

Like No Other

Chapter 1. 1753

Bored by the wench's halting attempts at conversation, Bill decided it was time to get some return for the tedious half-hour he had just spent listening to her talk as they walked up towards Whin Ridge. She had some right barmy ideas, this one did. But she also had a father with a bit of money in his pot, so Bill had been pretending an interest in what she was saying. Well, you had to court 'em a bit, didn't you?

'Let's stop an' catch us breath,' he growled, chucking his coat down on a grassy patch. 'It's a steep climb, yon.'

'Yes, but worth it for the view. Just look at that sky.'

He sighed and wished she'd shut up. He'd have to listen to her mauldering on and stare at her plain face every day once they were wed, but not now! Now was for other things. At least there was some pleasure to be had in walking out, even if the lass was taller than you. There was little joy in marriage, as far as he could see, but now that his mam had died, he had to get someone to look after the house and spin the wool into thread for him to weave, and it might as well be this one, whose father was his good friend.

'That's enough o' talkin',' he growled, and reached out to pull her down with him on the grass, where her height wouldn't matter. With the ease of long practice, he thrust one hand down the front of her bodice and forced his knee between her legs - as well as he could, with the long skirt and petticoats she was wearing.

She didn't scream as any other wench would have done, she just yelled, 'Leave go of me!' and tried to shove him away.

'Ah, you'll like it,' he said, willing to woo her a little more.

She didn't give him the chance to prove this. A ringing slap on his ear was followed by a series of punches to any part of his body within reach, delivered by a hand as hard and muscular as most men's. Yelling, he rolled off her and scrambled to his feet.

She rolled in the opposite direction and jumped up facing him. 'If you try to touch me again, I'll make you sorry!' she panted, face flushed. When he made no further move, she began to set her clothing in order.

He tugged his breeches straight, keeping a wary eye on her. They all knew she had a hot temper. 'Damn you, woman! Why did you lead me on like this if you didn't want a bit of a fondle?'

She paused to gape at him. 'Lead you on? How have I been doing that?'

'You agreed to come out walking with me, didn't you? What else did you think I meant by it?'

She glared at him, struggling to keep the tears back now.

He spat on the ground at her feet. 'Well, you can keep your precious body all to yourself from now on, Rachel Bloody Smedling. I'd as soon bed a viper as you. Sooner!' And so he'd tell her father next time they met, friend or no friend.

'Hah! Think I'd waste myself on a stunted weasel like you!' she flung back at him, trying to set her hair to rights by feel. 'I wasn't leadin' you on, an' well you know it, Bill Withers! When you asked me to come out for a walk, I told you straight there'd be no messin' around. I couldn't have said it plainer.'

'Aw, that's what all the lasses say when they're in the village, but they change their minds quick enough once you get 'em out o' sight o' their mothers.'

She bit back further words. What was the use in arguing? She'd been surprised when he asked her to go walking, for no other fellow ever had, but he'd been so nice about it she'd thought that once, just once, someone liked her well enough to find out if they got on comfortably together. But all he'd wanted was her body and - she scowled as she worked it out - someone to look after his house now that his mam had died. She should have realised that sooner, but she'd been so happy to have a fellow interested in her, like the other lasses. Well, she wouldn't fool herself again, indeed she wouldn't.

He snatched up his fustian jacket and began to drag it on, frustration making him want to hurt her. Stunted weasel, was he? He'd make her sorry she'd called him that, by hell he would! 'You should think yoursen lucky anyone's botherin' to take an interest. I haven't seen no one else askin' you to walk out with them.' He bent again to retrieve his hat and stick, winced at his sore cheek and added spitefully, 'Proper old broomstick, you are! Grateful to me, that's what you should be, grateful!'

She felt sick with anger, as much with herself as with him. 'Grateful!' she mimicked, with the biting sarcasm for which she was famous. 'Grateful! To have an animal like you pawing at me.' She forced a laugh and tossed her head so that some of the soft, straight hair fell in front of her eyes and hid the tears still welling there. 'Well, I'm not grateful! I'm sickened by your slobberings. What's more, a hog'd not only have better manners than you, it'd smell nicer, too.'

Breath hissed into his mouth as he jammed the shapeless felt hat down on his greasy black hair. 'Well, there's other wenches as aren't sickened. Plenty of 'em.'

'Go an' slobber over them, then!'

He'd been a rough bullying sort of boy, she remembered suddenly, from the days when she'd been free to play out a bit with the other children. And he clearly hadn't changed much since.

'I will go an' find mesen a prettier bit of skirt, that's for sure,' he growled. 'Don't think I ever fancied you, you old horse-face! 'Twas the dowry I were after. An' someone to take Mam's place. A man can't see what's in bed with him in the dark, but a good dowry goes a long way in the daylight, an' so does a steady hand with the spinning wheel.' He swished his stick at her, making her jerk backwards, then turned to leave.

'What?' The word was a gasp of air as his meaning sank in. She caught up with him in two leaps, barring his way with a ferocious look on her face. 'What d'you mean - dowry?'

He took a step backwards. He had no mind to provoke her further, not with that expression on her face. 'I meant nothin', nothin' at all. It were just words.'

"Tweren't just words, neither, Bill Withers. What did you mean by it?" Her voice was quieter now, but the fury flashing in her eyes and throbbing behind her words made him feel nervous. She was too strong for a woman, this one was. He preferred them soft and manageable.

'It were nothin', I tell you. Just a way o' speakin', like.' He kept a wary eye on her hands, which were curled into two very unfeminine fists, and tried to edge round her.

One of those hands shot out and before he could take a second step, Rachel had seized his stick. After a very brief tussle, she wrenched it away from him and used all the strength she could muster to send it whistling through the air, tumbling end over end as it bounced down the hillside.

He watched it open-mouthed, then edged back from her.

'I reckon I'm a match for you, Bill Withers,' she said, determination in every line of her body, 'so if you don't tell me what you mean by a dowry, you'll have to fight your way back to Upper Clough.'

'Well, then,' Bill's words came out in a rush, anger at being bested by a woman making him lash back at her in the only way he dared, 'it's your father as has talked about a dowry. He's offered five guineas to anyone as'll marry you an' take you off his hands. I could use the money, yes, an' a wife to spin for me, but I've changed my mind about havin' you! I'll find myself a softer armful to warm my bed, by hell I will! You hardly even look like a woman! Proper old beanstick, you are! No, a maypole. They should tie ribbons round your neck an' save themselves the cost of that new pole they're talkin' about setting up.' He grinned at his own wit, then scowled again as she made no response, just continued to stare at him, grey eyes narrowed like a cat's. 'So you can keep that precious body of yours untouched, an' I'll look for a likelier lass.'

She moved out of his way then and flourished one hand in a gesture to him to leave, for she could not have spoken a single word. Sick humiliation sat in a cold lump behind her anger and she stood motionless, arms folded across her breast, as she watched him hurry down the path towards the village. A couple of times she saw him glance over his shoulder as if he was afraid of her following him, but she didn't move, couldn't, for very shame. It was all she could do to hold her head up and keep her back straight.

Only when he was out of sight did she allow her shoulders to sag. 'Oh, how could he?' she whispered, thinking of the shame her father had put upon her. Knowing him, she could guess he'd have made the offer in the Lower Clough alehouse for all to hear, because that's where he spent most of his time. Most of his money, too, lately. Oh, she could kill him!

And then, suddenly, it was all too much for her - the tall thin body, the gaunt face, the mind that refused to be quiet and the temper that flared out of control sometimes and made enemies for her. Why had she been born like this? Why couldn't she be soft and pretty like her cousin Nell? It would be a waste of time fussing over her appearance, whatever her mother and Nell said. When did she have time to primp, anyway?

And even if she did change how she looked, she would still be too tall and she wouldn't think like the other girls, would she? Or behave like them, either. When the lasses of her age had started to walk out with lads and sit with the older women of an afternoon, spinning and gossiping, Rachel Smedling had been at home learning to weave, as the brother who'd died would have done. For some reason it had amused her father to teach her - and when she'd shown an aptitude, he'd kept her at it, for her work brought him more money than she would ever have saved him by spinning wool for him. She was as good a weaver as any of the men in the village, but it didn't make her more popular - it only emphasised how different she was.

She moaned in her throat, misery trickling through her veins like slow, thick acid. What had she done to deserve this? She stood next to her father at her loom in the attic for as long as he did every day, longer since he'd taken to the drink. And when she wasn't weaving, she had to help her poor ailing mam to keep the house clean or else labour on the family's plot of land. It seemed sometimes that the work never ended. From early morning till she fell into bed, she was always behind with something.

Lately she had grown to hate him, whatever it said in the Bible about honouring your father and mother! And she knew he felt the same way about her. It had soured him when her poor little brother died and since then he spoke to her scornfully, mocking how she looked, not only at home, but publicly.

A grim smile sat briefly on her face. He didn't try to hit her any more, though. Last time he'd slapped her, she'd told him straight she'd thump him back if he laid a finger on her again. When he'd raised his fist, she'd grabbed a piece of wood and clouted him with it. Hard.

Her mother had got so upset he'd backed down, saying Rachel wasn't worth bothering about, and he hadn't touched her since, but it had never occurred to her that he would try to get rid of her by bribing the men from the Weaver's Arms to wed her.

She drew in a few deep breaths and tried to calm down, but the thoughts still twisted round and round in her skull. She could guess why he'd done it, of course. Last year she'd insisted on getting her share of the weaving money and had vowed she wouldn't work at her loom if she didn't get paid for it, though she had had to let the loom stand idle for five days to prove that. Then he'd given in, but with a sour grace. So now that he couldn't steal all she earned, she supposed he didn't see any use in her staying around.

And if it weren't for her mam, she'd leave home this very day, oh, she surely would - and take her savings with her. He knew she had money put by, but he didn't know where or how much, though he'd gone through her things once or twice looking for it, she could tell that. She was very careful nowadays when she added new coins to her store, making sure he was out at the alehouse before she dug up her little tin box.

Suddenly, it was all too much! Overwhelmed with shame and anguish, Rachel buried her face in a tussock of springy moorland grass and began to weep hoarsely. Bill Withers! If her father had to buy her a husband, he should look for a better bargain than that! Buy her a husband! Oh, dear Lord, the shame of it!

A few days before Rachel went for her walk, Maggie Kellett sat down in her sister-in-law's comfortable kitchen in Hepstone, in the big farmhouse where she had grown up and lived till she got married. 'Oh, Bella, if only Justin could have got somewhere closer to home. I'm going to miss you so.'

Bella sighed. Maggie's shoulders were drooping, her blond hair was in tangles and her eyes were red-rimmed. The younger woman was a weak reed and it would be a relief not to have her living nearby, sending little Peg running to her aunt for help at every small crisis. 'You'll be fine once you get settled in,' she said bracingly. 'Mr Armstrong told your Justin the house in Upper Clough has three bedrooms and a proper parlour. Think how much better that'll be than the cottage you've got here, with only the open loft for the children to sleep in. And,' she looked suggestively at the other woman's swelling stomach, 'you're going to need more sleeping space once you've had the child.'

Maggie cradled her belly, but her face didn't brighten. 'I was later on than this when I lost the last one.'

'Well, you had two fine little girls before that, didn't you?'

'And lost two others. And I still haven't given Justin the son he wants.'

Bella ran out of patience. 'For heaven's sake, stop complaining, Maggie! Once the move is over, you'll be much happier in Upper Clough. You know you will.' She ignored the gulp and the trembling lips. 'Now, have you got everything ready for my Ned and Caleb Hesketh to load on the big cart tomorrow?'

'Everything except Justin's books and writing things. He wouldn't let me pack them till today because he was working on a sermon. You know what he's like, always reading in the evening. I can hardly get a word out of him sometimes.'

Bella wasn't getting into that argument again. 'Then you'd better go home and start packing the rest, hadn't you?'

Once she got home, Maggie began to tie the books into bundles. 'Justin thinks more of these than he does of me,' she muttered and brushed away another tear. She didn't want to leave Hepstone. The village might be small, but she had grown up there and her only remaining family lived just outside the village. Justin should have been offered the living here, for he'd been curate for eight years, but he wasn't the sort of man to talk softly to anyone, even his patron, especially when he saw an injustice or a better way of doing something. Eight years of living in a cramped cottage had made her feel very bitter. Well, who wouldn't be, in the circumstances? She'd come down in the world, she definitely had.

Her brother Ned was lucky. Men always had the best of everything. He'd inherited South Lea Farm from their father while Maggie had got nothing except some money, a few bits and pieces of furniture and her mother's silver locket. And of course her husband had immediately taken charge of the money, so she hadn't had the pleasure of spending it.

Why, even Caleb Hesketh, a distant cousin of Justin's, had a small farm of his own beyond the village, and he was bastard born. She sometimes thought she should have set her cap at him instead of Justin - except that Caleb was so big and stern he always made her feel a little nervous. And Black Top Farm, where he lived, lay right out on the edge of the moors, a bleak place where the wind whistled like a pack of demons in winter. She'd not fancy living there, nor enjoy living with his mother. Joanna Hesketh was a sharp-tongued woman and had nowhere else to go if her son married.

But her Justin was such a fine-looking young man that she'd been in a daze of love almost from the moment he came to the village as curate. He was still handsome; it was she who looked and felt worn out. She sat down on the edge of the bed and was tempted into lying down for a rest. Her back was aching again and she had craved sleep all the time she had been carrying this child.

Feeling guilty for her sharpness, Bella came round at dusk to help and found her still in bed, the books lying scattered on the floor, the little girls' needs forgotten. Eh, Maggie lass, Bella thought sadly, looking down on the sleeping woman, I don't know how you'll go on without me.

Justin returned home and frowned to see no evening meal ready and the packing still not finished.

'She's not carrying this baby easily,' Bella offered by way of an excuse.

'She never does. Thanks for your help, Bella, and for having the three of them to stay with you tomorrow.' He stifled his annoyance and went to shake Maggie awake. 'Time to get us all something to eat, love.'

As his wife yawned and took her time about getting up, he picked up the last few books and tied them together. He had finished his final round of farewells and duties as curate now, and was more than ready to leave Hepstone.

Only when little Peg came to try and help him did his expression lighten. But a shriek of dismay from the kitchen made the frown return to his face again, as he went to sort out his wife's latest domestic crisis. Perhaps she would cope better in a larger house. Or perhaps she wouldn't. Perhaps . . . he shook his head and banished such thoughts. She was his wife and whatever her faults, he owed her respect and love.

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