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***May 1845***

Carrie Preston watched stony-faced as the midwife helped her mother give birth to what would be her ninth live child. After Lily's birth four years ago, she'd hoped her mother wouldn't have any more children. At twenty-two she was sick of caring for babies and small children. But her father only had to talk lovingly and her mother would do anything for him, then before you knew it there'd be another baby on the way.

“Eh! Come over here quick an' give us a hand, lass.”

As Carrie stepped closer to the bed, Granny Gates thrust the squirming baby into her arms, with a terse, “There's another babby in there.”

“What? There can't be!” But Granny knew about these things because she acted as midwife at most of the births in the Lanes, as the poorer part of Hedderby Bridge was called.

“Didn't any of you guess it might be twins? Your mam must have been bigger than usual.”

“She doesn't go round showing us her belly and she allus looks fat when she's expecting! She just said this one was livelier than usual.” As Carrie cradled the tiny body against her, her mother gave a strangled scream and pushed out a second baby, then lay limply on the stained mattress while Granny cleaned her up.

Carrie groaned softly. Twins! Two babies to look after! That'd make seven sisters she had now and two brothers. How would they ever manage to feed and clothe the new ones? There wasn't

enough food to go round as it was, not with her father spending half his wages at the pub. If only Stott's didn't pay their men at the Dragon! So many of them started drinking there as soon as the coins were clinking in their pockets.

Carrie held the first baby carefully, not wanting it to do anything that would mess up her clothes. She only had one set and they were so ragged she was ashamed to go to her work at the new laundry that was replacing washerwomen for some of the richer families in town. She had a good job there, helping with the box mangle, earning twelve shillings a week, but she'd have to find a way to get some more clothes because her skirt was torn and frayed at the hem and her bodice was nearly worn through under the arms.

"They're healthy enough for all they're so small," the old woman said. "Listen to 'em shrieking. Here, give me that babby." Deftly she wrapped up the tiny creatures and laid them top to tail in the wooden box that was to have been the cradle for one.

Carrie stepped back, wincing as her new sisters continued to let out those thin wails that nearly drove you mad sometimes. She turned to look at her mother. The afterbirth had come away, just one for the pair of them, but surely there was more bleeding than there had been the other times?

Jane Preston groaned and twisted her legs as if in pain.

After a few more minutes, Granny turned to Carrie and said in a low voice, "Better fetch Dr Latimer to her. I can't stop this bleeding. I reckon she's tore hersen inside."

For a minute Carrie could only stare, then she ran down to tell her dad. Only he wasn't in the kitchen.

"Where's he gone?" she asked Marjorie, who was sitting in their father's chair near the fire, gazing dreamily into the flames.

"Dad? Gone down the Dragon. He said he couldn't stand the noise Mam was making."

Carrie glanced towards the pot on the mantelpiece. It had been moved. “He didn’t take any of the money, did he?”

Marjorie stared into the fire, not meeting her eyes.

Edith, always the quiet one but the most observant, said in her soft voice, “I think he took it all, our Carrie.”

“Oh, no! How are we to pay Granny now? And how will we buy food? Why didn’t you stop him, Marjorie?”

“’Cos he’d have give me a backhand if I’d tried.”

Carrie bit back more hot words. Marjorie, her next eldest sister, would do anything, say anything, to avoid a belting. And lately their father had become more violent. It was the drink, she reckoned, twisting his brain.

“I’ll have to go after him. I hope he’s got some money left. Granny says we need to fetch the doctor to Mam.”

Marjorie’s eyes filled with the easy tears she seemed able to produce for the slightest thing. “She’s not dying, is she?”

“She’s bleeding too much. Go up and see if Granny needs help.”

“You know I can’t stand the sight of blood.”

Carrie dragged her sister to her feet and shoved her towards the stairs. “*Go up!* Else it’s me who’ll be giving you a backhand. An’ you, Edith, make sure you don’t let that fire go out.” The others were in bed already. She could hear Dora, Grace and Lily whispering in the girls’ bedroom and knew Ted was fast asleep in the boys’ room upstairs. That boy could sleep through anything. Robbie was out drinking with his friends. Trust men to avoid being there for a birth. He was only a year younger than Carrie, but she felt many years older than him.

She left her brothers and sisters to it. Time enough to wake them if their mother . . . No, Carrie wouldn't *let* her die! She'd get the doctor to see her if she had to drag him here.

She snatched her matted grey shawl from the hook in the hall and rushed out into the night.

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It took only a couple of minutes for her to make her way down the narrow streets to the Dragon. Taking a deep breath to give herself the courage to confront her father, Carrie pushed her way into the warmth of the pub, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the smelly haze of smoke from the men's pipes, her eyes dazzled by the light from the gas burners set around the walls. She was tall enough to see over most folk's heads, but still couldn't spot her father so reckoned he must be sitting down at the far side, which was his favourite spot. Sighing, she began to move across the crowded room. He had to be here. He always came to this pub because it was so close, right at the foot of the Lanes on Market Street.

She stopped for a minute, feeling uneasy. It seemed as if the mood in here tonight was angry, men scowling, thumping tables, gesticulating. Had something happened?

A drunken man stepped backwards suddenly and bumped into her, grabbing her as she tried to avoid him. But though Carrie tried to pull away, he wouldn't let go of her arm. Instead he smiled and said, "Come an' have a drink wi' us, love," in a slurred voice.

"No, thanks."

"Go on. Have a drink. I'll pay."

The men round them began to call, "Have a drink! Have a drink!" some banging their pots on the tables or stamping their feet in time to the words.

Carrie tried to shake him off, but he was too drunk to listen to reason. When a younger man pushed through the onlookers and came up to them she tensed, hoping he wasn't going to join in the baiting.

"Let the lass go," he said in a sharp voice.

"Not till she's had a drink wi' us."

As the drunkard reached out his free hand and tried to feel Carrie's breast, she slapped him away angrily, but still couldn't manage to break his tight grip on her arm.

The newcomer grabbed the man's wrist and squeezed it hard. "*Let go, I said.*" His voice was loud enough to cut through the noise and make everyone nearby turn and stare at them.

The drunk yelped and let go, rubbing his hand. "What d'you do that for? I were only havin' a bit o' fun."

"The lass didn't like it."

"Thanks." Carrie tried to step back, but the other men around them didn't move.

Her rescuer studied her, then said quietly, "A decent lass like you shouldn't be in here at this time of night."

Carrie rubbed her wrist. "I wouldn't normally but I have to fetch our dad. Mam's just had twins and she needs the doctor. Only Dad's taken all the money."

"I'll help you look for him. What's his name?"

"Arthur Preston."

Her rescuer put two fingers to his mouth and blew a piercing whistle, then called out into the sudden silence, "Where's Arthur Preston?" He had the loudest voice Carrie had ever heard and for all he was still quite young, he had a presence that said he stood no nonsense from anyone. He was tall, looked sturdy and well fed. His brown wavy hair framed a rugged face and he had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

A chorus of voices in the far corner called out that Arthur was over there, so the two of them made their way in that direction. As they walked, the noise in the big public room gradually built up again so that they had to speak loudly to make themselves heard.

“Can you see him, lass?”

“Not yet—oh, yes. There he is. Thanks.” Carrie pushed her way through the last group of men. “Dad!”

Arthur Preston turned and blinked at her owlishly and she realised with a sinking heart that he was very drunk indeed. “Oh, Dad, how could you? Tonight of all nights.”

“Is it born yet? I hope it’s a boy this time.”

“It’s two girls. Twins.”

It took Arthur a minute to take this in, then he smiled. “Gorra have another drink for that. Two, eh? Takes a real man to get two at once. You hear that, lads? I’ve got twin daughters.”

Carrie shook his arm. “Mam’s really bad and Granny Gates says we’ve to send for the doctor, only there’s no money left. You took everything from the pot.” Not that there was ever much left in it by Wednesday.

He fumbled in his pockets and brought out a few coins, holding them on the flat of one hand and poking them with his fingertip. “There y’are. Take it.”

She felt like bursting into tears, but what good would that do? “Oh, Dad, is this all you have left? How are we going to buy food if you spend the money on drink?”

His foolish smile changed to a scowl. “Don’t you tell y’father what to do or I’ll leather your backside, big as you are.”

“Just you try to touch me and I’ll take a stick to you!” She stared down at the coins. “How am I going to pay the doctor?”

“Go an’ ask our Bill for help.”

“Uncle Bill’s already told you he won’t lend you any money. Haven’t you any more coins at all?”

As Arthur fumbled through his pockets again, she saw people laughing at him. Was it any wonder? He was drunk as an owl. His clothes were as ragged as you could get without being indecent and he smelled sour because he rarely washed these days. His own brother didn’t come round to see them now, because her father always tried to cadge money off him. Her aunt Sadie was a staunch Methodist and very much against drink, not allowing it into her own house. She would no longer speak to her drunken brother-in-law in the street.

Her father produced one penny more from his trouser pocket. Carrie added it to the coins in her hand and turned to leave, smearing away tears with the back of one arm. As she walked towards the front door, she found the young man who’d come to her aid still walking beside her, but she didn’t look at him, didn’t look at anyone.

When she reached the entrance, her companion put out his hand to bar her way. She looked at him warily. Now what?

“How much?”

She might have known that was what he wanted. They were all alike, men. Kept their brains in their trousers. “I don’t go with men.”

His face grew grim. “I meant: how much money do you need for the doctor?”

She shrugged. “Five shilli`ngs.”

He felt in his pocket and brought out half a sovereign. “Here, take this. And get some food with the rest of the money. You look hungry.”

Carrie thrust her hands behind her back. If she took it, he’d want something from her later. “I don’t even know you.”

“Eli. Eli Beckett, at your service.” He gave a mocking flourish towards the big room behind them. “I’ve come to help my uncle run this pub now my cousin’s dead.”

He held out his hand and Carrie shook it briefly, reluctant to touch him, she didn’t know why. The hand was warm and felt strong. For a moment they stared at one another and it felt almost as if they were the only ones there, then she pulled her hand away. She’d heard about Peter Beckett dying suddenly and had been sorry. He’d been well liked, a thin young man who’d never looked well, for all he ate good food every day.

She looked at the coin Eli was still holding out and was tempted to take it. It’d solve a lot of her present problems, including buying food the next day. “It’ll be a while before we can pay you back. *He* drinks more than ever when there’s a new baby.”

“I don’t want paying back. It’s my first month working here, and this,” he closed her fingers round the coin, “is for luck. Maybe if I do someone a good turn, fate will smile on me and I’ll get what I want.”

Carrie didn’t know about fate smiling on anyone round here. Most of the folk she knew thought themselves lucky if they could set bread on the table for their families every day, and didn’t try to think beyond that.

“What’s your first name, love?”

“Carrie.”

“Well, Carrie Preston, you nip off and fetch that doctor to your mother, then one day you can show me your new sisters. If they have brown eyes as pretty as yours, they’ll be lucky.”

For a minute she stared at him, then remembered her mother and muttered, “Thanks!” before hurrying off into the night.

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Eli watched her go: thin and all eyes, with that look people got when they didn't have enough to eat and were working too hard. She was taller than most folk round here, nearly the same height as he was, and there was something decent and honest that shone from her, for all she was wearing clothes that were little more than rags.

That damned father of hers ought to be taken out and given a good thrashing. Eli had had to watch it many a time in his parents' alehouse: men drinking away their money on wage day while their wives and children stood outside hoping there'd be enough left over to buy food. It was no different in this pub, even if it was bigger and sold wines and spirits as well as beer.

Well, there wasn't much he could do about that because selling drink was his living, but he didn't have to like how some men behaved, did he? One day he'd have a place of his own, a better one than this, somewhere for the more respectable folk to enjoy themselves, one with a proper music room attached. And he'd not let anyone get falling down drunk there, by hell he wouldn't!

He went back to Arthur Preston, found him arranging to have another drink "on the slate", and caught the potman's eye. "No more credit for this one, Jim."

The potman frowned at him. "But Arthur's a regular. He'll pay up later. He allus does."

"I mean it. No more drinks on the slate for him. Not today and not any other day, either."

With a shrug Jim turned away and went to serve someone else.

Arthur sat frowning, as if having difficulty understanding what was happening.

Eli looked down at him, not bothering to hide his scorn. "Get away home now, Preston. You've got two new daughters and a wife who need you, and you'll be served no more beer tonight."

For a moment anger darkened Arthur's face, then something about the other man made him bite back the hot words of protest. He heaved himself to his feet, scowling at

the tall young fellow eye to eye, for they were the same height. But even so, something held him back from lashing out and he spat on the floor instead to show his disgust. As he made his way out of the pub, swaying and unsteady, he grumbled under his breath and rubbed the place behind his ear that seemed always to be sore these days.

Eli followed him and stood in the doorway for a minute or two to make sure Preston didn't try to double back.

The other men at the table looked down into their pots until Beckett had moved away, then exchanged glances.

“What dost think of that new chap?” the oldest asked.

After grimacing as he considered it, the man next to him said slowly, “Wouldn't like to cross him. Looks like he can handle hissen in a fight.”

“Never heard of 'em *stopping* folk drinking in a pub afore,” another commented. “Not regulars, any road.”

“Aye.” They were all silent for a minute, contemplating this shocking state of affairs.

“What dost think of Arthur's lass?” one asked after a minute or two.

“She'd be bonny if she were better turned out. Most lasses make more effort than that.”

“She's too busy lookin' after all them kids. Eh, he's a wick 'un, yon Arthur is. Two more daughters!”

They raised their pots and drank to the new babies, then forgot about them as they got into an argument about which pub in town sold the best beer.

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When Eli next went into the kitchen behind the bar for a break, his uncle was waiting for him, looking angry.

“Jim says you stopped Preston from putting a drink on the slate. That man’s credit is perfectly good. Don’t do that again without asking me.”

“Preston’s wife’s just had twins.”

“There! He’d have celebrated in style if you hadn’t stopped him. And he allus clears the slate in the end. He’s all right, Preston is. Doesn’t start fights, drinks nice and steady. I only wish there were more like him.”

Eli folded his arms and leaned against the door frame. His uncle was one of the old-fashioned sort who just wanted to get as much money as they could out of his customers without thinking about tomorrow or the sort of pub he ran. He didn’t even provide food, though you could make a decent profit on it, just encouraged pie and cake sellers to come in and sell to his customers. It’d take a while to change things here, so Eli had to tread carefully. “It won’t win you friends on the town council, Uncle, to have men reeling home drunk, spending all they earn on booze while their families go hungry. You told me yourself the new Mayor’s a Holy Joe. He’s already stopped pubs opening on Sunday mornings till church is over. If we want that music licence, I reckon things’ll have to change round here.”

“*We* don’t want a music licence, *you* do.” Frank Beckett stared at his nephew before adding sharply, “Now, don’t stop any more customers from drinking their fill. I’ll tell Jim to put Arthur’s name back on the slate.”

Eli used the only argument his uncle would understand, “Look, Preston has a pretty daughter. She’ll go hungry if he spends all his money on booze.”

Frank frowned. “Found yoursen a lass, have you? Well, you can have your way about Preston, I suppose, as long as you don’t stop Jim serving any of my other regulars.”

Eli knew when to push and when to hold back. “All right. Now, you promised me when you brought me here that you’d let me start up a music room. How about using the back

of the big public area for a free and easy on Saturday nights? That'd be a start, bring more people into the pub. Then later we can make a proper music room. They're all the thing nowadays. If you leave it to me to arrange, I'll have partitions put round the back part of the pub and it'll earn you ten times what it does now."

"What, shut the back part away? Nay, I'm not doing that! It's the biggest room in any pub in town and I'm not having it changed! It's because of that room Stott's pay their men here and *that* brings us in customers every single week. We don't want Stott's going to another pub to pay out. That big public room earns our bread and butter for us, an' don't you ever forget that. And besides, it'd cost too much to put partitions in and buy that new furniture you were talking about. No, we'll wait a bit, save our money then decide what to do."

Eli had already noticed that his uncle was trying to wriggle out of his promise to let him have a music room if he came to work here. Well, Eli's father had said as much when warning him not to take up the job offer. His father had no time for his younger brother and was bitterly jealous of the way an old uncle had left Frank's wife some money and enabled him to buy the Dragon outright.

Knowing he had to make a stand now, Eli folded his arms and said, slowly and loudly, "If there's to be no music room then I'll not be staying. I told you that when you offered me this job, and I meant it."

"I didn't say there wasn't to be one, just not *yet*."

"We make a start on it right away or I leave."

His uncle's voice became coaxing. "You know you don't mean that."

Eli leaned forward, resting his hands on the table at which his uncle was sitting. "I *do* mean it. I can allus find myself another job because I'm good at what I do."

“But we *can't* close down the back part. Think of the money we'll lose. Look, we'll do what you suggested and set things up for a free and easy on Saturday nights. I'll have the piano brought in from the parlour and we'll find someone to play it so that folk can have a sing-song. I daresay there'll be one or two who can recite a poem too.” Frank smiled at his nephew. “There, how does that sound?”

“It'll do for a start, but only till we can set up a proper music room.” Eli had been here long enough to consider all the options and had already come to the conclusion that he needed somewhere larger and with a separate entrance if he was to attract enough customers, especially those of the better sort. “What about the old stables at the side, then?”

Frank stared at him. “The old stables? The place is in a right old mess, only good for storage. It'd cost a fortune to set that to rights.”

“But when it was finished, we'd have *extra* money coming in. Think of that.”

His uncle began chewing his lower lip. “Extra money, you say?”

Eli pressed his advantage. “It wouldn't take that much to clean it up. The roof's still watertight. I checked that yesterday when it rained. It'd make a nice big space if we knocked the stalls down—most of them only have wooden partitions, not walls. It needn't be too fancy, but it would need gas lights putting in there as well and—”

“More gas lights! Do you think I'm made of money? Do you know what the gas lights in the big room and the house cost me? The Hedderby Gas Company charges for each burner, you know.”

“But gas lights don't need cleaning and trimming every day like oil lamps do. Gas is the modern way to light a business.” Eli gestured towards the noisy, crowded public room. “It's a regular goldmine, this place. I reckon you can easily afford to put in a

proper music room.” He folded his arms. “I mean it, Uncle Frank. If you give me half a chance, I’ll make you rich. If you don’t give me a chance, I’m leaving.”

“But I don’t know owt about music rooms!” Frank looked at his nephew, read implacable determination in every line of his muscular young body, and tried desperately to work out how to avoid spending money while still keeping Eli here. He wasn’t so steady on his own feet these days and knew he couldn’t manage this place without help, but he didn’t like to spend good money unless he absolutely had to. He earned as much as he needed, enjoyed being a publican, just wanted things to go on as they were.

“I’ll *rent* you the stables and you can turn them into a music room,” he offered.

Eli walked across to where he’d hung his jacket. “Can you make my wages up tonight? I’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

His uncle’s voice rose to a higher pitch. “Now, hold on. Let’s be sensible. You can’t expect me to risk that much of my money without knowing how it’ll turn out!”

“You promised. If I had enough money of my own to rent the space and fancy it up, I’d not ask you to do it. But I don’t. And I only came to work here because of your promise.”

Frank saw his opportunity. “I’ll *lend* you the money, then.”

“Goodbye.”

“Come back!” He sighed and glared at his nephew. “We’ll talk about it in the morning, eh? Now’s not the time. And we’ll do a free and easy on Saturday night, see how that works, eh?”

Eli hesitated.

There was a sudden roar outside.

“Hell, someone’s started a fight!” He threw his jacket on the nearest chair and ran out into the public room, heading for the circle of men in the middle, shoving them aside

when they didn't budge. He was followed by the two potmen who'd been hired for their muscles as well as their skill in serving customers.

It took a while to calm everything down, by which time his uncle was calling "Last orders, per-lease, gentlemen!"

Eli didn't return to the kitchen until the doors had been closed behind the last customer and the potmen had cleared all the tables and washed the pots.

His cousin Joanna joined them there, looking even angrier than usual. "They were in a funny mood tonight. Even the folk in the snug were edgy."

Her father nodded agreement. "Aye. Stott's have cut wages by a bob a week and the men don't like it. Well, I don't myself! It'll reduce our profits, with most of Stott's men doing their drinking here."

Eli looked from one to the other. "I thought Stott's were doing well? They're the only light engineering works in town."

"They are doing well, never better, but the father died last year and the son inherited. He's a mean sod, is Athol Stott. I wish the cousin had inherited, yon Edmund. He's an easier man, doesn't look down his nose at you like that Athol does." There was an angry roar from outside the pub and Frank grimaced. "They're still fighting one another out there."

As he turned, he noticed his daughter, whose hair was falling down around her narrow face and who looked a bit dishevelled generally. "What happened to you, our Joanna! You look like you've been dragged through a hedge backwards. There's no *need* for you to go out on the floor at all now that your cousin's here. You should stay behind the bar in the snug from now on, as you did when our Peter was alive."

"You'd like to keep me caged up, wouldn't you?" She glared at her father then turned her scowl on her cousin. "And I think there's every need for me to keep on top of things out there."

She gestured to the big room. “This pub is *my* inheritance now my brother’s dead and I’m not letting you set me aside for Eli.”

Her father’s fond expression turned angry. “Your mother didn’t like you going out on the floor, you know she didn’t. You only started doing it after she died.”

“*She* used to do it.”

“She had to when we were starting up and every farthing counted. She didn’t go out on the floor once we’d bettered ourselves, an’ neither should you. It’s not *necessary*. Some of those men don’t know how to treat a decent woman.”

“Just let any man treat me less than respectfully and he’ll be out on his ear! Besides, I’m not on the floor much with the snug to run. Where else would the women and better folk drink if I didn’t keep that nice?”

“Aye, and you stick to the snug, my lass.” He could see the anger on her face still, so said placatingly, “I’ll see you looked after in my will, you know that, but a woman *can’t* run a big pub like this on her own, especially with most of our customers coming from the Lanes. It’s too rough round here, an’ well you know it.”

“You’re quite happy for me to go out there in the mornings, though, when someone has to clear up the mess those dirty devils leave behind. I’m not too good for that, am I?”

Eli watched with interest, wondering if he could turn this to his advantage. His cousin Joanna had been hostile towards him from the day he’d arrived. She was three years younger than him, twenty-five and still unwed, with her hair screwed back unflatteringly into a tight knot at the nape of her neck. She dressed plainly in dark clothes because she worked hard in the pub from dawn till dusk and he had to admit she kept the place nice, cleaner than you’d think possible.

He reckoned her plainness came from the anger that seemed to emanate from her, not from her features which weren’t bad. But from what his uncle had said when he persuaded Eli to join him here, she’d own a major share in this pub when her father died and he, as nephew, would get only

a minor one, so it'd be better to keep on her good side. He hadn't managed to make friends with her yet, but he would.

He'd never seen Joanna smile, not really. She wore a slightly more pleasant expression when greeting a few favoured regulars, mostly women and elderly men, who sat in the snug and caused no one any trouble, but when she was at rest the corners of her mouth turned down and her dark eyes had a brooding look to them.

No, now he came to think of it, there was one other person she smiled at—Bonny, who cleaned the pub, a moon-faced woman whom others would dismiss as an idiot, but who had enough sense to do the cleaning and who talked perfectly sensibly, if slowly and simply.

He'd find a way to get Joanna on his side, he vowed. He knew what he wanted, which was to run a music room, and no one was going to stop him from getting it. No one! Though he'd make a start by running a free and easy here on Saturdays.

Later he'd get his uncle to agree to turning the old stables into a music room. If he didn't, Eli really would leave. He wasn't wasting himself here for years on a vague promise of being left a share in the pub when his uncle died. It was now that things were happening, with music rooms opening all over the place, and Eli wanted to be part of it.

Anyway, if his uncle broke one promise, he'd probably break the other and leave everything to Joanna.