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***Hampshire: Spring 1900***

Harriet Benson hurried home from school to the neat terraced house, eager to share her news with her dad. Her street was one of the better ones, with the men all in work and families living decently, trying to help one another.

Until recently she’d been very happy here. Then her mother had died and her dad remarried.

Today she’d stayed at school late to help the teacher, as she often did, but her dad was due home around this time, so it was safe to go there now.

But she’d miscalculated and arrived a few minutes early, so the only one in the house was Norris, her stepbrother. He was washing his hands at the scullery sink, but stopped to stare at her when she came in.

As soon as she saw him, she started to back towards the kitchen door. She’d begun to get her woman’s curves earlier in the year, later than some of the other girls she knew, which had worried her at fifteen.

She didn’t like to be alone in the house with her stepbrother. The horrible, leering way he looked at her chest made her feel uncomfortable and more than once he’d touched her in a way he shouldn’t. Only she hadn’t dared complain, because her stepmother always took Norris’s side.

He was across the room and had hold of her arm before she realised what he was doing. She tried to pull away and get to the front door, but he dragged her back from the hall into the kitchen. ‘Don’t go. We can have a nice little chat, you an’ me. It’s not often I get you to myself.’

‘My friend’s waiting for me outside.’

He let out a loud, jeering laugh. ‘No, she isn’t. You don’t bring your friends home any more because my mum won’t have nosey parkers coming here to check up on her. Which means you’re lying.’ He shook her hard. ‘You shouldn’t—lie—to me. I don’t like it.’ Raising his free hand, still damp and soapy, he grabbed her breast and tweaked it hard, hurting her.

It wasn’t the first time he’d done that, but she’d been too embarrassed to mention it to her father, let alone her stepmother.

She cried out with the pain and tried again to get away from him, but he was much bigger and stronger than she was. However hard she struggled, his hands were all over her and he began breathing hard.

Then he yelled and let her go so suddenly she staggered back against the wall. As he crashed sideways to the ground, his flailing arms sent a chair flying across the room.

Harriet moaned in relief at the sight of her dad. He usually smiled a lot, but today his face was dark red with anger and he was gazing down at his stepson with fists clenched, as if ready to hit him again.

‘You young devil! If you ever lay one finger on my daughter again, I’ll beat you senseless then throw you out of my house for good. I’d throw you out now, if it weren’t for your mother.’

Norris got to his feet, backing away, scowling at them both. ‘Harriet goes with other fellows. Why not me?’

She opened her mouth to protest at this lie, but her dad seemed to swell with fury. ‘My daughter would never—’

Then his voice cut off and he raised one hand to his chest, groaning. The groan ended abruptly and he crumpled slowly to the ground, to lie there quite still.

‘Dad! What’s the matter?’ Harriet knelt beside him. *‘Dad!’*

But he didn’t stir.

She heard footsteps and looked down the hallway. The front door banged back on its hinges and Norris ran out of the house as if the devil himself was chasing him.

She looked back at her dad, but he hadn’t moved. He looked limp, not like himself. She knelt beside him, searching for a pulse, unable to find one, unable to believe . . . it couldn’t be.

Sobbing, she ran to the front door, just as Norris turned the corner of the street and vanished from sight. When she screamed loudly for help, neighbours came running at once.

She managed to tell them what had happened before she began sobbing.

Mrs Leigh from next door immediately put an arm round her. ‘Where’s your stepmother, dear?’

‘She visits her friend Miss Dodson on Tuesdays. Town Close.’

Someone shouted that they’d fetch Mrs Benson.

Mrs Leigh called sharply, ‘Stand back. Let the midwife through.’

A few people followed them into the house, standing quietly, waiting to see if they could help as they watched the midwife bend over James Benson, then look across at Harriet and shake her head.

‘I’m sorry, dear. He’s gone. If it’s any comfort, he’d not have felt a thing.’

Harriet had guessed that her dad was dead because she’d seen her mother lying in her coffin. Her dad had that same look to him, like a wax model of the real man. But she hadn’t wanted to believe such a dreadful thing could happen.

Her dad had died protecting her from her stepbrother, so this was all Norris’s fault. She’d never forgive him for that, never.

‘How did it happen, dear?’ Mrs Leigh asked.

She began to tell them what Norris had done, but her stepmother arrived just as she started and pushed across the room to slap her face. ‘Shut up, you silly girl! You’re hysterical. Don’t know what you’re saying. My Norris isn’t even here, is he?’

The neighbours exchanged glances and muttered to one another, but didn’t challenge this statement. Like Harriet, they were well aware that the second Mrs Benson would never hear a word against her son from her first marriage.

But Norris Harding was a bad ’un, even though he wasn’t yet twenty. Everyone knew that, too, just as they knew that neither he nor his mother were the sort of people who usually lived in a respectable street like this one.

Harriet clutched her burning cheek, too upset even to weep. Her dad was dead. What did Norris matter? What did anything matter now?

Then she had a dreadful thought: she’d be left in her stepmother’s care. There’d be no one to take her side or protect her against Norris now.

After her gentle little mother died, her dad had remarried within three months, to his daughter’s shock and horror. She knew a man needed a wife to look after his house and prepare his meals, but Harriet had been doing that, with a little help from the neighbours, and she’d been coping well, too. He hadn’t *needed* to marry again.

She’d taken her worries to Mrs Leigh next door, who had sat her down and explained the facts of life. That accounted for the noises Harriet had heard in the night from her father’s room.

‘Men need their bed play, dear, some more than others.’

‘But why did he have to choose someone like Winifred Harding. She isn’t—’

‘Your stepmother’s a good-looking woman, for her age. You have to give her that. She caught him at a weak moment and now he’s lumbered with her. The best of men can be fooled by a woman like that, even a man as nice as your father. Some men keep their brains in their trousers when they’re near a woman who eggs them on.’

She patted her young friend’s hand. ‘You’re old enough to understand that now. You’ll just have to make the best of it, I’m afraid, dear. It’s only for a few years, till you’ll be getting married yourself.’

A few years! A few weeks had been more than enough of Winifred and her son.

Harriet had watched the newly weds carefully after that talk. At first her dad seemed happy with his new wife, but after the first few months, she saw him start to look irritated, especially when Winifred spoiled her son or spoke too sharply to her stepdaughter.

James complained that Winifred was letting the house get untidy. She tried to blame it on Harriet, but he cut her short and told her he had eyes in his head and anyway, the house was her responsibility, not his daughter’s. Harriet had her schooling to do, though she would help with the chores in the evenings, of course.

Harriet couldn’t help wondering what her stepmother would do to her now, without her dad there to keep an eye on things. Life would get much worse, she was sure.

She didn’t even need to ask about one thing. There’d be no taking the special scholarship to the private girls’ grammar school now, the one for girls who were ‘exceptional’ and suitable to be trained as teachers. The scholarships were much sought after because every year they gave two ‘special’ girls two years of extra education to equip them better for their future duties.

And Harriet had been offered one. She had a letter to give to her dad about it.

It saddened her that he’d died before he’d even heard the news. He’d have been proud of her and so would her mother.

Her stepmother had been against letting Harriet stay on at school, saying she should be out working by now, bringing in money, paying her parents back for all they’d done for her. That had caused quite a few rows but her father had held firm and Harriet had kept going to school.

There’d be no chance of any more education now.

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Three days later, Harriet stood by her dad’s grave, wearing a black armband and her best frock, which was getting too short and was embarrassingly tight round the chest. As she watched the solemn-faced men lower the coffin into the hole, tears rolled down her cheeks. She wanted to beg the men to wait a few more moments before they removed her father’s body from her world.

As if that would bring him back!

Her stepmother sobbed once or twice, dabbing artistically at her eyes. But Winifred’s handkerchief was dry, Harriet was sure.

She’d been disgusted by the gloating look on the woman’s face as they waited in the front room for two old aunts and a distant cousin of Harriet’s father to arrive for the funeral. No members of her mother’s family had bothered to come. They’d stayed away after he married again.

*Mine*, that look said as Winifred ran her fingers along the edges of the highly polished furniture, *all mine*.

Most of the pieces had come from Harriet’s mother’s side: the furniture and the delicate ornaments. Winifred would get everything now. It wasn’t fair.

Her father’s lovely horse brasses and her parents’ books would no doubt be sold, because Winifred wasn’t the sentimental sort. She’d often complained about having to polish the brasses, and she didn’t read books, only women’s magazines like *Home Chat*.

What Winifred loved best was her son and money, and her stepdaughter wasn’t sure which of the two was more important to her.

When the funeral was over, the mourners walked back to the house, led by Winifred on her son’s arm, flourishing her black-edged handkerchief. Her face was shaded by a new black straw hat topped with big puffs of ribbon and two black feathers, with a small net veil across her face.

Harriet followed with the neighbours, because she certainly wouldn’t be welcome to walk next to her stepmother and stepbrother, even if she wanted to.

Norris was all attention towards his mother. Winifred’s friends whispered how lovely it was to see him behaving so well. A son should be a comfort to his mother. Such a fine, strong young man.

The neighbours didn’t say anything about him, nor did Harriet. She hated him.

Once they got back to the house, Winifred sent her stepdaughter to the kitchen to make a big pot of tea, while she sat in the front room sipping a glass of port wine ‘for my nerves’ and queening it over the relatives and friends who’d been invited back. No neighbours had been invited. Winifred said they were a nosy, snooty lot.

Her father’s relatives didn’t stay for long, but Harriet found time to get his cousin on her own and ask if she could go and live with them.

‘We’ve no room, dear. And it’s no use asking the aunties because they’re too old. I know it’s all very upsetting, but at least you have a roof over your head and a stepmother to look after you. You should be grateful for that.’

After that, her stepmother’s friends and relatives stayed on and it turned into a party. Winifred got out another bottle of the sickly sweet port wine and soon they were all laughing and talking.

What Harriet overheard them saying made her feel angry all over again.

‘You’ve done well for yourself this time, Winifred.’

‘You’ll be really well set up here, my girl, what with the insurance money and all this nice furniture. Good thing you took out that policy, eh?’

‘Don’t forget, you’ve still got your friends. You’ll not need to be lonely.’

The women clinked glasses with Winifred.

No one mentioned Harriet in the list of comforts. No one even said thank you when she refilled the big teapot and brought them clean teacups or glasses for the port.

 But Norris looked at her every time she came into the front room, looked and smiled in that horrible way. He didn’t offer to help with the heavy trays, just hovered near his mother, ‘comforting’ her and refilling her wine glass regularly.

At one stage his mother sent him out to buy two more bottles. Her voice was shrill and her face flushed now. She looked as if she was enjoying herself.

She raised her glass to her son when he got back and he clinked his own against it. ‘Here’s to the man of the house.’ But she laughed when she said that and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that she was the one in charge.

As Harriet was going back to the kitchen, she heard her name mentioned and paused in the hall to listen.

‘What about the girl, Winifred?’

‘What about her? She can get a job and bring me in a bit of money. Pay me back for all the care I’ve given her. I have to keep *my* money safe for my old age now that I don’t have a breadwinner, so I can’t afford to keep her in school any more. James was daft about that. I ask you, what use is all that schooling to a girl? She’ll only get married and have children, like we all do.’

‘It’ll do her good to go out to work like the rest of us,’ Norris said. ‘It’s a hard world out there and the sooner she realises which side her bread’s buttered on, the better.’

It was a hard world in here, too, Harried thought. She’d been run ragged since Dad died, treated like a skivvy and ordered around. It was what her life would be from now on, she was sure. Winifred was too lazy to do the housework if she could get someone else to do it for her.

And what sort of job would her stepmother find for her? Please, not the laundry or the meat works, Harriet prayed. She couldn’t face the noise and steam of one, and the disgusting sights and smells of the other.

But you didn’t get much choice when you were only fifteen. She’d be sixteen on May the tenth, in a month’s time, nearly grown up, but she still had no money and nowhere else to go.

‘Teapot’s empty, Harriet!’ that shrill voice called. ‘Stop mooning around and see to it.’

She sighed, took the tray into the kitchen and went back to collect the big teapot. She avoided passing close to Norris. But she couldn’t stop him looking at her. She could feel his eyes on her whenever he was near. It made her shiver.