give me my old job

back.'

Mrs Bishop considered this for a few moments while Daisy held her breath.

'Ah, come in, you daft article,' Cook said at last. 'You can sit there,' she pointed to the very chair that Daisy used to occupy when she worked there, 'where I can see you. And no wandering about. It's clear you know summat of Elizabeth House, although not much of what's happened of late. Bridget! Bridget! Come here and make this soft lass a cup of tea, will you? Best add sugar in case she's in an interesting condition too.'

What?

Bridget was clearly the kitchen maid who had replaced Daisy. Far from being loud, clumsy, untidy, slatternly or dim, she was more than up to the job. She was about fourteen, neat, obedient and quick. Oh dear, it didn't look as if the kitchen maid job would be available after all.

'Yes, Mrs Bishop.' Bridget set about doing as she was asked.

'Now, Daisy Farlowe, there are no jobs for you here,' said Mrs Bishop, vigorously stirring a pan to show she was very busy. 'Mary has gone into Crossthwaite to get some bits and pieces, and Terry ... well, he's long gone.'

'What? Terry's ... left? Gone completely? When? How did Mr Metcalfe let him go?' Daisy could feel her whole plan starting to unravel.

'Mr Metcalfe could hardly allow him to stay, from what I heard. I wasn't here then – a woman called Mrs Draper was cook at the time, but she didn't suit Mr and Mrs Metcalfe, so they got rid and employ me now instead. Anyhow, I'm not one to gossip, and I'm far too busy to be worrying about folk I've never met, so if you want to know the details, you'll have to ask Mary when she comes back, if she can spare you the time.'

Daisy accepted a cup of tea from Bridget, who had even put a plain biscuit on the saucer. She needed that: the tea and the biscuit. She needed the sugar in the tea to counteract the shock, too. Never for one moment did she think Terry would not be here. Whatever had happened, it must have been mightily serious.

'Mrs Bishop, is it all right if I wait here for Mary, please?'

'Yes, but just keep quiet and out of the way. I know nowt about you and I can't vouch for your character.'

Daisy nodded, feeling very small, and very inferior to Bridget, who was impressive for a kitchen maid and, just now, a lot more self-possessed than

Daisy herself. Where on earth had they found her? Bridget gave Daisy a kind smile, which made her feel even more of a grubby and unwelcome presence.

After a few minutes, during which Daisy assessed her position and decided she was, just, better off here, waiting to see if Mary would help her out, than high-tailing it back to Viper's End and the certainty of continuing to work for a pittance, Mary entered, carrying the familiar shopping basket, the very one to which Daisy herself had added Terry's *Daily Mail* when he'd offered her that fateful lift home in Mr Metcalfe's car.

'Mary!' She had called out before she could stop herself, so pleased was she to see a familiar face.

'Well, I never. Daisy Farlowe. Where did you blow in from?'

'I ... I came to see ... you. You and Terry. I didn't like my place in Lancashire so I came back here, hoping ...' She trailed off, knowing she sounded ridiculously presumptuous. Why had she thought that the staff at Elizabeth House would be missing her; that her place had proved so difficult to fill that only she would do for it?

Mary grasped the situation immediately. 'Here's those bits you want, Mrs Bishop,' she said. 'And I'll take Mr Metcalfe's dyspepsia cure through to Mr Anderson to take up in a minute or two.'

It sounded like Mr Anderson was the replacement for Terry. He really had gone.

'Now, Daisy, I think I'd better let you know how things are here now, and then you can take yourself off back to where you came from. Are you working in the same place as Rose?'

Daisy nodded, not trusting herself to speak, she felt so upset. She could barely hold back her tears. Terry gone! She had been so sure he would be here and overjoyed at her return.

'And does she know you're here? I can't believe she does.'

Daisy shook her head.

Mrs Bishop and Bridget had stopped even pretending not to listen, but Mary gave each of them a quelling look, then turned back to Daisy.

'Come through to the larder, Daisy, and I'll tell you in private. We don't want to distract Mrs Bishop from her work, when she's so very busy, do we?'

Daisy followed Mary through the scullery and along to the larder. Whatever changes there had been at Elizabeth House, Mary was still as

brittle as ever.

In the larder there was a row of little madeleines cooling on a rack. Daisy noticed in passing that they weren't identical in size and a couple of them were overbrowned at the edges. Mrs Bishop's baking wasn't up to Rose's standard.

'Right, I'll just close the door and we'll keep this private. Now, Daisy, I'd have thought you would have more sense than to come here running after Terry Ecclestone. It was him that got you the sack in the first place. You don't suppose, if he was here, that he'd suddenly come over all concerned about you and try to make amends, do you? Anyway, he got the sack a few weeks after you and Rose left. He got Amy Langdale in the family way and Mrs Metcalfe went berserk. She threw them both out and it was only Mr Metcalfe's intervention that allowed them even one day to collect up their things and arrange where to go. They left together, which I suppose says summat for that revolting lowlife, sticking by her, although not much.' She shuddered. 'Makes my flesh crawl even thinking of him. Still, he's got what he deserves, with Amy "poor little me"-ing and clinging miserably to his arm.

'After Rose left, we had a hellish two weeks of Mrs Pewsey – her that used to work at Castle Howard – and then Mrs Draper. But her style of cooking was more suited to a boys' boarding school than Mrs Metcalfe and her guests – especially Mrs Metcalfe's mother – so she was given the boot. Now it's Mrs Bishop. She's all right, but not a patch on Rose for fancy baking. I think Mrs Metcalfe misses Rose. They got on well and the food was better, but there we are. Rose has gone and I'm sure she's much appreciated where she is now.'

At last Mary drew breath and Daisy felt weak with shock.

'So Terry really was in love with Amy Langdale all along? Can that really be true?'

'Don't be daft, Daisy. They probably hate each other. I hope they do. It will serve them right.' Mary laughed unkindly. 'Just 'cos a man *does that* with a woman, it doesn't mean he's in love with her – at least men like Ecclestone.'

Daisy realised she had behaved like a silly child, not the woman of the world she had thought herself to be, embarking on this adventure. All her imaginings about the welcome she would get here from Terry had been just stupid delusions, with no basis in reality at all.

‘Oh, Mary,’ she said, her voice trembling, ‘I’ve been daft. I’ve run away and now I can see I’ve come here for nowt. I even stole Rose’s savings to get me here. I thought I’d be given my old job back.’

‘No chance of that, love,’ said Mary. ‘Young Bridget is summat special. We were very lucky to find her – some friend of Mrs Metcalfe’s in Harrogate heard of her. She wants to be a cook herself and she hasn’t put a foot wrong in all the weeks she’s been here. Even old Ma Pewsey thought she was a cut above, while she despised the rest of us.’

‘I thought Terry would have seen I was the girl for him and he’d explain the motor-car accident wasn’t my fault and I should be allowed back.’

‘I think, Daisy,’ said Mary, carefully, as if explaining to a slow child, ‘that the motor-car accident is water under the bridge.’

Daisy nodded. She felt ridiculous: she thought she had been the centre of the world, and she wasn’t even a consideration.

‘Here.’ Mary offered Daisy her handkerchief. ‘Now, you can’t stay here, weeping over Terry and Cousin Amy. Can you go back to your employer, do you think? That would be best. Let’s just pretend you never came here, and we’ll all continue as we were. You might have some explaining to do when you get back, but I reckon you’re good at making up stories.’

‘Oh, but, Mary, it’s grim ...’

Daisy explained about her mother dying, and the rent Louisa had owed to her landlord.

‘Now Rose has been forced to take on the debt and we’re both working at Mr Lancaster’s house for next to nowt. We never even see most of our wages as they go straight back to Lancaster to pay off the rent – even the rent on Mum’s shop. There’s interest added every day and neither Rose nor I can see a time when we’ll ever be free of it. I can’t go back there, Mary. I might never leave.’

‘Heavens,’ muttered Mary. ‘I’m that sorry. Poor Rose. She’s got a special talent – she’s got her ambitions and her dreams – and she deserves her chances in life, not to be shut in a kind of debtors’ prison. This Lancaster fella sounds like a monster.’

‘He’s not violent or owt, but he wants to make sure of his money. He could just have let us off Mum’s rent – I can’t believe it’s that much to him as he’s so rich – but he works out the debt to the last penny week by week. Rose sees his ledger when she gets the balance of her pay, which is such a tiny amount, and she’s always a bit quiet and upset for a while afterwards.

It's ... it's hopeless, Mary. I've got away for now, but I wonder if he'll come after me, have me arrested and imprisoned for trying to escape the debt.'

'I don't reckon a fella who fancies himself as the big man – as this Lancaster surely does – is going to be too worried about *your* disappearance, Daisy. After all, Rose is still there. And now all the debt is hers.' Mary gave Daisy a long look, her eyebrows raised. 'It's just another example of a man taking advantage of a woman, setting personal gain above humanity. Makes my blood boil.' She swallowed and her face was set in a frown.

'I—'

'Shush a minute. I'm thinking, Daisy.'

After a few moments, Mary gave a huge sigh and said, 'Right, this is what I reckon you should do. Stay here until I've finished this evening. Just keep out of everyone's way and I'll tell Mr Anderson what I need to. Then I'll take you into Crossthwaite, to my mam and dad. They can put you up for a night or two. But you can't stay there indefinitely. You'll either have to go back to work for this Lancaster fella—'

'Never!'

'—or you'll have to find a job elsewhere. Now listen, Daisy, and let this be a lesson for you: you've chosen of your own free will to abandon Rose and leave the debt entirely to her to pay. You say you won't go back, and if that's really the case, then you must stand on your own two feet and try behaving like a responsible woman. You can't expect folk to go out of their way for you – they owe you nowt – and you certainly can't rely on men. You've chosen your road and you're on your own now.'

Daisy felt properly chastised. She also felt like the lowest kind of traitor, abandoning Rose; but it hadn't been Rose she had been thinking of when she'd fled Viper's End, and having escaped, she couldn't go back and let herself be ensnared again.

Rose missed Daisy more every day. At the same time, she felt angry that Daisy had absconded and left her with the debt entirely on her own shoulders. They had been, literally, sisters in adversity, and now Rose was carrying the burden alone. It just wasn't fair, and she would have had to be a saint to bear it without taking umbrage. She hardly slept, worrying about where Daisy might have got to, and she resented that her sister had imposed

that on her, too. Rose's days were spent barely coping with her work, with headaches that left her unable to think. She was exhausted, short-tempered and weepy.

Worse still, the skivvy that Patrick had managed to conjure up at a moment's notice was exactly the kind of girl one might expect to be idle and available: she wasn't at all willing or even possibly able. She also looked scruffy, with her hair in rat-tails and none too clean. Her name was Prudence.

Rose would have got on rather quicker without her hindrance, and within three days she had to ask Patrick if he would find someone else.

'I'm sorry, Patrick, but she really won't do,' she told him, while Prue went off to crash pans in the scullery, having been told they needed a second, proper wash. 'Nowt gets done right, or on time or with any initiative. And I'm not going to take on all Prue's work as well, just 'cos she's hopeless. And I'm not taking the blame for all the delays and mishaps either. This is no way to run a kitchen. It's no way to run a life, truth be told. Next to no pay, Daisy disappeared without trace, and now being burdened with this hopeless girl.' She put her face in her hands. 'I can't bear it, I really can't.'

'Twas an emergency to fill the role,' said Patrick meekly, 'but I have to say, that soft lass is getting on my nerves, too. I thought to give her a chance as we were desperate, but quite honestly, Rose, she's a half-wit. I wish I'd spotted the signs. Now, this is all getting too much for you so, if I may suggest, Mr Gerald is hovering in the corridor with some books, and I know it's you they're for, so why don't you go and sit outside with him and get some fresh air for ten minutes while Mr Lancaster is safely away at his office in Blackburn? I'll start thinking where I can find another skivvy.'

Rose nodded and hurried out, and there was Gerald, holding a little pile of books.

'I said I'd find you something to read and then we got side-tracked with Daisy disappearing and the trouble your unc— Alec Gimson has caused, and my father's general bad mood. Any news about Daisy today? I can see you look a little harassed. Well, actually, Rose, you look at your wits' end.'

'I feel it. I've heard nowt of Daisy, but if she's with friends they will persuade her to write and let me know. Oh, but what if she's wandering by herself somewhere, or has fallen into the hands of someone who has taken advantage of her?'

‘It’s a pity she wasn’t with your aunt at the farm.’

‘I knew Aunt Clara would tell me straight away. But that Daisy isn’t there is the only thing we do know. I’m that worried, I can hardly think what I’m doing half the time.’

‘I am so sorry.’ Gerald tucked a lank curl behind her ear. ‘You look exhausted. I don’t know if you’ll be up to reading anything, but I did promise you some books.’ He handed over the novels, which were bound in thick, darkly coloured boards with scrolly gold lettering.

Rose looked at the top one, which was green: *David Copperfield*.

‘It’s one of my favourites,’ said Gerald. ‘I hope, if you haven’t already read it, that you find you like it too. It might distract you from your worries.’

Rose was absurdly touched that he should have chosen so carefully. She felt tears spring to her eyes. She seemed to have done more crying since Daisy disappeared than she had done in the whole of her life up until then.

‘Thank you,’ she said, sniffing. ‘You are so kind.’

‘And you are so lovely,’ said Gerald, smiling, keeping his tone light. ‘Leave the books here on the step and we can have a walk in the garden. You’ll feel better for some sunshine and fresh air.’

They went up to the main hall and then out through some double doors from a rather old-fashioned room at the back, which Rose had never seen before.

‘Father is still in a temper with me over the Gimson business and has forbidden me to go to the office just now. He says I annoy him.’

‘Does that mean you’re on holiday?’ Rose asked. ‘It doesn’t sound like a punishment.’

‘Ha, if only that were true. He’s brought me a huge list of figures to double check, and interest to calculate and charge where it’s due. He took great pleasure in heaping the ledgers onto my studio floor so I can hardly get round the place. I suppose that was the whole point.’

‘But shouldn’t you be doing that now?’

‘Yes, but I’d rather be making sure you are all right, Rose. You do need a rest and some fresh air. Where on earth would we be if you got too ill to cook and we had to resort to Patrick again? Laid low with dyspepsia within a day, I think.’

‘Or, if not Patrick, then Prudence, the kitchen maid. Oh, I’m sorry, Gerald, but she’s got to go. She is the worst kitchen maid I have ever come

across. Patrick says he'll look for someone else.'

'Heavens, how did we manage to end up with "the worst ever"? Perhaps she came with a warning and we forgot to check.'

Rose couldn't help laughing. 'She probably did.'

Gerald joined in her laughter and they linked arms in a perfectly natural, affectionate way as they strolled among the flowerbeds.

After a few minutes, Rose felt she could face going back to the kitchen.

'As you're here *working on the accounts*,' Rose said, 'tell me what you would like for your lunch.'

'I think I should like to sit out here and eat a picnic. I should like it even more if you were to join me. Patrick wouldn't mind – rather the opposite, I think. I suspect Patrick is a closet subversive.'

'A what?'

'He secretly likes to undermine authority. Although he's worked here for years, I think only now is he gradually breaking his chains, twitching his lead, or something.'

'Those are not very nice images, Gerald. You should rather say Patrick is looking to assert his will. He's a human being – why shouldn't he?'

'Why indeed? Perhaps I ought to be following Patrick's example and asserting my will, too.'

The picnic was laid out on a rug on the grass. Gerald lay back, with his arms folded behind his head, the picture of indolence. It crossed Rose's mind that Gerald was, in fact, quite lazy, but perhaps it was the ledgers that he avoided working on. He was certainly keen on pursuing his painting. It was, in fairness, difficult to do something you disliked doing, especially if there seemed no end to it. Daisy was evidence of that.

That got Rose thinking about the tearoom. Now Daisy had stolen what little Rose had managed to save, the dream was less likely than ever to come about. She felt a bone-deep disappointment, yet she could not entirely blame Daisy. She had seen her chance of escape and had taken it. That had taken courage; recklessness, too, but that was Daisy all over – act now, worry about the consequences later.

If only, Rose thought, she was brave enough to do the same, instead of trying to be sensible about everything. If only she could just gather her courage and leave, never mind the debt. Now, however, with only one and

sixpence between herself and destitution, she had no chance of getting away from here ...

‘You look very pensive, Rose. You must be thinking about Daisy.’

‘Yes, you’re right, Gerald. You know what? I think, if she is safe, she has done the right thing. She had the courage to go. I am glad for her, provided she hasn’t come to any harm.’

Gerald didn’t reply immediately. Then: ‘The courage to go,’ he murmured. ‘There’s a lesson for us all. Perhaps I should follow Daisy’s example as well as Patrick’s. As you said yourself, we are all prisoners of a kind.’

‘Do you think you could go?’ asked Rose.

For a few moments he didn’t reply.

Then: ‘I could if you came with me.’

‘What?’ Suddenly her whole life could take a new turn, unless she had misheard. ‘Did you mean that?’ she asked carefully. There could be no light and amusing conversation now. Whatever was said had to be completely sincere.

‘Yes. Yes, Rose. I want to leave. I want you to leave with me. I love you and I want us to be together, to be married.’

Rose gave a little gasp of surprise.

‘Oh ...’ Her hand flew to her mouth. ‘I daren’t even think ... I’m just a cook and you – you’re the heir to your father’s fortune.’

‘That is where we came from, Rose. I prefer to think of where we are going – and that we should be going there together. If we don’t do something about being prisoners here, we always will be. I can help you get away; I can get away myself. Please, be my wife and let’s escape together.’

This sudden golden lightning bolt of hope on a day when everything had seemed overwhelming – it was so unexpected that it hardly seemed real to Rose. She got up from where she was sitting on the picnic rug, and walked along a way on the grass, chewing her thumbnail, weighing up caution and certainty against freedom and who knew what else.

‘Yes, Gerald. Yes. I will marry you. I love you, too. I can hardly believe it – it was not what I was looking to do – but I am sure I really do love you.’

‘Darling girl, we will be so happy. We have fallen in love so quickly, but why not? What is the rule? There is none.’

‘But one thing we must do, Gerald, is to tell your father. Please, let’s not sneak away like thieves.’ Suddenly she had an awful thought. ‘Oh, but what

about the money I owe? I'm paying off the debt by working here. I will still have it to pay.'

'Who says you have to work here? Work elsewhere. Better still, let me pay off the debt. What's mine is yours, if we're married,' Gerald laughed. 'I feel as if I'm in a swashbuckling adventure story, and *with one bound* I am free. I couldn't see the way out of the tangle before, but today it all became simple and clear. It was the picnic: the magical properties of that asparagus salad, I swear. You are enchanting and I have been enchanted by your beauty, your grace, your ... your picnic.' He threw his head back and laughed loudly.

'Now, Gerald, please don't start talking daft.'

'Not *daft* at all, my love. You have liberated me from my inertia and made me a better, a more courageous person. What am I doing here, putting up with my father and his bullying? Now I have met you, I see what I must do with my life.'

'Gerald, will you please be quiet? I am being serious.'

'And so am I. Dear Rose, I have some money of my own. When I turned twenty-five, last month, I received a letter from a solicitor employed by my mother. My mother had a little money of her own and left it to me in trust until I reached that birthday, so now I have it. My father knows nothing of this, and nor did I until I received the letter. I can pay off your debt and you will be free.'

'But why, if you are independent, haven't you escaped your desk at Lancaster Properties before now? Why endure what you don't have to, even for a few weeks?'

'Because ... because the trust fund is not enough to set me up as an artist with a studio such as I have here. Because I have always had Patrick and Dermot to run my life for me and I would be hopeless without them. Because ... I had no one to escape with and I was too scared to go alone. I take my hat off to your sister, who has a lot more courage than I do. But with you by my side, Rose, I want to take the chance.'

'Gerald, I hardly know what to say. You'd do that for me?'

'With you, my darling. I will do that *with* you. First of all, let me see exactly how much your debt is, down to the last penny. Then I'll write a cheque to Lancaster Properties and you need never worry about the back rent again.'

Rose put her hands to her face. The sense of relief was overwhelming. She felt as if the cage door had opened and, with Gerald taking her hand, all she had to do was fly away.

But where would they go? They had no home. And always, always that worrying question weighed upon her mind: where was Daisy?

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘HAVE YOU TOLD your father about us yet?’ Rose asked Gerald gently the following morning, when she went upstairs on the pretext of asking what he would like to eat later.

‘No, I’m afraid I didn’t have a chance,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, Rose. He was in a foul mood last night and it seemed rash to poke the already irate bear, so to speak. But I will, don’t worry. I’ve already written a cheque that will pay off every penny your mother owed, my love. At least Father will be pleased to have the money, although I sometimes wonder if he doesn’t prefer to have control over people in his debt to actually taking their money.’

Rose suspected the same, but thought it wise not to voice her opinion.

‘Thank you, Gerald,’ she said instead. ‘I am more grateful than I can say.’

‘No need to be grateful. What is mine will be yours when we are married. Now, what news? Have you heard from Daisy yet? Is that useless skivvy still here or has Patrick found a better one?’

‘No, no news of Daisy. And Prudence is still here, but I think not for much longer. Patrick is determined to find someone to take her place.’

Gerald took Rose’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Everything will change very soon, Rose, I promise. Your debt will be paid, we will be married. I am hoping Father will welcome you as my wife and we will start our lives together here, at Viper’s End, but ... well, we’ll see.’

Rose didn’t feel too optimistic that James Lancaster would happily accept the money from Gerald and then rush to embrace his cook as his ideal daughter-in-law, especially if he was hoping that Gerald would marry Miss Pennington, but it was encouraging that Gerald – who, after all, knew his father so much better than she did – even thought this might be a possibility.

When Rose went back to the kitchen, Patrick was unusually cheerful. ‘’Tis a letter from young Daisy, I reckon,’ he said, grinning and putting an envelope into Rose’s hands. ‘Just arrived.’

Rose took it, feeling as if a boulder had lifted from her shoulders, but then she saw that the handwriting was not Daisy’s but that of someone

unknown to her, and immediately she felt downcast again.

‘No, I think not, Patrick, but mebbe this is news of her.’

Quickly, she slit the letter open with the handle of a teaspoon and unfolded the single sheet of lined paper it contained.

*Railway Cottage
Crossthwaite
15 July 1913*

Dear Rose,

Harold and I have had Daisy staying with us for a couple of nights. I know you will be worried about her. She didn't want us to let you know where she is and she swore Harold to secrecy, but I managed to evade the promise. I reckon Daisy is feeling ashamed of herself as her plans have hit the buffers.

She turned up at Elizabeth House, asking for Terry. She didn't know he'd been dismissed weeks ago. He got that cousin of Mrs Metcalfe's in the family way, and Mrs Metcalfe threw them both out. Mary doesn't know where they've gone.

Daisy explained to us a little of her life at Viper's End and, having got away, she is determined not to go back. I can't blame her, although she mentioned a time or two how bad she feels about leaving you with the debt that holds you there.

Harold knows a man whose family has a luggage-making business in Leeds, and Daisy has gone for a job there. One of the other girls working at the factory has a room she can share nearby, but I've told Daisy to come back here if she needs us.

I'm right sorry things have been bad for you, what with the death of your mam, and then this business with the debt and now the worry over Daisy. If Harold and I can help in any way, please let me know.

Mary says Mrs Metcalfe doesn't think her new cook, Mrs Bishop, is a patch on you for baking.

*With fondest wishes,
Esme Lawson*

‘You've found her?’ asked Patrick, looking at Rose's face.

‘Kind of. She’s safe, Patrick, that’s the main thing.’ Rose couldn’t stop smiling. ‘Oh, but this is such a relief ... such a huge relief, Patrick. She has a job and a place to live.’

She told him what Mrs Lawson had written.

‘Sounds like she had a lucky escape from this Terry character,’ said Patrick.

‘Yes. I tried to warn her, but ... you know.’

Patrick nodded. ‘Well, she’s not the first to misstep in romance, and she won’t be the last,’ he said sagely.

‘I must tell Gerald. He was asking about her only just now. He will be so pleased she is safe.’

The luggage factory was a family business at Armley on the west side of Leeds. The smell in the factory was a very strong and heady mixture of leather, glue, paper and fabric. The noise of sewing machines and hammering added to the busy air of industry. Daisy was being supervised while learning to glue the thick paper linings neatly into the cheaper range of suitcases. By the end of the day, she felt quite light-headed with the strong smell. The glue seemed to embed its scent in the back of her throat so that it felt dry and raspy by the time she left.

Maggie, the young woman with whom Daisy shared a rented room, worked on fabric linings, which were used for the more expensive cases, and she could run up the seams on a treadle sewing machine seemingly without needing to think about it.

‘Don’t worry, Daisy, you’ll soon get the hang of it,’ she said. ‘Gluing is messy and smelly, but everyone starts there. Soon as you can, try to get moved to fabric linings or even fastenings.’

Maggie was very friendly. She was aged eighteen and a hard worker, but happy to take the much slower Daisy under her wing.

In Maggie, Daisy felt she had found a friend. The room they shared was a short walk from the factory, in a boarding house of rooms that took only female tenants. It certainly wasn’t smart, spacious or particularly comfortable, but it was their own little home and the girls kept it very neat. Even after three days, Daisy felt she was settled there.

The factory was closed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. The first Saturday, Maggie suggested a stroll around the arcades of Leeds to window-shop.

‘Never mind that there’s lots to buy and nowt we can afford,’ she said. ‘It’s good to see summat to aim for ... for when we’ve married into fortunes.’ She laughed. ‘Everyone can dream.’

For a moment, Daisy thought of Rose and her dreams of her own little tearoom business. She would never achieve that now, stuck at Viper’s End with the debt, and her meagre savings at this very moment hidden safely in the inner pocket of Daisy’s handbag. A wave of misery washed over Daisy. Rose deserved better from her sister – better in life – but Daisy’s need to get away had been urgent ... overwhelming.

‘What’s matter?’ asked Maggie. ‘You look proper cast down.’

‘No, I’m all right,’ said Daisy, shrugging off her guilty feelings. No point, having done the deed, regretting it, unless she was going to put matters right. She forced a smile, pulled back her shoulders and smoothed the cuffs of the favourite little jacket Louisa had made for her.

Daisy and Maggie set out walking the mile or so in their stout shoes, which were also their only shoes. Then began an afternoon of peering into shop windows, gazing at the latest fashions and imagining being able to buy those gorgeous dresses, those elaborate hats, those pretty shoes. The little shops within Thornton’s Arcade were like something out of a magazine to Daisy. She turned to look up and watch the Ivanhoe Clock at the far end, which was just chiming the quarter hour, the little figures moving, each to play his part. And then her eyes fell on a familiar figure coming towards her and she felt herself recoil with revulsion.

It was Terry Ecclestone. He was alone, walking slowly along, looking in the shop windows. Any moment now he would lift his head and see her just yards in front of him.

‘Maggie, please can we just look over there?’ said Daisy, indicating the other side of the row, and she steered her friend over to a shop across from where they were (she didn’t even know what it sold), turned her back towards Terry and pulled up her jacket collar.

For a moment Maggie looked at Daisy as if she thought she was being odd, but Maggie was quick to catch on.

‘What is it?’ she murmured. ‘Someone you’re avoiding?’

Daisy was relieved not to have to explain too much.

‘A horrible fella I once worked with. I’d just rather avoid—’

‘Then let’s go inside,’ suggested Maggie, and opened the shop door, which announced them with a loud peal of the bell.

It was a chocolate shop, and the girls were immediately enveloped in the mouth-watering aroma of dark chocolate. Unfortunately, the shop was very small, and there was little looking round they could do before either having to buy something or leave.

‘How may I help you?’ asked the assistant from behind a glass-fronted counter, dainty rows of elaborately decorated chocolates displayed before her.

‘We’re just looking,’ said Maggie, ‘thank you.’

The chocolates were very expensive, at least to her and Daisy.

‘For anything in particular?’ asked the assistant.

‘No, just looking,’ confirmed Daisy.

‘Because if you’re not buying, can I suggest you leave,’ said the assistant, her tone and her face changing to confrontational in a moment. ‘I’m fed up of you factory girls coming in and helping yourselves. This is a shop, not easy pickings for the light-fingered. I’ll have you know there’s a constable patrols up and down Briggate and I can have him here in no time.’

Daisy and Maggie looked at each other in consternation. It had never crossed their minds to steal the chocolates, only to escape attention in the arcade, and now it looked as if they would be drawing attention instead, by being asked to leave in a very forthright fashion.

Daisy thought of the money she had stolen from Rose. Some of it had gone on securing her share of the boarding-house room and her food in advance of her pay, but she did have a few shillings left. If it became imperative to fend off unjust suspicions while avoiding Terry Ecclestone in the arcade, at least she could buy a quarter of chocolates. But she took exception to being singled out as a ‘factory girl’ and as a potential thief, and she would rather not put her – Rose’s – money in this rude woman’s pocket.

‘I am surprised you put off customers by name-calling and accusations,’ she said. ‘I had thought to look round and decide, then buy, but if my money isn’t good enough for you, there are other shops where I can spend it.’

That shut the woman up for a few seconds. Meanwhile, Daisy backed towards the window and peered down the arcade to see if Terry was still in sight. She couldn’t see him at all. It looked as if the coast was clear.

‘So have you decided what you’d like?’ the woman came back.

‘Nowt from you,’ said Daisy bluntly. ‘And, as I said, I’d rather buy elsewhere. Good day to you.’

She left, followed by Maggie, looking nonplussed, and pulled the door to behind them none too gently.

‘What was all that about?’ asked Maggie, taking Daisy’s arm and steering her down the arcade.

‘Treating us like thieves instead of likely customers. Makes my blood boil. Just ’cos we’re not rich people, it doesn’t mean we’re dishonest.’

‘But we did only go in to avoid whoever it was you saw,’ said Maggie reasonably. ‘And I take it this fella has now gone?’

‘Yes. Sorry about all that, Maggie. Thanks for being so quick on the uptake when I needed to make myself scarce. It was just a fella who used to work at the same house when I was in service. I thought he was a right good ’un for a bit, but I was stupid. Now I’ve learned what he’s really like – my eyes are opened to his true character – and I didn’t want to stand there trying to be polite when he makes my flesh crawl.’

‘Well, you certainly didn’t bother to waste good manners on that chocolate shop madam,’ laughed Maggie.

Within a few minutes, Daisy and Maggie had decided they’d had enough window-shopping for one afternoon. The encounter in the chocolate shop had left them both feeling inadequate, as if they really did appear to be figures of suspicion who had no honest business around the smart little arcade shops and would not be welcome inside anywhere.

They set off back, but hadn’t gone far when Maggie gave a gasp of dismay.

‘Bother, I said I’d get some cough medicine for Mrs Enderby. She gave me the money and I completely forgot. I’ll have to go back to that chemist off Briggate.’

Mrs Enderby was their landlady, and both girls had heard her coughing loudly, sufficient to put them off their breakfasts.

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No, you go on, Daisy, and get a pot of tea brewing. I’ll be back by the time it’s ready to pour.’

They parted, Maggie back the way they had come and Daisy onwards to their digs.

She had just got to the doorstep, and was feeling around in her bag for her key, when a familiar voice very close to her ear said, ‘Thought it was you, Daise. Saw you in Thornton’s Arcade. I said to myself, I’d know that pretty ankle anywhere.’

Daisy literally jumped in surprise and her stomach did a nervous swoop of alarm.

‘Terry! Have you been following me?’

‘Well, I happen to live not so far from here these days. What luck, eh? P’raps we can meet up; have a bit of fun together. A night on the town. Could do with a bonny face to look at, and some amusing company.’

Daisy’s heart plummeted. Oh, no, what were the chances of bumping into the wretched man every time she left the house if he really did live close by? Pretty high, if he was the kind to follow a girl home to find out where she lived. What a rat he was, just as Mary had said.

‘What about Amy Langdale?’ snapped Daisy, taking a step away from Terry, who was crowding her. ‘Or is she now Amy Ecclestone?’

‘You seem to be in the know,’ said Terry. ‘Been asking about me, have you?’ He looked pleased at the thought. ‘But what a ball and chain Amy’s turned out to be,’ he went on, neither confirming nor denying that he and Amy were married. ‘Bleating and whingeing about her health. She’s useless at keeping house and seems to think I can do everything, just ’cos I was Mr Metcalfe’s man. Got a job in a newsagent’s shop, haven’t I, and her sitting around all day doing nowt at all, like Lady Muck.’

‘Yes, I heard you got the sack,’ said Daisy artlessly, relieved that her hand had closed around her key in the bottom of her handbag at last, even as Terry’s hand started to stroke her upper arm. ‘I expect she’s feeling poorly because she’s expecting a baby. When is it due?’

‘Autumn, but I don’t know if I won’t have left her by then. It’s all I can do to be in the same room as the silly b—’

‘Well, just keep your filthy hands to yourself. And it’s no use you *bleating and whingeing* to me about Amy, is it?’ snapped Daisy. ‘She’s nowt to do with me, and neither are you.’

She pushed her key into the lock, opened the door, stepped swiftly inside and closed it firmly in his face.

Good riddance.

Hurriedly she took off her jacket and threw it on the floor, as if it was contaminated by his wandering hand. She’d have to wash it; she could not bear to wear it again until it was clean of his touch. How could she ever have sought out his company, flirted and joked with him? Rose had warned her and she’d taken no notice. What an idiot she had been.

Later, when Maggie was back and settling down to read a magazine in the evening light of summer through the window, she said, 'Summat strange, Daisy. There's this fella across the road, just standing looking this way. I saw him there earlier when I came back and thought nowt of it. It's not the one you were avoiding in the arcade this afternoon, is it?'

Daisy came over, getting down low to peer above the windowsill while trying to avoid being seen. But she knew, even before she caught sight of him, who it was.

'Bloomin' well is. Creeping about, spying on me.'

'So he's an old beau of yours and you fell out?' asked Maggie.

'No,' said Daisy. 'Not even that. He's nowt to me and, I know now, he never was.'

After a week in which Terry had spent a lot of his evenings loitering in the street outside Mrs Enderby's house, and was even, horrifyingly, hanging around outside the luggage factory when she left work one day, so that she and Maggie had to leave by another door and take a different route home, Daisy decided she needed to move her digs. It wasn't fair on Maggie, who was here first, to have that man turning up whenever he felt like it, watching them in a sinister way. He didn't do anything except be there, but it felt threatening.

She wondered whether to tell Mrs Enderby that there was a man making a nuisance of himself, but she didn't want to worry the old lady, and nor did she want in any way to be blamed for Terry's unnerving and obnoxious behaviour. She had done everything to avoid him and nothing at all to encourage him since she'd left Elizabeth House. She even wondered whether to go to the police and complain, but she thought that they would adopt a similar tone to the woman in the chocolate shop, and look down on a 'factory girl', whereas Terry had had a very respectable job in service for several years, and now had a pregnant wife to care for. Daisy could just imagine the play-acting when the police caught up with him at home.

Reluctantly she found a new job at Hepworth's Providence Works, sewing pocket linings for men's suits and overcoats. It was a vast factory compared with the luggage makers, with many female workers and a good feeling of camaraderie, but the hours were long and at first she found it exhausting to keep up with the more experienced machinists.

Her new rented room was tiny, one of many in a rundown house. It was cheap but also damp, even now, in summer. She found evidence of a past rodent infestation behind her wardrobe, and she wasn't looking forward to autumn, when the creatures might well attempt to move inside again.

But the worst thing was what Terry Ecclestone had done to her peace of mind. Whenever she left the house, or walked to or from her work at the factory, Daisy was constantly looking over her shoulder, hoping she wasn't being followed. This, she realised, was the price she was paying for flirting with a bully and a coward: a man who preyed on women. Unknowingly, innocently, she had allowed her head to be turned, albeit for a short while, by exactly the same sort of man that Alec Gimson was.

Rose placed the lids on the vegetable dishes. The food this evening was Mr Lancaster's favourite. It was all Rose could think to do to make sure he was in an amenable mood so that Gerald might feel able to broach the subject of his intention to marry her. Patrick carefully picked up the tray and set off at his funereal pace for the dining room.

Prudence was still working in the kitchen – that is, she was still present, although there was little evidence of much work done. Today, she was making a fuss about her foot, which she said was swollen in the heat.

'It's never very hot down here, Prue,' said Rose. 'And you're far too young to suffer from swollen feet.'

'But, missis, my foot really hurts so's I can hardly stand on it. I'll be lame by tomorrow, I reckon. I need to lie down.'

'Show me.'

Prue stood on one leg and raised the other in front of her, her black stocking wrinkled around her skinny ankle. It looked a perfectly normal size to Rose.

'Oh, just get on with siding away these pans. Then, when you've washed them, you can sit down and eat your dinner with your foot up.'

Prue didn't look happy about this and crashed the pans about in protest all the way to the scullery, but Rose had learned to harden her heart. Tomorrow Prue would have found something else to complain about and use as an excuse to avoid her work.

If only Patrick would hurry up and find someone better. If only Daisy were here ...

Just then there was the click of the sneck on the back door. That was a surprise, as the bolt was usually drawn across by this time. Rose looked up in a rush of hope that it was, in fact, Daisy returning; that she had conjured up Daisy just by the power of wishful thinking.

But the figure letting himself into the kitchen was Alec Gimson.

‘You!’ She could hardly believe her eyes. She had been afraid when Gerald had told her that Gimson was on the run, but now she knew Daisy was safe from him, Rose had put him out of her mind.

‘Hello, Rose. I haven’t seen you in a long while.’

He looked scruffy and unshaven, as if he’d slept under a hedge, which Rose thought he might have done since evading arrest.

So many other thoughts about him crowded into her mind, so that she felt a great wave of fury swamping her. She thought of how he had preyed on her mother and had taken her savings and then her livelihood, so Louisa had died with almost nothing. She thought of how he had lied about the money he’d extracted from Louisa, how he had thrown her and Daisy out of his house when she’d asked to be repaid what he owed her, and how he had falsely raised her rent for his own gain, so that in the end she had been ruined. Rose remembered that he had got Daisy sacked from her job with Mr Tisbury. She remembered too that he had pimped and exploited some female mill workers, and, according to Gerald, run a gambling den at his house, undoubtedly financed in part by Louisa’s savings.

Above all, she remembered what Louisa had told her on her deathbed: that Alec had forced himself on a friend of Louisa’s and then used the ensuing tragedy at the hands of the backstreet quack as a way of controlling and manipulating Louisa, never allowing her conscience to come to terms with the mistake she’d made in all good faith, placing the death of young Jess at Louisa’s door, when it was his own action that had led to the young girl’s death. Louisa’s secret was now Rose’s, and she had vowed never to acknowledge it to anyone. But she knew, and she knew the worst of Alec Gimson.

She felt her flesh crawl with revulsion that this apology for a human being should be here.

‘Get out.’

‘Well, that’s a fine welcome for your uncle, down on his luck.’

‘You are no uncle of mine. You are nowt to me. Get out now, or ...’ She cast around for something to threaten him with, to show she meant what she

said and bring the encounter to a swift end. 'Or I'll beat you and then kick you out myself.' She grabbed the poker from beside the range.

'Ah, c'mon, girl. Take pity on your old uncle.' He spread his arms as if to show her he was harmless. 'I'm hoping you'll be able to find me summat for my dinner, that's all. Had a bit of bad luck, I have, and I've been moving around—'

'I said, get out. Bad luck? It was bad luck for Mum the day you turned up to steal her money, that's for sure.'

She stepped towards him and took a swipe at him with the poker, but he stepped back nimbly so the big kitchen table was now between her and him.

'I don't know what you've heard, Rose, but it sounds to me as if someone's being telling fibs about me. I tried to help Louisa – my own little sister – but I could see the business was failing. She just couldn't keep it afloat any longer.'

'Shut up! That's all lies.'

'It isn't. It isn't, girl. I went out of my way to help her. Gave her some of my savings one day – did she tell you that? Went to her shop and put it in her hands. Never asked to be repaid either.'

'More lies! Prudence! Prue!'

'Ah, I reckon that daft girl has taken herself off out of hearing.'

So he knew about Prue, and it sounded as if he had bribed her to make herself scarce, and maybe to make sure the bolt was not across the door either. Perhaps he had been hanging around at Viper's End for a while. That was an uncomfortable thought.

But when would Patrick come back down? He seemed to be a long time serving the Lancasters' dinner. Surely Patrick hadn't been bribed, too.

'Now, put that poker down and let's be civilised, Rose. You always were the one in the family with a bit of class. It's not like you to be screaming and flinging about, I reckon. So how about you leave the poker over there and we'll sit around this table and eat our tea like proper family.'

'Proper family!' Rose took another step towards him and raised the poker again. 'How dare you mention family, after the way you treated my mother, your own little sister? How dare you!'

As he stepped away again, she swung the poker down and hit him hard on his arm as he raised it to protect his face.

'Aah! For God's sake, you witch. You'll have me brained.'

‘Vile man. Worse than a feral dog. That’s what you are. Get out, get out, get out.’ Rose chased him round the table, raining blows with the poker on his back.

Then he saw her long, broad-bladed kitchen knife on the table, among a few things Prue had overlooked taking to wash, grabbed it by the handle and dodged the next blow of the poker.

He turned towards her, yelling, ‘Right, time to control you, you w—’

‘Patrick! Patrick!’ yelled Rose, but the elderly footman must still be upstairs serving the dinner. The walls of Viper’s End were very thick, like those of an ancient castle, and it was impossible to hear anyone in another part of the house. Still, she tried. ‘Patrick!’

All the time, Rose was now retreating back around the table. She knew just how sharp that knife was, and she didn’t take her eyes from it for a moment.

‘Thought I’d come for my tea, but mebbe I’ve come to be rid of the first of Louisa’s bints,’ Gimson said. ‘She’s dead, although no one bothered to tell me – I only heard later. Well, now the world will be rid of you too. I’ll wipe out the lot of you.’

‘You’re mad,’ gasped Rose, moving further away, trying to keep two sides of the table between him and herself. ‘You’re made of nowt but hatred and evil.’

‘Stop right there, Gimson,’ said Gerald, bursting into the kitchen from the back corridor. ‘Rose, move over there out of harm’s way. Let’s get a good sight of the blackguard.’

Rose did as he said. Never in her life had she been so pleased to see anyone. And Gerald sounded so fierce. It was quite a revelation, even to the woman who loved him, truth be told. He carried a shotgun, which he raised to his shoulder. His father came in just behind him, but unarmed.

‘Now, Gimson, put the knife down slowly,’ Gerald went on. ‘Put it on the table. That’s right. Now, go and stand in that corner with your hands raised where I can see them.’

But Gimson was a desperate man and he was not going to wait around quietly to be outnumbered and arrested. He made a rush for the back door, where he ran straight into Dermot, knocking him over, then scrambling past him. Then there was the sound of a struggle with someone else outside and a loud cry from one of the men.

Gerald, too, ran out of the door, stepping over Dermot, raised the gun, steadied his aim and fired.

‘Did you wing him?’ asked his father keenly, following close behind.

‘I think not. He’s got away. I saw him making off down the drive.’

‘Typical. We’d have had him if you showed the slightest skill with that gun. Right, Patrick, come on, get yourself up, and let’s be after that blighter in the car.’

Patrick was sprawled on the gravel, holding a hand to one eye.

Rose, now safe but trembling with shock, came out of the kitchen and helped the old man to his feet, while Gerald helped up Dermot.

‘Mr Lancaster, Patrick is hurt,’ she said.

Lancaster looked at him and shrugged. ‘Just a black eye. Nothing fatal. Let’s get a move on before Gimson goes to ground.’

‘No, sir. We need to see that Patrick is all right,’ insisted Rose. ‘He’s not a young man and may be badly hurt.’

Lancaster turned to her with an arrogant and angry look. ‘When I want the advice of my cook, I’ll ask for it. Kindly confine your remarks to the subject of food, of which you have a passing knowledge, and don’t interfere with what you know nothing about.’

Rose gasped at the rudeness and lack of sympathy. Only two minutes before she had been chased around the kitchen by a madman armed with a knife. Now she was being put rather too firmly in her place, while Lancaster’s manservant of many, many years had suffered an injury to his face.

Gerald, ineffectively brushing down the sleeve of Dermot’s jacket, turned to his father with a look of fury.

‘Father, you are mistaken. Rose is not to be spoken to in that way. Rose, Patrick, Dermot – none of them is beneath your common courtesy or consideration, and nor am I. In fact,’ he took a deep breath, ‘you had better start treating Rose with kindness, because she is the woman I am going to marry.’

For a moment James Lancaster stared at his son with his mouth open. Then his features were transformed into a mask of absolute fury.

‘Never!’ he shouted.

He cast around, taking in Gerald and Rose, and even Patrick and Dermot, who had so bravely played their parts in trying to prevent Gimson’s escape

and were now quite unjustly caught up in the vitriol emanating from their employer.

‘By God,’ Lancaster yelled, ‘you have all gone completely mad!’

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CHAPTER TWENTY

‘**S**O ALL THIS was going on behind my back while I was away on my holidays in Scotland?’ asked Lancaster. ‘Thought the coast was clear, did you, Gerald, and were sneaking about below stairs? No wonder your mind wasn’t on the job at Lancaster Properties. It’s hardly a surprise you made a complete mess of everything at the office, just as you did when that lunatic turned up here earlier. And what about Miss Pennington? She must be waiting for you to propose any day, and your reputation will be worthless when it gets around that you’ve led her on, then let her down. And to marry the cook. You could not insult her more if you tried.’

Gerald and Rose were in Lancaster’s study, to where they had been sternly summoned, like miscreants, to explain their intention to marry, while Patrick and Dermot patched up each other’s bruises downstairs before Dermot went to the police. There was no sign of Prudence. It seemed that she had disappeared with whatever bribe Rose suspected Gimson had paid her. She’d taken her few belongings, so it was certain she wouldn’t be making an appearance at Viper’s End again, for which everyone was thankful.

Lancaster had intended to have Rose and Gerald standing before him like prisoners in the dock while he sat glowering behind his desk, but Gerald, who knew his father’s bullying tactics well, had quickly moved two straight-back chairs close together in front of the desk and then asked Rose politely if she’d care to take a seat. Then he had sat down beside her and taken her hand in a gesture of reassurance to her, and a show of solidarity with her to his father.

It was as if he had taken strength from his confrontation with Gimson, and Rose thought she loved him more for this simple act of courtesy.

‘That is very unfair, Father,’ said Gerald.

‘There was no sneaking, Mr Lancaster,’ said Rose, quietly.

‘It is not your place to answer me back, young woman.’

‘Well, *I* shall answer you back, Father,’ said Gerald. ‘There has been no sneaking, as Rose says. And I didn’t make a mess of things at the office. It

was you who employed Gimson and Seymour, and it was me who found out about their deception. All the police have to do is catch up with Gimson, which they will do soon. He hasn't gone far from Blackburn in the days he's been on the run, so it seems unlikely that he will disappear completely now. He won't be at large for long.'

'And what—'

'I'm just coming to Miss Pennington, Father, of whom it seems you know very little. Celia Pennington is an excellent woman and a good friend. I know, because the lady confided in me herself that she is engaged to someone else, and has only kept the engagement a secret because her sister is to marry later this month and she wanted the limelight to fall entirely on Penelope on her special day. Celia and I were never going to marry each other. We both know it and are perfectly content about it.'

'Well, you certainly seem to have all the answers, Gerald,' said Lancaster. 'But may I suggest you cast your mind back to the reason that Rose Farlowe is here in the first place? She owes Lancaster Properties a lot of back rent on a house and a shop, and the interest on that too. In fact, with that former skivvy, her sister, absconding, the debt is being paid off more slowly than ever. Do you honestly think that I'm going to say: "There, there, dear, let's forget about the debt"? Do you, Gerald?'

'No, Father. I know you better than that,' said Gerald, carefully, and was pleased to see his father's self-righteous expression slip for a moment. 'But that matter is easily overcome.'

'Oh, is it, indeed? And how do you intend to *easily overcome* it?'

There was a little pause, and Rose saw that Gerald looked only a little triumphant to be playing his trump card. She realised that this might lead to the severing of all relations with his father, but if so, that would be Lancaster's decision, not Gerald's choice. She clutched her hands together in her lap and hoped with all her heart that Lancaster would show his son the love and support he deserved. It seemed to her that James Lancaster's critical attitude towards Gerald had become a habit, a way of dismissing him that was extremely unfair but was perhaps easier and quicker than trying to understand the young man he had become.

Gerald swallowed nervously. 'By paying the debt myself,' he said quietly. He dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He unfolded it to reveal it was a cheque. 'Here, Father. I think you'll find this settles Rose's debt.'

Lancaster looked as if he couldn't believe his eyes. He picked up the cheque and examined it carefully, then turned it over as if expecting to find there some clue as to where it came from.

'Is this genuine?' he asked with a rather insulting show of incredulity.

'Oh, really, Father, do you think I would try to pay off Rose's debt with a forged cheque? Of course it's genuine. And before you ask, Mama left me a small inheritance, to be paid to me on my twenty-fifth birthday, which, as you know, has passed. I knew nothing of it until I had a letter from the solicitor with whom she arranged the inheritance. Now I am using some of it to free Rose from her debts. She no longer has to work here. We will be married as soon as we can be.'

'Just one moment,' said Lancaster. He stood up and went to get the ledger with which Rose was familiar from the shelf behind him. He opened it at the 'Farlowe' page and, with his index finger, made a show of following down the columns. 'This cheque is dated three days ago,' he said, 'and interest has accumulated since then, see?'

'How much?' asked Rose, narrowing her eyes. It had already occurred to her that there was a reason why some people were very rich, and perhaps these people were not known for their generosity of spirit. Personally, she would rather be poor than mean.

'Sixpence,' answered Lancaster. 'The debt has yet to be paid in full.'

'Here you are, then,' said Rose.

She had been prepared for just this moment, having seen what kind of a man Lancaster was, and guessing he would try to score a point over her and Gerald. From her skirt pocket she pulled out six pennies. She put them down on Lancaster's desk and very slowly pushed them towards him, one at a time, with one finger.

'Would you care to examine these coins and see that they are genuine, Mr Lancaster?' she asked artlessly.

'No, no, I'm sure they are,' he answered, his face betraying that even he realised he had gone too far.

'Oh, but I would rather you did, sir, just to be on the safe side.'

'No, I'm sure they are genuine, Miss Farlowe.'

'Oh, but, sir, I insist. It would be a rum do if, entirely by mistake, one was a forgery, and I found that I still owed you, with interest. Please, Mr Lancaster, examine the pennies.'

Lancaster made a rather humiliated and brief show of turning over the coins.

‘All genuine, Mr Lancaster? And my debt is paid?’

‘Yes, Miss Farlowe. Thank you.’

Lancaster took up a pen and signed off the debt. Then Rose signed too.

Rose glanced at Gerald and saw he was looking at her with pride. She came back round the desk to him and he took her hand and gave it a supportive squeeze. They hadn’t finished here yet, however. There was still their intended marriage to discuss.

Lancaster blotted the page and closed the book. Then he put it back carefully on the shelf and turned to face Gerald and Rose.

‘And now get out of my house,’ he said. ‘Go on, get out, and don’t ever come back.’

‘Father, please!’

‘You are a disappointment to me, Gerald, and you always have been. No good academically at school, no good at sports. I gave you a job in my office – handed to you because you are my son, despite your lack of talents – and you can’t even do that right—’

‘That is unfair. I always did the job well.’

‘—because your mind was always on wasting your time with your ridiculous painting; although, as far as I can see, you have no talent for that either. So you can keep out of the office too. I don’t want you at Lancaster Properties. And now you’re going to marry the cook. That says it all, really. Perhaps you are better suited to life below stairs. One thing is for certain, you’ll never come to any good now. With that woman by your side, you’ll be dragged down to penury and grubbing about for your rent. See how much time you have for messing about painting flowers then.’

‘Father—’

‘I have given you everything and now you throw it all back in my face for some ill-judged romance.’

‘Everything? You never gave me any encouragement. You never gave me any freedom. You never gave me any love, Father. Or at least not after Mama died. Well, now I’ve found all those with someone else: with Rose. And it’s like finding an oasis to drink from in a desert. I was parched of love and Rose has saved me.’

‘You speak like a lunatic: *deserts* and *oases*. When you take your head from the clouds and face the reality of your predicament ... well, all I can

say is, you needn't come running back to me.'

'Back to the cage? Back to being bullied and unhappy, and not allowed to find my own feet and be the person I want to be, but forced into the mould of your control? I love Viper's End, and you are my father, but if losing you and my home is the price of freedom and being able to marry Rose, then that is the price I will pay.'

'You'll live to regret it,' prophesied his father. 'My son – married to a servant. I never thought you could betray me and all I have worked for, and the memory of your mother. She was a Granby, let me remind you.'

'And you made your own money, just as I intend to do, and were very proud to marry so high. Mama always wanted me to be happy. She would have loved Rose as her daughter-in-law.'

'Please,' said Rose, who had covered her face with her hands while this argument was taking place, 'please, can you not argue any more? It is a waste of time because, Mr Lancaster, Viper's End is your home. You rule here and you will never back down. Gerald and I will leave tomorrow morning, if that is what you want. That will give us time to gather our things and make plans about where we are to go. I hope you would not deny us even that little time?' She looked at him enquiringly and he lowered his eyes.

'Tomorrow morning,' he agreed.

'Goodbye then,' said Gerald. Good manners meant he could not deny his father his hand, but Lancaster went to the window to gaze out over the garden, his back turned.

'Come, Rose,' said Gerald after a very long minute, and he took Rose's arm as if she were a queen he was honoured to escort. 'Let's go and get our things ready.'

'Have you eaten your dinner?' she asked, as they left the room. Trying for normal conversation was the best she could do to help Gerald cope with that awful encounter. She had seen tears in his eyes when his father refused to take his hand. She had not expected Lancaster to welcome the news of his son's engagement to his cook, but really, the man had been rude and arrogant beyond what she could have imagined. It was clear to her that he disliked anything that wasn't entirely under his control. 'I think your dinner was interrupted by Gimson. Let's go down and see if there's owt left that's fit to eat ...'

Rose and Gerald were very quiet when they boarded the first of their trains on their journey to Yorkshire. Their plan was to go to Crossthwaite to find out from Mrs Lawson what they could about Daisy's whereabouts.

Since the previous evening, despite the earlier frightening encounter with Alec Gimson, Rose's heart was singing and she wanted to leap around and shout, 'I'm free! I'm free!' She was overjoyed to be leaving Viper's End, when she thought she might have been stuck in James Lancaster's kitchen for ever, like a prisoner serving a life sentence, and she was confident that she would find a new job very quickly. But she was sensitive to Gerald's misery at leaving his much-loved home, and the rift with his father, which looked as if it was likely to be permanent. She hated to see him so unhappy, but to try to jolly him out of his sadness just yet would be to treat it too lightly. Instead, she put aside her happiness at her new-found freedom and vowed to be as kind and considerate to Gerald as she could be.

It had been hard to say goodbye that morning to Patrick, sporting a bandage over the black eye that Gimson had given him. 'You're the best cook we've ever had at Viper's End, Rose, and now you're off,' he said lugubriously. 'I'll be alone here – well, with Dermot, but he's no company – and back to cooking for himself upstairs until I find more staff, with only beggars in debt to choose from. Still, I'm glad you've escaped. I doubt we'll meet again.' He took her hand and looked genuinely sorry to see her go.

The previous evening, Rose, Gerald and Patrick had been eating their late and reheated dinner when a police officer had arrived. It was the policeman to whom Gerald had spoken on the day Gimson had fled from the Lancaster Properties office. He noted down their accounts of the dramatic moment when Gimson had come in, ostensibly to ask for food, but then had tried to attack Rose; how Gerald had tried to restrain him at gunpoint and Gimson had escaped, pushing Dermot to the ground and then punching Patrick as he fled.

When they had all told their stories, late in the evening though it was, Patrick took the policeman upstairs to speak to Mr Lancaster. The officer was confident that Gimson would be apprehended, but that was the second reason that Rose was pleased to get away. She didn't feel safe at Viper's End now, with that madman still on the run and possibly close by.

The third reason to be glad to leave Viper's End was the thought of seeing Daisy again, which formed a part of her and Gerald's immediate

plan.

‘Mrs Lawson, who sheltered Daisy, will be able to help put us on the road to finding her,’ Rose explained confidently. ‘She knows where Daisy works.’

‘Yes, that’s a sound starting point,’ Gerald agreed. ‘I admit I’m looking forward to seeing this pretty place, Rose. You’ve spoken of Crossthwaite so often that I feel I might recognise your friends. Perhaps we could even find somewhere to live there. Permanently, I mean.’

‘I don’t know whether we’ll be stopping there long enough for you to look round, Gerald. It might be straight back to Leeds to pursue whatever we’ve found out.’

Gerald looked at his watch. ‘It’s nearly midday already and we haven’t got to Leeds yet. I think we should find ourselves somewhere to stay for tonight, settle ourselves in our rooms, then go to see Mrs Lawson so we can be ready to go to look for Daisy straight away tomorrow. We don’t want to miss her at work if that’s the only place Mrs Lawson knows we’ll find her. Also, sorry to be a weakling, but I could do with a rest. I don’t know about you, but I hardly slept last night, what with ... everything.’

‘It’s been proper trying,’ agreed Rose. Her instinct had been to go to find Daisy immediately, but Gerald was right. Even now, she was yawning and half asleep, lulled by the rhythm of the train.

‘Do you think Crossthwaite will have a suitable place for us to stay?’ asked Gerald. ‘That would be convenient for our seeing the Lawsons today.’

‘There is the Rose and Thorns,’ said Rose. ‘It’s an inn; a bit old-fashioned, but very respectable.’

‘Ha, I can see that we’re fated to end up there,’ said Gerald, with a smile.

‘Let’s see if they have rooms for us ... if that’s all right, Gerald? I was once used to paying my own way, but recently, well, you know ...’

‘Darling, of course it’s all right. Soon we’ll be married and everything we have will be shared.’

‘Thank you, love,’ murmured Rose.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek quickly and discreetly, although they had the first-class compartment to themselves. What a revelation that had been to Rose when Gerald bought the train tickets and the porter showed them to this carriage, then wheeled their luggage along to the

baggage car: Rose's single cardboard case and Gerald's steamer trunk. In addition, Gerald carried two carpet bags, to keep beside him in the carriage.

Rose had never even seen inside a first-class carriage before. The seats were stiffly padded, with antimacassars over the backs and little reading lamps with glass shades above.

'Once we've found Daisy, we must look for work,' she said. 'I intend to get another cooking job. It shouldn't be difficult, especially if I look for summat in service. Oh, but then those kinds of job are live-in, which won't work out when we're married.'

'It needn't be a job in service, Rose. You could work at a bakery, or a tearoom. I haven't forgotten your dreams, and I hope you haven't either. We haven't the money for you to start up a business of your own just yet, but that needn't stop you finding someone else's to work in. Then you'll be able to see how it suits you.'

'Yes, my darling,' said Rose, thinking that Gerald might revise his suggestions once he'd seen Crossthwaite, which wasn't really large enough, nor did it have sufficient numbers of visitors, to support a tearoom. People just went about their business, then went home and made their own pot of tea. But she was grateful that he was thinking of what would make her happy. 'Let's see how things are once we've found Daisy,' she said.

James Lancaster was on a boat on a lake. In a sudden squall, a raging whirlpool formed right in the deepest part and sucked his boat towards it, while Gerald stretched out from the bank with a slender and ineffectual branch from a tree and tried to reach him.

'Grab hold, Father. Just grab hold,' called his son frantically.

But it was no use, and as the waves closed over his head, Lancaster awoke and found himself in his bed in the dark, with the bedclothes rumpled around him. His heart was pounding with the aftermath of the panic from the nightmare, and the room felt stuffy and oppressive.

He got out of bed, felt his way around it and went to draw back the curtains and let in some fresh air from the window, which was already open a little.

As he drew the heavy curtain, a hand reached in from the parapet outside, then grabbed him round the wrist. For a moment, both Lancaster and the intruder looked equally startled, but then the menacing face, ugly with

hatred, was snarling straight into Lancaster's and the dishevelled figure swiftly pushed the window wide and stepped into the room.

'Aaah!' yelled Lancaster, realising at last who this was.

To him it felt like a new scene in the continuation of his nightmare. He tried to bring himself out of it, tried to wake, but reality, however nightmarish, would not be shaken off.

'Think you can treat me as your man one week and have that mummy's boy son of yours sack me the next, Lancaster?'

The arrogant tone, the vicious look on the face – Lancaster realised then that this hellish encounter was very real, and Alec Gimson was all too present and dangerous.

'Whuh ... wh ... what are you doing sneaking about in the night, Gimson? Get out ... get out at once. I order you to leave,' said Lancaster, his voice shaking with the shock of finding so aggressive an intruder in his room.

Gimson took no notice, as if Lancaster hadn't spoken at all.

'When that stuck-up piece Louisa Farlowe died – who, let me tell you, kept a very shady secret and wasn't the gentle sort she pretended to be – you gave a home to her daughters, whose noses are even higher in the air than their mother's. They should be on the streets, grubbing in the gutters for a living, not being given a home in a grand house. What's the matter with you, Lancaster, gone soft in your old age? They're the ones who are rewarded, and I'm the one who gets the sack and the police called. Now I've lost my home, and Sal has shown her true colours and betrayed me, the wh—'

'You're raving mad,' said Lancaster. 'You've got it all wrong and, quite obviously, man, you've lost your wits.'

'Never even got to see you, Lancaster. You sent that insipid boy of yours to tell me to leave, except I got away after I heard that Seymour was spouting a heap of lies and making Louisa Farlowe sound like the victim. Couldn't you face me yourself? Not keen to do your own dirty work, I notice.'

'Be quiet, Gimson,' snapped Lancaster, regaining his courage as the madman vented his nonsense. 'I don't have to answer to you and your gibberish. Get out before I ring for Patrick and have you thrown out.'

He moved towards the bell pull, but Gimson was too quick, pulling him away and then pushing him to the ground. In the moonlight through the

window, the two men faced each other, Lancaster on his back on his bedroom carpet, and Gimson looming over him.

‘Patrick?’ scoffed Gimson, seeming to hear Lancaster for the first time. ‘What use is that half-dead old codger? Nursing a black eye, too, if I’m not mistaken.’ He laughed nastily. ‘No, Patrick will come without you needing to ring for him ... if he’s still able, that is.’ He aimed a kick at Lancaster’s ribs and then reached for a heavy candlestick from the table beside the bed, moonlight catching the shiny yellow of the brass.

‘You took away my home and my livelihood, Lancaster, and you put me outside the law. This is the price you pay,’ he said, and hit Lancaster hard on the forehead with the sharp-cornered base of the candlestick.

The blow killed James Lancaster instantly.

‘Serves you right,’ Gimson told the bloody corpse. ‘Your kind – you start out with nowt and forget all about where you came from. Rise high, then pull the ladder up after you.’

He reached over and pushed the candlestick back onto the table where he’d found it. Beside it was a box of matches. He struck one, held it to the candle, which was short and held in its cup with melted wax, and glanced around the room. There was nothing he could stuff into his pockets – no cash or jewellery. No, wait, what was that? He picked up Lancaster’s pocket watch from the table and took that. Then, very deliberately, he ran the flame of the candle up the nearest of the ornate bedcurtains that were tied to the posts at each corner of the bed. Instantly the old curtains caught alight and the flames licked greedily upwards in the draught from the open window.

Gimson went to the door to make good his escape, but it wouldn’t budge. He rattled it, but it was obviously locked. The gentle crackle of flames grew louder as he bent to look in the lock, but the key wasn’t there. Strange, when Lancaster said he was going to ring for his servant. Still, no time to wonder about that now.

All right, where would it be? Somewhere nearby, of course. He cast around the room, holding the candlestick, although the fire was burning brightly already, illuminating the ancient room in an orange glow. There was no sign of the key on the table, the mantelpiece, or on the windowsill.

By now the flames had caught the bedclothes and the dry timbers of the old bed, and Gimson could feel the heat building.

Damn, he’d have to leave through the window and escape the fire by moving back along the parapet outside, then climbing down.

It wasn't as easy to get out through the window as it had been to get inside. The window opened inwards and, in his growing hurry to get away, to Gimson the gap looked much smaller now than it had earlier.

No, I got in; I'll get out. Just leave, move along and then ... what?

It was a very long way to the ground, which he hadn't noticed when he'd climbed up a ladder he'd found in the garden, reaching the top of the portico, then up a drainpipe, with brackets holding it to the wall at helpful distances to use as handholds.

Gimson squeezed out through the window, but just as he was about to lower his second leg to the narrow parapet, the room erupted in a fierce incandescence of fire, and the heat of the flames stung his flesh. Hurrying to get clear, he caught his foot on the window fastening and pitched forward, straight over the low stone columns of the parapet wall to the ground below.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE PLACE WHERE Daisy was working, Esme Lawson had told Rose and Gerald, was called McCauley's Luggage. It wasn't hard for them to find. Even without the sign on the side of the building, Rose knew she must be in the right place because of the strong smell of textiles and glue, and the sounds of hammering and sewing machining coming from the building.

There was a little office area just inside the door of the workshop, where a young man sat at a desk, writing in a book. Rose tapped at the open door.

'Good morning,' she said. 'May we come in?'

'Sir, madam, how may I help you?' asked the man, springing to his feet, then eagerly placing chairs before his overcrowded desk. 'We don't sell retail from here, although some of our range is available in Schofields.' He named the central Leeds store that Rose remembered was one of Mrs Metcalfe's favourite shops. 'Or mebbe you're enquiring about wholesale terms?'

'No, although I'm sure if I was selling luggage I'd choose yours,' said Gerald, charmingly. 'No, we came to ask about one of your employees, Miss Daisy Farlowe.'

'Yes, I know Daisy,' said the young man, smiling as if he liked Daisy. 'But I'm afraid she no longer works here.'

'What?' gasped Rose. 'She must hardly have been here any time at all. Do you know where she's gone?'

'I'm afraid not, but let's see if I can find out for you.' Then his curiosity got the better of him and he asked tentatively, 'You're not former employers of hers, are you? She's not in any kind of trouble?'

Oh dear, it didn't bode well that this young man regarded Daisy, whom he obviously liked, as the kind of girl who might get into some kind of trouble with her employers. Rose's mind rushed through all Daisy's previous jobs, and she realised that that was exactly the kind of girl Daisy was. None of her jobs had ended well.

'No,' said Gerald. 'Miss Farlowe here is Daisy's sister.'

‘Ah, I see ...’ the young man said, nonsensically, and backed out of the office. ‘I shan’t keep you waiting.’ He disappeared into the main part of the workshop.

‘Oh, no, this doesn’t look good at all,’ murmured Rose. ‘You don’t think she’s been sacked, do you, Gerald? Mrs Lawson said this was a good place to work. I hope there hasn’t been some ... misunderstanding.’

‘Well, we’re here now, Rose, and are about to find out. At least this chap knows who she is, so we’ve made a start. Perhaps Daisy has a better job,’ he added, lowering his voice.

‘You think so, love?’ asked Rose with a raised eyebrow.

The enthusiastic man returned with a young woman, whom he introduced as ‘Daisy’s friend Maggie’. Then he left Maggie with Rose and Gerald and promised to return shortly.

‘So you’re Daisy’s sister?’ began Maggie. ‘It was nice having Daisy working here and sharing my digs. I thought we’d be going on like that a while, but soon after she started here we went to look at the posh shops in the arcades – just window-shopping, like. Daisy saw some fella she said she used to work with and wanted to avoid, so we dived into a shop so he’d not see us. But he must have done, as he followed her home and started hanging around outside Mrs Enderby’s, where I still live. Soon his interest began to frighten us. Once, this fella came here and stood at the gate, and we had to leave round the back and run home a different way.’

‘Good heavens, this man sounds like the most awful creep,’ said Gerald. ‘Outrageous, imposing his unwelcome presence on young women.’

‘And I know exactly who it was,’ said Rose angrily. ‘Maggie, did Daisy say it was a person she worked with in service?’

‘Yes, that’s right, Miss Farlowe. She didn’t say his name. She said that made him more real and she’d rather forget she once knew him, but she couldn’t do that when he was following her. He is about ten years older than Daisy – a good few older than me. Daisy knew if she went to the police they would either dismiss her as a daft girl – the kind who flirts and can’t cope with the consequences – or they’d side with this fella, who was supposed to be married to some relation of their old employer. She reckoned the posh folk would be the ones to be believed and she, the one who was being followed about and frightened, would be seen as the guilty party. I reckon she was right about that. She didn’t even tell Mrs Enderby in case it scared the lady. Mrs E is a good sort. So Daisy decided, sudden, like,

to move to a new job and a new home, which was a big loss for me, 'cos she was nice to share with. At least I'm shot of that bloomin' fella creeping about, though.'

'Oh, Maggie, I'm so sorry you had to put up with that,' said Rose. 'But I'm looking for Daisy. I'm worried things are going badly for her. Do you know where she went?'

'Hepworth's. They make clothes. The factory is called Providence Works. It's not far.' She pointed in the vague direction. 'I don't know where she lives, but I expect you can ask for her at the factory.'

Rose and Gerald thanked Maggie and, when the friendly young man came back, they asked him for directions to the clothing factory, then set off.

At Hepworth's, which was far bigger than McCauley's Luggage and very noisy with the clatter of sewing machines as far as the eye could see, Rose and Gerald introduced themselves to a middle-aged man, who came to see what they wanted and said he was a foreman. Rose briefly explained that she was looking for Daisy, her sister.

'Daisy Farlowe?' he said, shaking his head. 'There's a lot works here, miss, and I don't remember the name. Let me go and ask someone else.'

He disappeared for quite a few minutes.

'Oh dear,' said Rose, her confidence beginning to falter. 'Perhaps Maggie remembered the wrong place. Or Daisy didn't come here after all. If that awful man Terry Ecclestone followed her here, she might have decided to leave Leeds altogether. Oh, Gerald, she could be anywhere.'

'Don't fret, darling. We've yet to hear what they have to say. Look, someone's coming.'

Another man approached. He looked as if he was in a hurry and couldn't really spare them the time.

'Daisy Farlowe?' he said. 'I hear you're her sister. This is where she lives.' He gave Rose a scrap of paper with an address written on it. 'It's not far. She said she wasn't well one day and then didn't turn up for work again. If she's not back directly, we won't be able to keep her job open.'

Rose's eyes were huge with worry now. The memory of her mother coughing and gasping and dying flew into her mind, and it was all she could do to keep her composure.

'Thank you, sir,' said Gerald. 'Come on, Rose, let's go and find her.'

He steered Rose outside the tall building, into a bleak urban street, where he showed the address to someone passing, who directed him.

‘Nearly found her, Rose. Not far now,’ he encouraged, and Rose was more thankful than she could say to have this kindest of men beside her, propping her up now her courage was failing.



When Rose and Gerald got to the mean little row of shabby houses where Daisy lived, they thought at first that they’d mistaken the name of the road.

‘This looks awful,’ said Rose. ‘What number is it? Seventeen? It’s this one.’ She pointed out a house where the front door was peeling paint. The windows were filthy with black dust. ‘It looks like a few folk live here, from the different styles at the windows. Let’s knock and see if anyone will let us in.’

After Gerald had knocked twice, and he and Rose waited in a heavy silence, neither wanting to voice his or her misgivings, the door was opened by a remarkably pretty woman with abundant orange hair, wearing an elaborately frilled and very grubby peignoir.

‘Yes, love?’ she asked Gerald, ignoring Rose.

‘Please, does Daisy Farlowe live here?’ asked Rose.

‘Who’s asking?’

‘Her sister.’

‘Let me see.’ The woman closed the door, but gently, and left Rose and Gerald on the step.

‘You don’t think this place is ... is a brothel ... do you?’ asked Rose, embarrassed to air her suspicions aloud, but thinking it a question that really had to be asked.

‘Good heavens, I hope not,’ said Gerald. ‘I doubt it, if your sister is here, Rose,’ he added a little too late to provide complete reassurance.

The door opened again and the young woman with the vibrant hair stood back so Rose and Gerald could enter. Inside, the hallway was crowded with coats and hats on hooks all the way along to the back, and untidy heaps of shoes and boots on the floor beneath them.

‘She says to go up,’ said the woman. ‘Top of the stairs on the left at the front.’

‘Thank you,’ said Rose, and led Gerald up the narrow stairs. The worn carpet was stained and encrusted with dust, and Rose pulled up her skirt to

prevent it catching up any grubbiness around the hem.

‘Daisy? Daisy, it’s me. Me and Gerald. We’ve come to find you,’ said Rose softly as she opened the door of Daisy’s room. She peered round to make sure Daisy was suitably dressed for Gerald to go in too.

Daisy was lying in her bed, in her crumpled and grubby nightdress, looking ill. Her nose was red and sore, her eyes also sore-looking and narrowed as if she had a headache.

‘Oh, Daisy. You look bad, love,’ said Rose, rushing to her. ‘What is it? It’s not the galloping consumption, is it?’ The horrible thought rushed into her mind and out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Please, please, don’t let this be like Mum’s illness all over again. I couldn’t bear it if I was the only one left of us.

‘Rose – it is you! Where did ... ? How ... ?’ Daisy rasped, but couldn’t seem to get her thoughts straight.

Rose put her hand to Daisy’s forehead and felt how overheated she was.

‘She has a fever, Gerald,’ she said anxiously. ‘Here, Daisy, try to drink some of this water.’ She helped Daisy to sit up and passed her a teacup with water in it from beside her bed.

‘I think Daisy might have influenza,’ said Gerald sensibly. ‘I had it once, and I remember feeling feverish and properly ill. Like a very bad cold, but extra nasty.’

‘How long have you been like this, Daise?’ asked Rose.

‘Dunno. A few days ...’

‘Oh, poor love. Has anyone brought you owt to eat?’

‘I don’t want owt, Rose.’

‘That lady who let us in, with the bright hair ...’

‘Serafina.’

‘Sera— goodness. Serafina, has she been looking after you?’

‘She’s been kind but she has to go to work.’

Rose and Gerald looked at each other, both wondering what the woman with the elaborate name and the showy hair did for a living.

‘Let me get you another cup of water and then I think we should talk about taking you home.’

‘What, back to Viper’s End? No, never!’ Daisy began to cry.

She didn’t usually cry so easily, and Rose thought her resilience had been weakened by her illness.

‘No, not Viper’s End. Don’t fret, flower. So much has happened since you ran away. Gerald and I are in Crossthwaite, at the Rose and Thorns. There’s room for you there, and the beds are very comfortable. Mrs Ryder, the landlady, is kind. She’s a motherly sort and I reckon she’ll know what’ll make you feel better in no time. The only thing is, you’ll have to get up now and come with us. If you can put on your frock, I’ll gather up your bits and put them in your case. But I’m not leaving you here, in this awful room.’ She looked at the mould on the ceiling; she sniffed and thought she detected the stale, rancid smell of mice; she peered in disgust at the windowpane, opaque with dirt. ‘C’mon, Daise, you can do it, and then, once you’re in a clean bed, you’ll feel much, much better.’

‘And while you get Daisy organised,’ said Gerald, ‘I shall go and look for a hansom cab.’

‘Do you think you’ll find one?’ asked Rose.

‘I’m determined on it, even if I have to walk all the way to the station,’ said Gerald, smiling to try to raise the mood. In truth, he rather feared he might have to, but he would do anything to help Rose and her sister.

Rose and Daisy heard him bounding down the stairs, then the sound of the front door opening and closing.

‘I’ve never been in a hansom cab before,’ said Daisy, sniffing. She dipped her fingers into the cup of water from which she had just drunk and dabbed them on her hot face.

‘Nor have I,’ said Rose. ‘And when you’re feeling better, I have so much to tell you.’

At last Daisy was installed in a bed in a little room of her own next to Rose’s at the Rose and Thorns, the journey achieved by the considerable expense of a rather ancient horse-drawn cab all the way from Leeds to Crossthwaite.

Mrs Ryder took the arrival of Daisy entirely in her stride. In fact, she seemed delighted to have someone to fuss over. She recommended beef tea to alleviate the symptoms of flu. She happened to have some in her larder, and took up a steaming mug of it on a tray. Rose sat beside Daisy’s bed, where Daisy lay propped up on fat pillows and wearing a clean nightdress, and slowly offered her spoonfuls of the hot clear brown liquid. A professional part of Rose admitted that Mrs Ryder’s beef tea was every bit

as clear as any she had made herself. Maybe Mrs Ryder also strained it through a cheesecloth twice ...

In the meantime, Gerald had gone back to the Lawsons to tell them about the search for Daisy, and that she was now safe, but not well. Of course, Esme Lawson brought out a cake and made a pot of tea for Gerald to enjoy while she and Harold listened to Gerald's account.

'Thank goodness you found her. It's a blessing that Maggie was at the luggage maker's and knew where Daisy had gone to,' said Esme. 'Poor lamb, having to flee from that man Ecclestone. He tried it on with our Mary, but she's older than Daisy, and has got a bit more confidence to deal with undesirables, I should think.'

Knowing a little of Daisy, Gerald didn't think this was necessarily so, but he kept quiet.

'Anyway,' continued Esme, 'Mary told him where to go. He took umbrage and never forgave her, but he didn't try it again.'

'Rose told me he was a nuisance to all the single women at Elizabeth House,' said Gerald.

'Aye, so I gather, but Mrs Metcalfe cooked his goose in the end,' said Esme. 'Seems only fitting it was a woman who got the better of him. Mary tells me he's married to Amy Langdale now, so she heard. Ha!'

'If he'd come following our Mary, creeping about after her like he did with young Daisy, I'd have punched his lights out,' said Harold. 'I'm not a man for violence—'

'You're as gentle as a baby rabbit,' said Esme, fondly and imaginatively.

'—but a woman has a right to go about her business without fear from the likes of him.'

Gerald nodded. He wasn't a man for a fight either, but he had to agree with Mr Lawson.

There was a knock at the door then, and Esme got up to answer it. After a couple of minutes, she came back into the sitting room with a tall man in uniform, carrying a helmet under his arm. It was a policeman.

'Mr Lawson?' asked the policeman. 'Sorry to disturb you in the evening, sir. I am Sergeant Allbright. I understand you are the gentleman in the know around here, and I am wondering, sir, if you can tell me where I might find Mr Gerald Lancaster.'

Gerald got to his feet. 'I am Gerald Lancaster, officer. How can I help you?'

‘Please, sit down, Mr Lancaster. I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.’

‘Dead?’ gasped Rose, sitting in Mrs Ryder’s parlour while Gerald sat on a chair beside her and took her hand. ‘How terrible! Oh, my love, I am so sorry.’ She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. ‘I hoped we might be reconciled with your father. I know you did, too.’

Gerald kissed the top of her head and, when she released him, he covered his face with both hands for a moment.

‘It’s so hard to believe. Father, dead. Killed by ... by an intruder, it seems. Such violence ... And Viper’s End gone too.’

There were tears in Rose’s eyes as she tried to think of the words that would comfort Gerald in the face of such shocking news. In the end she gave up and just held him close again.

‘I must go back tomorrow to ... to make arrangements, to see to ... things,’ he said.

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No, darling Rose, you must stay here with Daisy. She’s not well enough to travel to Lancashire and, besides, you have a lot of news to catch up on after weeks apart.’

‘You’re right, of course,’ said Rose, ‘but you will come back soon, won’t you?’ She knew she sounded young and plaintive, but she couldn’t help it. The shock of this terrible news made her feel suddenly out of her depth.

For some indefinable reason she was anxious about being left here with Daisy, in circumstances that were beyond her usual experiences. He would come back for her, wouldn’t he? But what if he couldn’t?

‘I’ll pay Mrs Ryder in advance for the rooms and for your food for a few days, so you needn’t worry about that,’ he said, ‘and I’ll leave you some spending money, too.’

‘Oh ... yes. Thank you,’ Rose said. For a few ridiculous hours she’d forgotten that she and Daisy were penniless. They both owned little more than what they were wearing. First-class travel on the train, rooms at a comfortable inn and a taxi-cab hired at huge expense all the way from Leeds to Crossthwaite had buffered the very real fact of her poverty with a show of affluence. She was a self-reliant woman; she made her own way. She must not forget that. But just now she had to accept what Gerald offered.

Gerald avoided telling Rose that his father had been killed by Alec Gimson. The police officer had told him that a man's body was found with a broken neck in front of the blackened ruin of Viper's End, Mr Lancaster's beautiful gold watch, now smashed, in his pocket. At first it looked as if he might have broken into the house to rob Mr Lancaster, but then Mr Lancaster's stableman, Dermot O'Malley, confirmed that this was Alec Gimson, the same man who had caused so much trouble at Viper's End just a day before the fire.

Patrick would have been able to confirm that, too, but Patrick had perished in the flames. Gerald knew Rose had become very fond of the old manservant, and he decided to keep that tragic news to himself for the time being. Or maybe he was so stricken with grief at Patrick's death, on top of his father's and the loss of Viper's End, that he did not trust himself to speak about it and maintain a manly stiff upper lip.

Daisy had been at the Rose and Thorns for five days when she began to gather her strength and colour returned to her pallid cheeks.

'Take the lass out in the sunshine, Rose,' suggested Mrs Ryder. 'You know the byways of Crossthwaite well enough – there's a whole field of buttercups further up, t'other side of the lane that runs behind here. Made my heart sing to see them, it did, and I reckon you two could both do with some cheering up.'

'Aye, you're right, Mrs Ryder,' said Rose. 'Thank you. Funny how we're town girls but we both love the beauty and clean air of the countryside.'

'It's no mystery,' said the kindly landlady. 'Who wouldn't? Y'know, I wouldn't work in Leeds for owt.'

'It wasn't so bad,' said Daisy. 'I might have stayed if it hadn't been ... if things had been different, and I hadn't got ill, but now I'm on the mend I'm thinking of what I can do next.'

'Come along then, Daisy,' Rose said, handing her her jacket. Daisy's employment history was such a sorry tale that she thought Mrs Ryder had better be spared the details. 'You can tell me all about it as we walk.'

They set out off past the inn, then down a little footpath where wildflowers grew at either side of the narrow way, and on to the lane behind. Compared to the air in Leeds, here it felt light and clean; spotless. Rose tipped her face to the sun and breathed deeply. If only Gerald would come back, she would, she thought in that moment, be completely happy.

‘Do you feel up to going as far as the buttercup field, Daise?’

‘I’ll see. Long as you don’t go too fast, I reckon I’ll be all right,’ said Daisy. ‘I shall have to start thinking about looking for another job very soon. Can’t mope about being delicate for ever, can I? And Gerald has been so kind, paying for us to stay at the inn. It wouldn’t do to take advantage, even though you are going to marry him.’

‘Quite right. I want to get cooking again. Gerald says he thinks Crossthwaite is a lovely place, but I don’t reckon there are many opportunities for cooking jobs unless it’s in one of the big houses. And when we’re married, I won’t want a live-in job. Mebbe we’ll have to have a look around ...’

Daisy nodded. She wasn’t sure what she would do next. Somehow, something always came up, but she would like it to be her choice, not a necessity.

‘Heavens,’ said Rose as they walked slowly along the quiet lane, ‘do you see who’s coming?’

‘It’s Mrs Metcalfe. Well, I never! I didn’t know she was one for walks,’ said Daisy. ‘By herself, too.’

‘Shush, Daise.’

They approached the lady, who was looking very pretty and carrying a little parasol to shade her face, as if she was having a day at the races or some similar social day out. Mrs Metcalfe always dressed as if people were going to be looking at her, which usually meant that they did.

‘Good morning, Mrs Metcalfe,’ Rose greeted her.

‘Rose! And Maisie.’

‘I hope you’re well, Mrs Metcalfe,’ said Rose.

‘Oh, yes, thank you. I’m never ill,’ said Mrs Metcalfe. ‘What a surprise. Are you in Crossthwaite for a holiday?’

Rose laughed lightly. ‘No, ma’am. *Daisy and I are staying at the Rose and Thorns. Daisy’s had influenza, but is getting better now.*’

It was only a partial explanation but it would have to do. She could hardly say, *We’re both unemployed and staying there at the expense of my fiancé, who had a terrible rift with his father, for whom we both worked to pay off a massive debt. Then my future father-in-law was murdered and his house was burned down, so we find ourselves at a loose end while he deals with all that.*

‘I’m sorry to hear you’ve been ill, Daisy,’ said Mrs Metcalfe. ‘But tell me, Rose, where are you working now?’ She had a calculating look on her face. ‘You see, well, we very much miss you at Elizabeth House. There’s been no one who can measure up to you. Mrs Pursey ... Pewsey, or whatever she was called, put everyone’s back up. Then it was Mrs ... oh, I can’t remember the woman’s name but I do remember the awful food. Poor Mr Metcalfe ... well, let’s just say we had to ask the woman to go. Now we have Mrs Bishop. She’s all right, but bakes with nothing like your skills. My mother was saying only the other day how much she misses those little bird things you used to make. Now, Rose, I know it’s very unlikely you’re free to come back, but we would welcome you wholeheartedly. And I do believe I could get Mr Metcalfe to find a few more shillings for your wages each week. How does that sound?’

For a moment Rose was tempted. More money, a lovely place to work, this very appreciative, although rather silly, woman to work for ...

But what about Gerald? He would be coming back any day now. And what about Daisy, who needed a firm and settling hand? Daisy had told Rose about the very superior kitchen maid, Bridget. It sounded to Rose as though Bridget was an asset, someone she would get on with, but Rose’s duty was to Daisy, who was a problem that needed solving. No, she couldn’t take a live-in job and still marry Gerald. It wouldn’t work at all.

And anyway, what about her tearoom dreams? Gerald was very keen on the idea. He frequently mentioned it, as if he truly believed in her and her ability to achieve this; that she could make the dream come true. If she put her ambition aside now, would the tearoom *ever* come about? She had even less money of her own now than before, but Gerald had his little inheritance from his mother, and his own dream of painting his beautiful flower pictures, and they could make all their dreams come true if they worked together, and were level-headed and sensible, and didn’t overreach—

‘Rose!’ It was Daisy, looking at her oddly. ‘Rose, Mrs Metcalfe wants to know how it sounds – the offer of your old job back. But with *more money*.’ She added this last with some emphasis and a little glance at Mrs Metcalfe.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Metcalfe. I liked working for you, and I know I was lucky to have such a good employer, but I am to be married very soon. I *am* looking for a job, but not a live-in position.’

‘Oh, but perhaps your future husband would like to work for us, too? Is he in service and free to move to Elizabeth House? Mr Anderson is an

excellent footman, but he doesn't drive, and Mr Metcalfe is thinking of buying another car and getting a full-time chauffeur so that we can both go exactly where we want at any time. Such a lovely idea,' she beamed.

'That's kind of you, Mrs Metcalfe,' said Rose, 'but my future husband is ... an artist. He paints beautiful pictures. His expertise is in depicting gardens and flowers. Such as your lovely garden at Elizabeth House,' she added, hoping she didn't sound too pushy.

Mrs Metcalfe looked delighted. 'Oh, Rose, how wonderful. How clever of you ... I mean, my heartfelt congratulations on your forthcoming marriage. And, when your fiancé is next in Crossthwaite, I hope you will tell him he may call on me and show me some of his work. And, if it's the kind of painting that I like, maybe he could take a turn around the garden and see if he thinks it would make a suitable subject for a painting.'

'Thank you, Mrs Metcalfe. I'll tell him,' said Rose. 'I'm so pleased to have seen you again, ma'am. Thank you for offering me my job back, but, well, my circumstances are different now.'

'Yes, I can quite see that,' said Mrs Metcalfe, plainly thinking Rose had done well to bag herself a husband who was not in service. 'I hope we'll meet again while you are at the Rose and Thorns. Goodbye, Rose. Goodbye, Daisy.'

She turned, angled the parasol and set off back the way she had come, towards Elizabeth House, with a languid little wave of her hand. Rose and Daisy stood and let her go on so that they wouldn't be walking with her towards the buttercup field.

'Do you reckon I overdid it, Daise?' whispered Rose.

'Course not. Gerald will be pleased if he has an order for a painting.'

'A commission,' said Rose. 'Yes.' She sighed. 'I do wish he would hurry up and come back. I feel I'm marking time. If things were different, I would have taken back my old job and been pleased, but there are the both of us – three of us – to think of, and I can't do owt unless we're agreed.'

'Don't worry, Rose. He'll be back soon,' said Daisy. 'Now, Mrs M has gone, so shall we go up as far as these buttercups Mrs Ryder told us about?'

Rose agreed with a smile, but the offer of her old job back had unsettled her. It was the best job she had ever had, and the tearoom dream seemed as far away as ever. If only Gerald would come back. Only with him by her side could she move on from this limbo.

The girls walked single file back down the narrow footpath that led to the main street beside the inn. They emerged by the front of the building and there was Gerald, a carpet bag in each hand, approaching from the direction of the little station.

Rose rushed towards him and he put down his bags and took her in his arms.

‘Oh, my darling,’ she said, hugging him tightly. ‘Oh, I am so pleased to see you again. Every single thought I’ve had has been about you, and how you were going on in Heathstone, and when you might be back.’

‘Well, I’m here now,’ he said, kissing her forehead, a decorous display of affection suitable to their standing in the main street outside the only inn in town. ‘And Daisy, looking so much better I’m glad to see.’

‘Hello, Gerald. Yes, I’m ready for anything,’ said Daisy. ‘What did I tell you, Rose? I knew Gerald would be back at any minute. Rose has just been offered her old job back at Elizabeth House, but she turned it down as it’s live-in, but she did interest Mrs Metcalfe in your garden painting and you’re invited to visit and look round,’ she added to Gerald.

‘Daisy, let the poor man get his bags inside and have a sit-down before you blab all my news,’ laughed Rose.

‘Ah, well, there you’re wrong, my sweetheart,’ said Gerald. ‘Not a *poor man* any more. To be honest, the whole business has been very trying, not to say upsetting, and it isn’t over yet. But there is some good news. So let’s go inside and order something delicious to eat from Mrs Ryder, and sit in her parlour to eat it and talk in private, and I shall blab my own news to you both. Rose, my angel, I think that if you really want your dream tearoom, you might be able to have it. If, on the other hand, you would prefer to be a lady of leisure, then the choice is yours.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Rose, her hand to her mouth in astonishment. ‘D’you know, I never thought ...’

EPILOGUE

August 1914

‘**D**O YOU RECKON it’ll be all right, Gerald?’

Gerald turned over to face Rose. The summer dawn light fell through the gap in the half-drawn curtains and illuminated her drowsy face. She looked so young and beautiful, half asleep as she was, he thought. He wanted the answer he gave her to be full of hope, but she deserved the truth.

‘I don’t know, Rose. I hear there are young men turning up at Buckingham Palace, singing “God Save the King”, and waving Union Flags, then running cheerfully off to sign up. All very jolly and gung-ho. I want to believe it will be all over by Christmas – that’s what the Expeditionary Force command are saying – but ... who knows?’

She turned towards him. ‘Thanks for not telling me easy lies, love.’

‘I’d never do that, my darling. You’d see through me straight away,’ he said with a little smile.

‘Aye, I would, that. Have you decided: *will* you go and sign up?’

‘Certainly not via Buckingham Palace. But I’m young enough, and old enough, and, well, it’s my duty to do my bit, isn’t it? If this does go on for a while, every eligible man will have to go to fight. Protect the Belgians from invasion and oppression. Belgium today, the rest of Europe tomorrow – we can’t pretend we’re not involved. It’s the right thing to do – to protect our country, our homes, our wives ...’

‘Our tearooms.’

‘Quite right, Rose. I expect the Kaiser has heard about the choux pastries at Rose Lancaster’s Tearoom and if he’s heading to Harrogate he won’t want to miss out.’

‘Well, he needn’t invade half of Europe to do so. He could just come and ask to be seated at my best table, like Mrs Metcalfe and Mrs Langdale do whenever they’re here for some shopping.’

‘But what will you say to him?’

‘I’ll tell him to sling his hook and come back when he’s pulled his army out of Belgium, of course.’

‘That’s my Rose. Whatever happens, I know the tearoom is in the safest of hands.’

‘Women’s hands.’

‘Exactly. Funny how we didn’t even notice it is a business employing almost entirely women until that accountant chap remarked on it. Thought it a joke – was I under petticoat tyranny, he wanted to know, or some such nonsense.’

‘Daft ...’

‘As you say.’

‘I wonder what he’d have thought if he’d set eyes on Serafina as we first saw her – do you remember?’

‘How could I forget? How narrow-minded we were! We judged entirely on appearance, when the lady beneath the orange hair and unclean gown was not only a good friend to Daisy, but it turns out she has a remarkable head for figures. Well, Leeds City Varieties’ loss is our gain. Luckily for us she was ready to hang up her dancing shoes and turn to her other talent – for bookkeeping.’

‘She fits right in. She’s even acquired a taste for tailored costumes, have you noticed?’

‘Darling, I would hardly notice what Serafina Carver is wearing when you are in the room, would I? I have eyes only for you.’

‘Daft ...’

‘If you say so.’

They both laughed softly. Then Rose moved over, and put an arm across Gerald and held him close as they fell asleep.

When Rose awoke again, it was an hour later, and time for her to get up and go to work. The two bakers she and Gerald employed got in early to the kitchen at the back of the smart tearoom in Parliament Street. Although she was the proprietor, Rose still liked to work in the kitchen at the start of each day and she’d made the role of decorating the elegant little cakes her own, exactly as she had dreamed of doing all those months ago when she piped ‘those little bird things’ to please Mrs Metcalfe’s mother.

Gerald got up more slowly, kissing the back of her neck while she was trying to put up her hair.

‘Are you going out to sketch today, love?’ she asked his reflection behind her in the mirror.

‘I might ...’

‘You don’t sound very bothered.’

‘It’s hard to feel enthusiastic about that when there’s a war broken out.’

‘Yes, of course. Difficult to think of owt else, really. Shall I ask Morris to come up and draw you a bath?’

‘Yes, please. Rose?’

‘Mm?’

‘Don’t go to the tearoom just yet. I know you like to get there to greet the waitresses and Serafina, and get started on the cakes, but I’d love it if you and I had breakfast together. Then maybe we could walk along together, too.’

‘Of course,’ said Rose. ‘I’ll tell Mrs Hawkins to keep mine until we’re both down.’

‘Thank you.’

Rose went slowly downstairs, her mind full of the jumbled thoughts that had invaded her dreams last night: the hopes and the terrible misgivings.

‘Will you see Daisy later?’ asked Gerald, as he and Rose left their house overlooking The Stray and headed towards the tearoom, which, even now, a year after Gerald inherited his father’s fortune and they had married and made their plans, she could hardly believe was real.

The name ‘Rose Lancaster’s Tearoom’ was attractively painted in gold lettering above the window. Inside were shiny blond-wood tables and chairs, the table linen lilac, pale blue and soft pink. Little chandeliers, with tiny coloured droplets of glass around the lights, shone above and reflected in a series of immaculate glass-fronted counters, on which sat glass domes and large white plates for the showpiece cakes.

‘Yes, it’s Daisy’s half-day at the dress shop and she’s coming to the tearoom. If we’re not too busy, I might suggest a little walk to air our thoughts, what with there being so many thoughts to have just now.’

‘You know, I can see why Daisy and Serafina are such good friends.’

‘Well, they do share a house, so I hope they are. And Daisy has found summat worthwhile to occupy her thoughts since Serafina introduced her to

the suffragette cause. I wonder what will happen to that now the country is at war ...'

'No, I meant, they're so alike. Who'd have thought that your scruffy little sister would blossom into such a young lady?'

'Less of the "scruffy", if you don't mind,' said Rose with a grin. 'It's Serafina's new-found love of sharp tailoring rubbing off on Daisy; it's also being able to afford decent clothes to wear. It's the quiet politeness of the dress shop; it's growing up, I suppose. It's learning to keep her mouth shut, above all.'

They both laughed.

'Now, love,' said Rose, after a few minutes' walking, 'aren't you going to sketch in the Valley Gardens?' She expected them to part and Gerald would head off down to the left.

'No ... no, Rose. Not today. I-I thought I might take the train to Blackburn today. Look into the Lancaster Properties office. Tie up a few things with my managers, just in case ...'

'Oh. Oh, all right. Mebbe that's a better idea. Do you know when you'll be back?'

'I'm not sure, Rose.'

He bent to kiss her, a longer and more passionate kiss than usual whenever they parted for the day, despite their being in a public place.

'Bye, Gerald, love.'

'Bye, my darling.'

He turned right, skirting the curve of the road, and headed towards the station.

Rose stood and watched his departing figure. Even from the back, she thought he looked young, and beautiful in her eyes.

'Excuse me, please, lady ...'

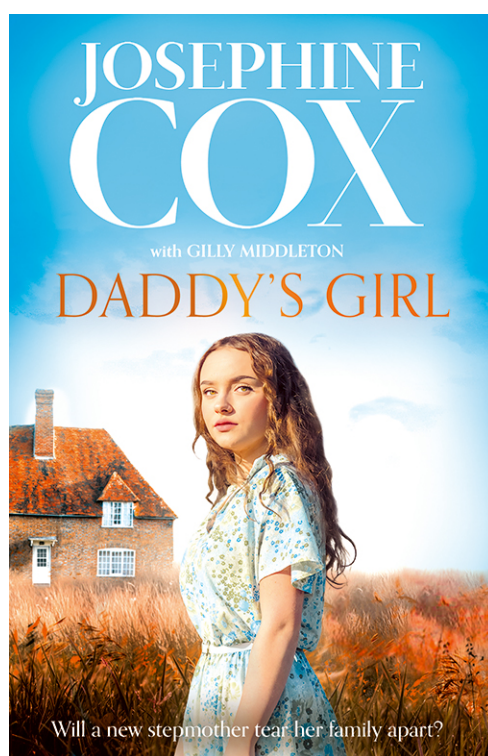
It was a man in army uniform trying to get past.

'Sorry ...'

Rose took a step out of the way. When she looked up again just a moment later, Gerald had completely vanished from sight.

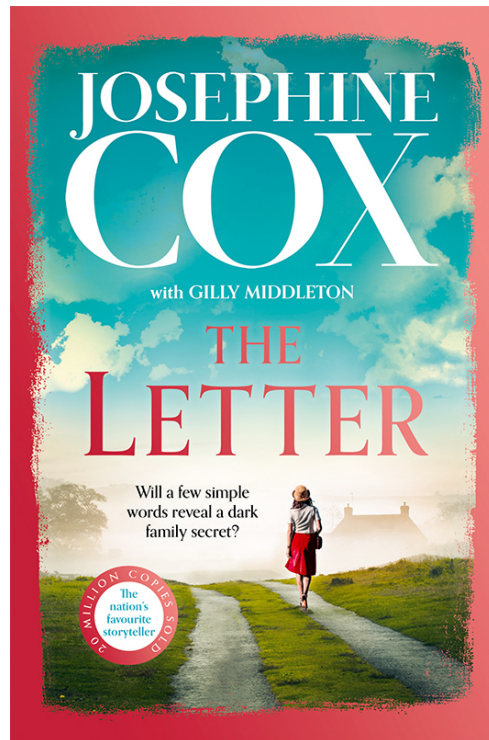
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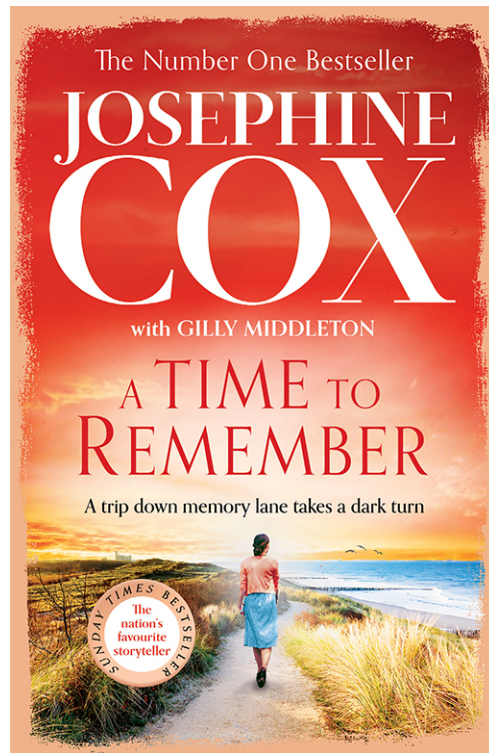
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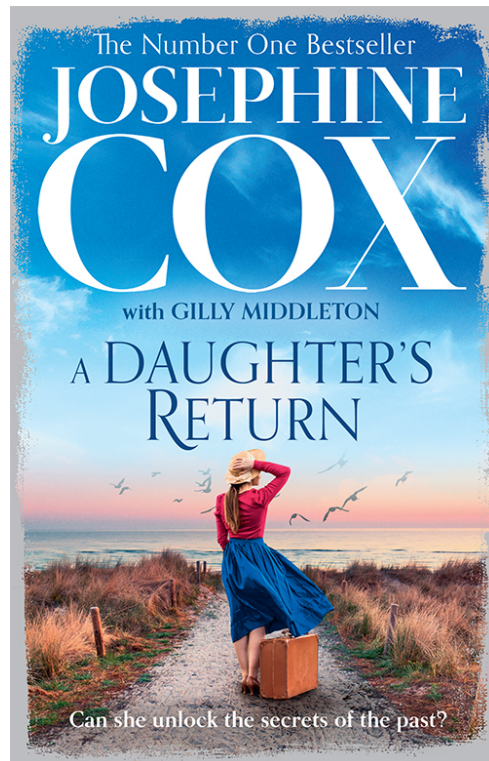
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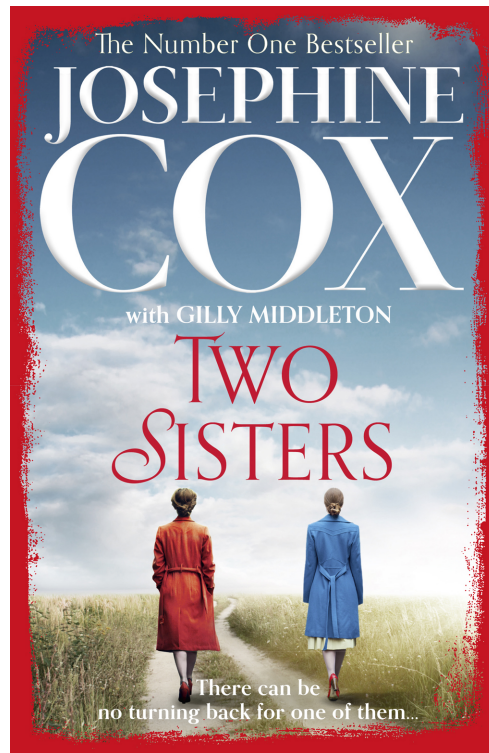
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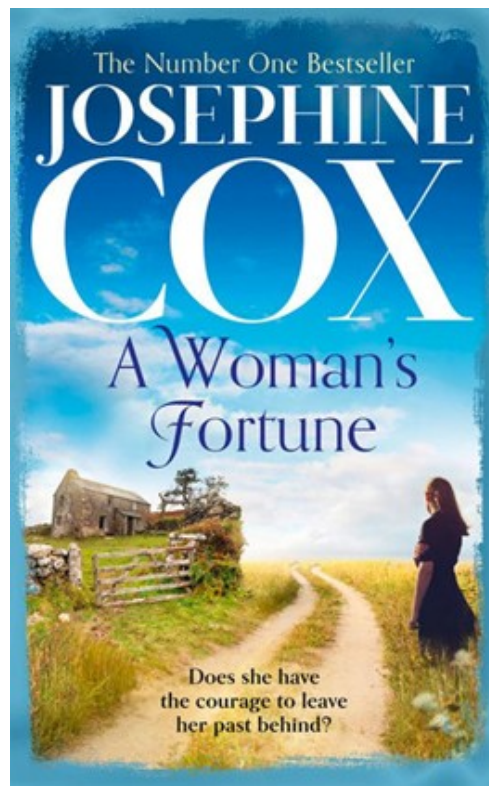
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About the Author

Josephine Cox was born in Blackburn, one of ten children who never forgot her own experience of hardship. She had a long and happy marriage to her husband, Ken, and was immensely proud of her family and her grandchildren. Josephine's books have sold over twenty million copies worldwide, and she said of her success, 'I could never imagine a single day without writing. It's been that way since as far back as I can remember.'

Her stories live on through Gilly Middleton who worked with Josephine for many years and writes new stories inspired by her world.

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