

Lancashire Lass

Chapter 1. March 1857

Dorothy Pringle stood in the doorway, smiling as she watched her cheerful young maid working. The room was fragrant with polish and flowers, spring sunlight was glinting through the windows and Liza, unaware that she was being observed, was humming softly as she set the table, placing each plate carefully and aligning the silverware round each setting.

When the knocker sounded, the girl looked up and jumped in shock. "Ooh, I didn't know you were there, Mrs P."

The knocker sounded again, demanding attention not asking for it.

"Shall I answer the door, ma'am?"

"No, I'll do it. You finish in here."

Liza got on with her work. She loved making the table look nice, loved everything about working here for such a kind mistress. She heard conversation, the deep rumble of a man's voice, the soft tones of her mistress, and paused, frowning. It sounded like - but it couldn't be, surely?

Mrs Pringle reappeared, looking puzzled. "It's your father."

When Con Docherty followed her into the room, not waiting to be invited, Liza shot a worried glance sideways at her mistress. What was her father doing here? And pushing into the parlour, too, with his dirty boots on. It wasn't the last Friday of the month when he came to pick up her wages. Her heart began to thump with anxiety. Perhaps there was trouble at home?

Con threw a surly look at the lady of the house, who barely came up to his shoulder and yet always intimidated him. "I've come to take my daughter away, I'm afraid, Mrs Pringle. She won't be able to work for you any more. Her mother's ill, so she's needed at home." He turned to his daughter. "Go and get your things together, girl!"

Liza looked doubtfully from one to the other, waiting for her mistress to speak.

"You can come back when your mother is better," Dorothy said soothingly.

Con cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we're going to need her at home from now on, missus, so if you can pay me what she's due, we won't trouble you further."

Liza, who had paused at the doorway to listen, could not hold back a wail of disappointment. She saw her father glare at her and clapped her hand across her mouth. You didn't argue with Da, or go against his wishes if you knew what was good for you, but the last thing she wanted, the very last, was to leave here. She hated it at home.

Within half an hour she had her things packed and was walking towards the town with her da carrying on his shoulder the wicker trunk she could scarcely lift when it was full, but whose weight he hardly seemed to notice. Liza was worried sick about her mam, but he'd told her to shut up when she'd tried again to find out exactly what was wrong, so she walked along in silence beside him, fretting.

Once they were over the rising piece of ground that separated the village of Ashleigh from Pendleworth, the pretty lanes gave way to cobbled streets. The town was dominated by the huge mill with its tall, smoking chimney and by the two big houses, Pendleworth Hall and Rawley Manor, which lay to the north-east and north-west, overlooking everything from a safe distance. The Hall was the home of the Ludlams, who owned the mill - and a lot of other things in the district as well. The Rawleys had lived at the Manor for ever, but these days they did not bother much with the town, which had doubled in size in the past twenty years.

Back at Ashleigh you couldn't see the mill or the big houses. The air tasted sweeter out there and Liza loved the big shady trees round the house. Here the air had a sooty taste to it and everything seemed darker, with roofs of grey slate and square setts of grey stone paving the main streets. Even the red bricks of the little terraced houses, built by the Ludlams to house their workers, had been darkened to an indeterminate murky brown by the smoke from the big mill chimney. Every month, when Da came for her wages and brought her home for her Sunday off, Liza felt the narrow streets closing round her like a vice. That hadn't worried her when she'd known she'd be going back to the Pringles' in the evening, but she was already dreading the thought of staying here.

She didn't try to speak again, just concentrated on keeping up with Da's long strides. She only came up to his shoulder because she and her sister took after their mam. Her two elder brothers took after Da and were burly men already, but it was too soon to tell with Kieran, who had only just turned nine.

At the lower end of Market Road they turned into Underby Street, where the shop stood with its faded sign above the window, DOCHERTY, SECOND HAND CLOTHING, and a grubby card in the door saying Best prices given. Liza's steps faltered. She didn't want to live here again, not when she'd tasted another sort of life, one where you had enough to eat every single day in a house where things were kept lovely and clean - and where no one shouted at you, let alone thumped you if you spoke out of turn.

As they walked through the shop with its piles of clothes and its sour smell, she wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe in. Passing into the kitchen, she saw her sister standing in the scullery doorway, but Da muttered, "Look sharp!" so she merely waved to Nancy and followed him upstairs.

Through the open door of the front bedroom she saw Mam sleeping restlessly but not looking as bad as Liza had feared, thank goodness. Da dumped the trunk in the back bedroom and glanced towards the front room.

"It'll do her good to have you here looking after things. And it'll do me good to have your help in the shop again. Get changed out of them fancy clothes and come downstairs. I want some food an' you're a better cook than our Nancy."

"Yes, Da." But when Mam was on her feet again, surely they would let her go back - if her place was still vacant. Liza crossed her fingers tightly. Please, let no one else be found to take her place! The Pringles didn't pay high wages, which was why they'd taken on a girl from Underby Street, so maybe there was a chance.

Da had vanished into the shop by the time she went down. In the scullery Nancy, who had only just turned twelve and was small with it, was washing the dishes half-heartedly. "I'm that glad you're back. Da's been in a terrible mood all week, an' Niall hit me this morning." She sniffed dolefully and rubbed at a bruise on her cheek with one wet, reddened hand.

"Well, never mind that now. You get that washing up finished. Mam would have a fit if she came down and saw this mess. We'll take her up a cup of tea as soon as she wakes."

"I can't do everything," Nancy muttered, scowling.

"Of course you can't. I'll feed Da first, then we'll clean up together."

Only she had to go into the shop first to ask him for money to buy tea and food, because there was hardly anything in the house, which put him in a bad mood and made him shout at her. It was, Liza thought miserably, as if nothing had changed in the two years she'd been living away. Just her. And she'd changed a lot. This place didn't feel like home any more - and she didn't feel like putting up with things, either.

The next day Da went through her trunk and took her good working clothes to sell in his shop.

When she begged him not to, Liza got a clout round the ear. It was then she realised he really wasn't going to let her return to the Pringles. She wept into the pillow that night and when Nancy turned to cuddle her, whispered, "I'm not stopping here! Whatever he does, I'm not stopping!" Once her mam was better she'd find a way to escape, then go somewhere so far away Da would never find her again.

When he nipped out for a wet of ale, Liza went into the shop, took some of her clothes from among the better stuff and hid them under the piles of old things that were going for rags, hoping he wouldn't notice.

For the next two weeks she hardly had a minute to think, because there was not only Mam to look after, but her elder brothers, Niall and Dermott, too. They expected her to jump to attention and serve their needs the minute they came home from the mill. As always they took the biggest share of the food except for Da, and that didn't leave much for the younger children.

Once again Liza knew what it was to go hungry and began to feel bitterly resentful of her brothers' greedy, bullying ways. The younger members of the Docherty family did not starve, but they did not get enough to eat, either, and she had sharp words with Niall more than once, for he was far nastier than Dermott and always had been. When he hit her one day, she picked up the frying pan and threatened to retaliate if he touched her again.

Luckily, Dermott began laughing.

"What's so funny?" Niall growled.

"The size of it - threatening you?" And Dermott was off again.

Niall started to grin. "You're going to beat me up, are you, our Liza? You and whose army?" He picked her up and tossed her in the air a couple of times, laughing as she shrieked in panic.

The two men were still chuckling as they walked out.

She watched them go, hands on hips. Well, she'd meant what she said. She wasn't going to put up with their rough treatment any more.

When Andrew Pringle came home from one of his long rambles round the countryside, Dorothy greeted him with, "Liza's father's taken her away to help out at home. Her mother's ill, it seems. I'll have to get another maid. Just when I'd got the girl nicely trained, too."

He pursed his lips and looked at her sideways.

She knew then that he was up to something and her heart skipped with anxiety. That look never boded well.

"Don't bother to look for another maid, my dear. We'd have had to give Liza notice soon anyway."

"Give her notice - but why?" Had he lost more of their money in one of his silly schemes? Surely not? No, he was beaming at her like a village idiot, not avoiding her eyes and mumbling out a confession of his losses as he had so many times before.

He put an arm round her shoulders. "I've got some good news for you, my dear."

Heart sinking, she walked with him into the small parlour, asking, "What is it?" before they'd even sat down, so anxious was she. His idea of good news and hers often differed markedly.

"I've decided that we're never going to do well here in Pendleworth. There simply aren't enough opportunities in an industrial district for a man like me."

Dorothy felt her apprehension increase and weigh down like a lead weight in her belly. "Just say it straight out, Andrew," she begged.

After another of his assessing glances, he took a deep breath and said quickly, "Well - I've decided to emigrate to Australia."

For a moment she couldn't believe she'd heard correctly and could only blink at him as she considered the words in her mind. But whichever way she tried it, they meant the same. "Emigrate to Australia!" she said faintly. "But - but why should you go there?"

He was avoiding her eyes completely now. "We're all going there, Dorothy. In fact - well, I've already booked our passages."

"What?" The room spun round her for a minute, then settled down. She wanted to scream at him, but what good had getting angry ever done? In his own quiet way, he was as immovable as the Pennine Hills. "I don't understand. Why should we want to go to Australia? It's a place for convicts, not gentlefolk." And they were gentlefolk, however poor they'd become. That thought always consoled her.

"That's Sydney you're thinking about. Western Australia has far fewer convicts than the rest and only got some because they asked for them. People mostly go out there as free settlers."

"Well, I still don't want to go."

"You must allow me to be the judge of that, my dear. I am, after all, the head of the family, and I sincerely believe we'll be able to make a better life for ourselves in the Antipodes. Things are going from bad to worse in England and people tell me there are great opportunities in the colonies if you're willing to work hard - which I hope I am."

When Andrew gave her a radiant smile, like a small boy who'd brought her a present, her heart sank still further, for he only got that look in his eyes when he was well into one of his schemes. She should have guessed he was up to something because he'd been in a good mood lately. But he always cheered up as spring approached and he could spend more time outdoors in his beloved garden, so she had thought nothing of it. "Well, you can just go there on your own."

Find out what it's like and if it looks promising, Kitty and I will follow you later."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. You see, you'd have nowhere to live if you stayed here. Anyway, a wife's place is with her husband and a daughter should live with her parents till she marries, especially an only child like our dear Kitty."

For a moment Dorothy could hardly breathe, then the words came out twice as loudly as usual. "What do you mean, we'd have nowhere to live? We have this house."

"Not any longer. I've sold it to Mr Ludlam. We're going to need the money to buy a piece of land in Australia, you see. A farm. My forebears were farmers and now I'm going to be one too. That's why things haven't gone well for me before. I've been going against my nature."

Dorothy had difficulty putting words together and they came out in short, angry bursts. "But - but what if it all - what if it goes wrong?" Most of his schemes did fail, but there had always been the house to fall back on - that and her small annuity. This time they would have absolutely nothing left except the fifty pounds she received every year, the legacy of an old aunt, which had been intended for pin money not household expenses. He always took it away from her immediately, anyway.

Andrew waved her objections aside. "I won't let it go wrong. Now, I really must start clearing out my shed and you will have to start on the house because we're sailing next month. We can only take essential items with us - and no furniture. It's quite providential that Liza has left, really, but Maggie will be coming with us, of course. She's been with us for fifteen years and I'm sure she won't leave us in the lurch, so I've booked her a passage, too."

Dorothy sat motionless for a long time after he'd left, feeling stiff and shocked. This was worse than anything he had done before, far worse. She decided to say nothing to Kitty yet, dreading her daughter's reaction, but went to confide in Maggie, who stared at her in horror and burst into tears.

"Mrs P, he never!"

Dorothy could only nod unhappily. "You will come with us, won't you, Maggie?"

"How can I? I have Mam to think of - and my sisters. How can I?"

That evening, after their daughter had gone to bed, Dorothy tried once more. "Andrew, I've been thinking. It'd make so much more sense for you to go out to Australia first and - and investigate the situation. Kitty and I can go and stay with my sister. You know how Nora dotes on the girl. She'll have us for sure." And would make them pay for it in small services and regularly expressed gratitude, but it'd be worth it.

He glared at her. "Certainly not! You're my wife and you're coming with me. So is our daughter. Have you told her about it yet?"

"N-no."

"Then I'll tell her myself in the morning."

The news made Kitty throw a tantrum and she continued to weep at regular intervals till her eyes were puffy and her nose red. Dorothy argued, scolded and cajoled, trying every way she could think of to make her husband see reason, especially as Maggie was definitely not coming with them. But nothing they did or said could move him from his decision.

It wasn't often she wept, but she did now, and just as bitterly as fifteen-year-old Kitty.

But although their tears drove Andrew from the house into the garden he loved and cared for himself, they did not make him change his mind.

When Liza's mother was well enough to come down and sit on the rocking chair in the kitchen, things improved a little in Underby Street. Mary Docherty was as gentle and ineffective as ever, but Con would not let anyone except himself bully his wife, so she was able to protect the younger children a bit from her two eldest sons and share out the food more fairly, too.

One evening a few days afterwards Da came into the back room, beaming broadly, and beckoned to Liza. "Come into the shop a minute, will ye, girl? I've some good news for you."

She brightened and followed him, hoping he'd got her place back. He hadn't found the clothes she'd hidden, and she was sure Mrs P. would understand if she didn't have all her old things.

"Come over here to the light." He grabbed her and ran his hand down her body in a way that made her yelp in protest and try to pull away. "Stand still, will ye!" he roared, feeling the swell of her breasts in a dispassionate way, pinching the flesh of her upper arms, then turning her round first one way, then the other. After the initial shock she didn't dare protest, because Con Docherty was very much master in his own house, and even Niall and Dermott did not dare defy him.

As he pushed her away, he pursed his lips, put his head on one side and asked, "How old are ye now?"

"Eighteen."

He nodded. "Thought so. You're a woman growed, that's for sure."

What had got into him tonight? When had he ever cared about her? It was sons who mattered to him, not daughters.

"Teddy Marshall's wife has been dead these two months now. 'Tis hard for a man on his own. He needs a woman to look after things for him." He smiled knowingly as he added, "And of course, to warm his bed."

Liza stared at him in horror, guessing what was coming next.

"So I telled him he could wed you. I could see he fancied you when he came into the shop last week. It'll be better for you than going off to work for that uppity Pringle woman. You'll have your own house and Teddy's a good provider. He's comin' over to see you in a few minutes. We'll fix it all up then." He stared at her again, then added abruptly, "You'd better do something with your hair, though, instead of scraping it back in a bun like an old woman. There's some ribbons in the bottom drawer. Use one of them." His eyes softened. "You've a fine head of hair on you. You're black Irish, like your mother's side of the family. Good lookers, the Brennans." He made a fist and stared down at it admiringly, "Though the Dochertys are built stronger."

Liza didn't move for a moment - couldn't! - and when she found her voice again, it came out nearer to a squeak. "But Da, Mr Marshall's old!"

He scowled. "He's no more than thirty-five. Younger than me. A man's in his prime at thirty-five, let me tell you, young lady. It's women as fade after thirty. Look at your mother. She once had rosy cheeks an' bright blue eyes just like

yours." He gazed into the distance for a moment, then added more softly, "And Mary was prettier than you'll ever be - you're too sharp-featured, you are - though you wouldn't think it to look at her now."

Liza sought desperately for some way to change his mind. "But, Da, I don't want to marry anyone yet." Especially not Mr Marshall. He was another large, heavy-handed man, very like her father only uglier. Mrs Marshall had died in childbirth recently and the latest baby with her, but he had three sons and young as they were, they were already shaping up to be bullies. Liza's little brother Kieran was absolutely terrified of them. She shuddered at the memory of how Mr Marshall had caught her in a corner and rubbed himself against her last time he came into the shop. It had made her feel sick and she'd expected her father to protest, but he hadn't. Now she understood what that had all been about. It was the real reason she'd been brought home from Mrs Pringle's. No doubt Mr Marshall was slipping her father some money to hurry things up. Well, she wasn't going to agree to it. Oh, no!

Her father nudged her. "'Tis the best chance you're ever likely to get. You'll be set for life. Young men don't have money like the older ones do."

"I won't do it."

He scowled at her. "Don't be stupid, girl! Have a bit of sense for once!"

There was the sound of clogs on the road outside and the little brass doorbell on its wobbly curled spring tinkled wildly. Con turned round smiling. "There you are, lad. I was just tellin' my lass that you're to wed her."

Teddy Marshall nodded. "Good." But his eyes were on Liza, raking up and down her body.

She stared back at him in horror. He had thinning brown hair and a lumpy nose, and always smelled sour, as if he washed even less than her father did. He had beaten his other wife, given her many a bruise, broken her arm once - everyone knew that.

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to get wed," she said as firmly as she could manage, because inside she was shivering with fear at the thought of defying Da.

Both men ignored her.

"I'll go and see the priest tomorrow morning, then, shall I?" Teddy said over her head.

"Aye. Sooner it's done the better. Our Nancy's twelve. She can take over helpin' me in the shop an' my Mary will just have to pull herself together."

"But Da - "

Con turned to his daughter. "We'll have no more silliness from you, my girl. You'll do as I tell you or you'll be feeling the back of me hand, so you will."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to marry anyone." She nodded to the other man and tried to soften her refusal. "Thanks all the same, Mr Marshall."

Da came over and clouted her, then pushed her towards his friend. "Stay here and talk to Teddy. He'll soon change your mind. I have to see your mam about something." He was gone before she could protest.

Mr Marshall moved swiftly to grab her. Liza shrieked and tried to pull away but he ignored that and began to fumble with her body, his fingers tweaking her nipples. She wriggled and tried to kick him but he was so much bigger than she was that she felt like a toy in the hands of a clumsy child.

"I won't do it!" she panted, glaring up at him. "No one can make me say yes in church. Let go of me!"

"You will do it," Marshall said. "And we can so make you." Again his fingers nipped and tweaked, and she couldn't help crying out in pain.

When he started to lift her skirt, however, there was a cough behind them and her father said, "That's enough, lad. A bit of a feel's one thing, but you don't get anything else afore you're wed. She's a good girl, my Liza is, an' she's staying untouched till Father Michael has married you."

Teddy let go of Liza, breathing deeply and adjusting his trousers. "Well, let's get it done quick, then."

"Come away to the pub with ye and we'll discuss the details. A sup or two of ale an' you'll last out a bit longer."

The two men laughed and went out together, but Marshall turned at the door to stare across at the white-faced, trembling girl. "I'm looking forward very much to makin' a woman of you, Liza Docherty."

She shook her head, holding herself upright until they'd left, then she drew in a long, sobbing breath. Mr Marshall's clogs make a loud clopping noise as he walked away, her father's shoes sounding like a faint echo beside them. He always made a lot of noise, Mr Marshall did. And his sons used their iron-tipped clogs to terrorise other kids. They'd be hell on a young step-mother, those three would.

She couldn't seem to move again until the sound of the men's footsteps had died right away down the bottom of the street and only then did her mother slip into the shop to join her. "He told you, did he, love?"

Liza smeared away the tears. "You knew what he was planning, Mam. You knew!"

Mary's voice sounded weary. "He only told me this morning."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"What good would that have done?"

"It'd maybe have given me time to think of something. I tell you flat, Mam: I won't marry Mr Marshall."

Mary looked at her daughter. "Your da will make you." Her voice was toneless, as if she didn't care about that or anything else.

Liza stared at her. Married to Mr Marshall, she'd soon look like this. His other wife had done. Beaten. Hopeless. At that moment, she determined that she'd do anything, even run away from home, if necessary, to escape such a fate.

"Liza, love - "

"I won't marry him," she said again, then shouted, "I won't. I won't!" But the piles of old clothes muffled the words so that they faded to nothing and her mother had already shuffled away into the back room. "I won't, though," Liza whispered, then sniffed away the tears that were still threatening before following her mam.

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