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Swindon, Wiltshire: March 1910

The night before, Nell slept only fitfully. She kept waking with a start, terrified her father had found out what she was going to do and was coming to drag her back and beat her. In the end, the sounds from other houses in the terrace told her it was time to get up. She lay for a moment or two longer, feeling desperately sad, then got out of bed and lit a candle.

That woke her sister Mattie, who didn't say anything, just lay staring at her from the far side of the bed, looking as miserable as Nell felt. At twenty-nine, Mattie knew how serious this was and only desperation would have driven them to it.

It was strange. Mattie was running away to avoid marrying the man Nell's father had chosen for her, and Nell was running away so that she could get married.

They had to shake their youngest sister awake, as usual, and Renie was excited rather than sad. To a sixteen-year-old, this seemed like an adventure.

Today all three of them were running away from their bully of a father. Nell was leaving with Cliff, and they were going to get married as soon as they could. Now she was twenty-one, she didn't need her father's permission. He wouldn't have given it, she knew, even though she was expecting Cliff's child. Her father said it was his daughters' duty to support him in his old age.

Renie was going to live with them but Mattie had to make her own way in the world. Nell didn't know where her sister was going, anywhere away from *him*, and was upset

that Cliff wouldn't let both her sisters come and live with them. But he could get stubborn sometimes and he'd put his foot down about this. Mattie was too old to get married now, he said, and she'd be on his hands for ever. What's more, she'd want to rule the roost and he wasn't having that.

Any other morning she and her sisters would have chatted quietly as they got dressed, but today they were too sad to talk. Nell managed to squeeze into four pairs of drawers, three shifts, three petticoats and two blouses, then rolled up stockings and other bits and pieces, and crammed them into a shopping bag. She had to take as much with her as possible without *him* realising.

Renie and Mattie's clothing was similarly bulky, and Renie also had a shopping bag full of bits and pieces. They thought they could get away with taking that to work without anyone realising what they were doing.

Even if they'd been able to leave openly, there were no suitcases in the house because their father didn't approve of going away on holiday. He'd only once gone on the annual trip put on by the Railway Works for its employees and their families, and after that had refused point-blank to waste his time or let his family go on it. Nell had cried about that several times as a child, seeing all her friends looking forward to Trip Day.

Any other father might have noticed their sudden plumpness today, but not Bart Fulden. He shovelled down the breakfast Mattie put in front of him, then left for work without so much as a thank you.

Only then were the three of them free to hug one another and whisper final hopes and wishes. After that Mattie stepped back and said harshly, 'Go on with you. No use drawing it out. And make sure you get your wages today. You'll need every penny.'

Nell couldn't hold back a sob and a final reminder. 'Remember, Mattie, wherever you are, be sure to get in touch with Cliff's family in two years' time. We'll do the same and

let them know where we are.'

Renie said nothing, just looked at Mattie, her eyes brimming with tears, then gave her eldest sister another crushing hug and rushed out of the house.

Nell followed more slowly, catching up with Renie and telling her sharply to stop crying. She automatically greeted other women they met as they walked to the laundry where they both worked. It was a cold morning with rain threatening, and she got teased about wearing extra clothing to keep warm. They noticed. *He* hadn't.

After they'd clocked in and were heading towards their work stations, Renie whispered, 'I'm frightened. He'll find out, I know he will.'

'No, he won't. It'll be all right, I promise you. We've planned it very carefully. He won't catch us.'

But Nell was afraid, too. She knew their father had no idea what they were planning to do, but still, fear of him churned inside her.

At quarter past eight, Renie put their plan into operation, doubling up as if in pain, then rushing to the outhouse. She didn't come back and the charge hand sent Nell to see what she was doing. When she got back, she reported that her sister had a bad stomach upset.

When the charge hand went to check up, there was no trouble persuading her to let Nell off for an hour to take her home, Renie looked so white and sickly.

'Your sister shouldn't have come in today. I could tell the minute I saw her that she was sickening for something. And you hurry back, Nell Fulden. I'll have to dock your pay for every hour you're away, you know.'

But when the charge hand had gone back to work, Nell slipped along to the office and begged for their pay up until yesterday. 'If I have to get something for Renie from the chemist and I've no money at all. You know what my dad's like.'

‘Why do you both need your wages?’

‘In case I can’t get back here. Dad’ll kill us if we’ve no money for him this week.’

And because everyone knew what a bully Bart Fulden was, they let her have the wages owing up to the previous day. She sighed in relief as she put the money in her purse.

Not much to run away on, less than two pounds, but better than nothing.

They got to the station with several minutes to spare before the nine o’clock train, finding a place to wait behind a pile of luggage, hoping no one they knew would notice them.

‘What if your Cliff doesn’t come?’ Renie asked, shaking the raindrops off her scarf and settling it more comfortably round her neck.

It was Nell’s greatest fear, too, but she wasn’t going to admit that. ‘He will come,’ she insisted.

But at five to nine Cliff still hadn’t arrived.

‘He’s not coming.’ Renie clutched her arm. ‘Dad’ll kill us for coming home from work.’

‘Of course Cliff will be here.’ Surely he wouldn’t let them down?

At three minutes to nine, he rushed into the station, carrying a suitcase and a canvas sack with a drawstring containing his toolbox, as they’d planned. Without his tools, how would he earn a living for them?

He gestured to them to go to the platform where the train was already waiting, and went to buy the tickets. He came running to join them, only just in time. After he’d put his suitcase in the overhead net, he sat down, still clutching his toolbox.

He didn’t say a word, just stared at her then looked out of the window. Nell had expected him to comfort her, put his arm round her. He was supposed to love her, but he hadn’t acted lovingly ever since she told him she was expecting. And that wasn’t fair.

As the train whistled and began to puff slowly out of the station, Nell saw a shawled

figure standing watching near the entrance. In spite of the shawl being pulled down over the woman's head, she recognised her sister Mattie instantly. That was the final straw. She began to sob.

'Be quiet!' Cliff snapped. 'I don't know what you've got to cry about.'

Nell tried to control herself but the odd tear was still escaping when the train pulled into Wootton Bassett, where they were to get off.

'Hide in the waiting room till the other passengers have left the station,' he ordered.

He kept watch near the door, then beckoned them. 'Right. It's clear.' He hurried them across to a low wall at one side, boosting Nell and Renie over it, then passing them the bags. Finally, he scrambled over himself.

Nell hoped he would give her a hug now that the first part of their escape was over, but all he said was, 'Hurry up.'

He set off walking away from the centre of the little town. 'I told my cousin we'd wait by the side of the road.'

Renie shivered. 'I hope he comes quickly. It's going to rain again soon.'

Nell nudged her. Cliff seemed on edge, so it was best not to chat and disturb him.

Only a few minutes later one of the new motor lorries that were starting to replace horses and carts came into view, moving far more quickly than a horse ever could. Nell had never ridden in a motor vehicle before and felt a bit nervous about this part of the journey. She didn't like the smell it made but the faster they got away the happier she'd be.

'Here's my cousin,' Cliff said unnecessarily as the lorry drew up next to them.

The driver got down from his high seat at the front, grunted something that could have been a greeting, and came round to lift the back edge of the tarpaulin covering the goods. 'They can shelter from the rain under it,' he said to Cliff. 'You come in the front

with me.'

'We should have gone on by train,' Renie said, scowling at the dirty floor of the truck.

'How many times do I have to tell you? My cousin's giving us a lift so that your damned father won't be able to trace where we've gone from Swindon. He's taking this load to Gloucester and from there we'll go by train to Manchester.'

'Are we still going to Rochdale?' Nell asked. Cliff hadn't wanted to talk about details.

His voice was sharp. 'Why do you keep asking that? You know I've got relatives in Rochdale who'll help us get started. That's better than going among strangers. My mother's written to them. In between crying her eyes out because I have to leave.' He looked at her as if that was her fault.

Nell shut her mouth with a snap. They'd never agree about his mother, who had spoiled him rotten and would never consider anyone good enough for him. The few times they'd met, Mrs Greenhill had looked down her nose at Nell. She hadn't liked visiting them. It was a dark, mean little house and his mother set a poor table, even when guests were invited.

Cliff helped her up into the back of the lorry, where she and her sister had to squeeze in uncomfortably between two crates.

As he got Renie settled, Nell couldn't stop another tear tracking its way down her cheek and didn't bother to wipe it away.

'Damned well stop crying!' he yelled suddenly. 'What have *you* got to cry about? I've give up my job and family for you. You're getting a wage earner to look after you and the baby, aren't you? That's what you women want, isn't it? All I can say is, it'd better be bloody worth it. Make sure you give me a son.'

She stared at him in shock, never having seen him like this. As if it wasn't his baby too. As if she could do anything about whether it was a son or a daughter.

Scowling, he yanked the edges of the tarpaulin round them and went to sit in the front next to his cousin.

She exchanged quick glances with Renie, but didn't make any comment. What could you say? Done was done.

Nell felt lost today, not her usual self at all, and to top it all, she was worried sick about Mattie, who still hadn't recovered from a bad cold and shouldn't be out in such weather. To her surprise, she was also more than a bit nervous of this new Cliff, who'd just spoken to her harshly and looked at her as if he hated her. When they started courting, he'd been so nice, so loving, but he'd changed.

She got annoyed with herself for being so timid. He might have had to give up his job, but that was more his fault than hers. He was the one who'd forced himself on her, so why was he blaming her for the baby? And once he'd done it, he'd expected her to let him use her body every time they could steal an hour together.

She couldn't understand what he saw in it. She found it an uncomfortable business and it must look so silly. No wonder people did it in secret. But it was what men and women did together when they got married, and it seemed to please him, so she'd just have to put up with it as other wives did.

Renie reached out to take her hand and as rain began to fall more heavily, the two sisters pulled the tarpaulin right over themselves and huddled close to one another for warmth.

'We'll be all right now we've got away,' Renie whispered.

A little later she said, 'Your Cliff's grumpy today, isn't he? Is he often like that?'

'No, he isn't. He's worried about getting away from Dad, that's why he's so bad-tempered. He's not a big man, like Dad, would never hold his own in a fight.'

But Nell wasn't nearly as sure as she pretended that they'd be all right. She wasn't

sure of anything today, not even the man she was going to marry.

The industrial parts of Lancashire came as a shock to the two girls, so smoky was the air and so grimy were the buildings. It was far worse than the centre of Swindon and the railway works. Whole towns seemed to be wreathed in black smoke as you passed through them by train.

The station in Manchester was crowded, but they were lucky and found a train to Rochdale ready to set out.

The railway station there wasn't even in the town centre, so they had a long walk to get to Cliff's relatives. The man they were going to was some sort of second cousin and had sent a letter telling them how to get there. Cliff had never met him before, but family helped one another in times of trouble.

By now, Nell felt so weary she could hardly put one foot in front of the other. Even Renie, usually full of energy, was quiet and pale. And it was raining again. Would it ever stop?

Cliff's cousin George and his wife Pauline looked at Nell disapprovingly and hardly said a word to her. She wanted to yell out that it wasn't her fault she was expecting a baby, but was afraid of being shown the door if she upset them, so kept quiet.

Lodgings had been found for the two sisters a few doors away, and Cliff was to sleep on the sofa at his cousins'. Before they knew it, Nell and Renie had been taken along the street and left for the night, even though it was only half-past eight.

'I'm not doing food at this hour,' the landlady said as the front door closed behind Cliff. 'I don't serve meals after half-past six.'

'But we haven't had any tea!' Renie protested.

'Nothing to do with me. You should have come earlier if you wanted tea. Won't hurt

you to go without food for one night. I went to bed hungry many a time when I were a little 'un.'

Nell shook her head at her sister, who looked at her incredulously then snapped her mouth shut. After the landlady had left them, she said, 'I'm sorry to have brought you to this.'

'It's not your fault.' Renie came to sit beside her on the bed. 'Shall we nip out and buy something from the corner shop?'

'No. We'll manage tonight and she'll feed us in the morning. We need to save every single penny of our money.' She hadn't given any of their wages to Renie, who always spent any coins she got straight away, buying sweets, magazines or other rubbish. Not that any of them had had much chance to treat themselves because their father took nearly all of their wages. 'We might as well go to bed. It's cold and damp in this room.'

'But I'm thirsty.'

'There's water in the bathroom tap.'

In spite of her complaints, Renie was soon asleep but Nell lay awake worrying. If this was an example of how Cliff kept his promise to look after her, what was the rest of her life going to be like? He hadn't even asked the landlady about their evening meal, and had gone quickly back to his cousins' for his own tea.

Only what could she do but marry him with a baby on the way?

She didn't cry, was beyond tears now. She'd expected to feel happy at escaping from her father, but instead she felt apprehensive about the future.

Before she went to sleep, she murmured a prayer for her eldest sister, hoping Mattie had found somewhere better than this for her first night.

She was woken next morning by a nearby mill hooter, which was nearly as loud as the one at Swindon's railway works. It was soon followed by others, then the clatter of clogs

on pavements. She was so tired, she dozed off again, and of course Renie never stirred till someone shook her awake.

There was a knock on the door and the landlady yelled, 'Get up, you two! Everyone else has gone to work and I want you out of the house.'

'What about breakfast?' Renie asked when they went down.

'What about it? You've missed it. I cleared the table half an hour ago. It's up to the Greenhills to feed you now. Don't take long. I want to clean the house. And remember, no lodgers are allowed inside during the day, so don't come back till tea-time.'

'But we need something to eat,' Nell protested. 'We didn't have tea last night, either.'

'Well, you're not getting anything from me now. I don't usually have your sort staying here. I only took you in for the sake of poor Pauline Greenhill.' She looked at Nell's stomach suggestively.

Nell could feel herself blushing and as soon as the door had closed behind the landlady, she said. 'Hurry up. We'll have to buy something to eat.'

She staggered as they went out into the street and Renie caught hold of her. 'Are you all right?'

'Just a bit dizzy. I don't feel well in the mornings at the moment.'

They went along the street and knocked on the door to find Cliff waiting impatiently for them. 'You're late. I have to go and see about a job. It's not looking like rain, so you might as well walk into town with me and start getting to know your way round.'

'What time will we meet you?' Nell asked, feeling as if she was talking to a stranger.

'Come back here at twelve.'

'What about food?' Renie asked. 'We haven't had anything to eat since you bought us those sandwiches yesterday. That landlady didn't give us anything last night and not this morning, either. She said we'd missed the time for breakfast. But no one called us down,

did they? She's just trying to cheat us.'

He looked at them in surprise. 'I thought tea and breakfast were included in the board. She's certainly charging enough.'

'She told us to clear out and said the Greenhills would have to feed us.'

'Just a minute.' He went along the street and knocked on the door of their lodgings.

They could hear the sounds of an argument but couldn't make out the words.

Nell was still feeling faint, so leaned against the wall.

Suddenly their bulging shopping bags were hurled out on to the pavement, spilling clothes all over the place. Renie ran along the street to help Cliff pick them up, but not before some of them got wet and dirty. Nell was feeling so queasy she didn't dare move for a minute or two.

Cliff came back with her bag, still looking angry. 'She should have given you meals. I'll ask my cousin for something. You can't go without food.'

He left them standing outside and when he came back, said, 'There's some bread you can have. Don't use too much marg on it. They've not got a lot of money, not with five children. We'll buy them another loaf while we're out. You can leave your bags here in the front room.'

Five children, Nell thought with a shudder. She didn't want that many. Just this one was causing so much trouble. She felt more tired than normal and sick every morning.

When they left his cousins' house after being given one thin piece of bread and scrape each, he said, 'You'd better come with me and wait outside the upholstery place while I go and see about the job. We'll get something else to eat after that, then go and look for some other lodgings for you. If I get this job, you can start looking for work as well. It'd make a big difference to have us all in bringing something in.'

After a few minutes, Cliff came outside again. He looked so downhearted, Nell could

tell at once that he hadn't got the job. She didn't like to remind him they were still hungry. Renie had wanted to buy a loaf, but she'd told her to wait. They weren't spending a penny unless they had to, because who knew what they'd need their own money for? Cliff had far more than them. He'd been saving for years. She'd heard his workmates tease him about being tight-fisted.

He looked at her. 'I didn't get it.'

She went to pat his arm. 'I'm sorry, Cliff. What shall we do now?'

'The foreman said there might be a job in somewhere called Milnrow. I have to go there by train, but I think you'd better stay here in Rochdale. I don't want to pay three lots of fares for nothing. I'll see you later at my cousin's. Don't go back there till teatime, though.'

He was gone before they could do anything. He seemed quite desperate to get a job and she could understand that, but it was only their first full day here so if it took him a few days to find one, it wouldn't be the end of the world. It clearly meant a lot to him, though. When she thought about it, he'd had a job right from school, working for Great Western, first as a lad who did anything asked of him, then as an apprentice, then as an upholsterer, one of the better jobs in the railway works.

This must be the first time in his life he'd not had a wage coming in and he was panicking. That would explain why he was so . . . tense.

But he could still have given some thought to them, and he hadn't. Not even one minute's consideration.

She linked her arm in her sister's and they started walking along by the river in the centre of town, which was crossed by several bridges. One of them was quite new and when they stopped to look over the edge at the muddy, shallow river, an old woman passing by stopped to chat and told them the Esplanade Bridge had only been finished

the previous year.

‘Why is the water red?’ Renie asked.

‘From the dyeworks, love. It often changes colour, depending on what they’re using there.’

Renie wrinkled her nose. ‘It doesn’t smell very nice.’

The woman laughed. ‘Where there’s muck there’s money!’ She moved on and as it started raining again, they followed her to the more sheltered Yorkshire Street, with its rows of shops.

It was a long, cold day and they didn’t always find shelter from the showers, so got wetter and wetter. At noon, Nell bought a stale lardy cake, cheap because it’d been baked yesterday. It gave you quite a lot for your money, and they shared that, finding a drinking fountain to wash it down.

The next time it began to rain hard they went into the library for a while. Nell read the newspapers while Renie found a book about a maid who fell in love with her mistress’s son.

They kept quiet, trying not to be noticed, but after a while a man came over to them. ‘Are you members of the library?’

‘Er—no. We’ve just come to live in Rochdale and we’re waiting to see if my—husband gets a job. I thought I’d see if I could find a job too.’ She indicated the newspaper.

‘Well, you can stay another hour till you’ve checked out the jobs, but we can’t have every Tom, Dick and Harry using the library as a shelter when it rains.’

Nell remembered to keep her hand hidden inside her skirt, so that he didn’t see her lack of a wedding ring. When he looked at her as if expecting a reply, she nodded and said, ‘Thank you.’ What a mean fellow! She went back to looking down the columns of jobs. Many of the job names meant nothing to her, because they were in the mills, and

what did she know about mill work?

Anyway, once she and Cliff were married, she'd have a house and husband to look after and wouldn't be able to work full-time. That left jobs like cleaning or doing people's washing privately, which didn't pay much. She sighed. Cliff wasn't the only one who'd come down in the world. The supervisor at the laundry in Swindon had said she was a good worker and might be put in charge of two other girls soon. She'd lost her chance at that now, as well as everything else she'd dreamed about. And it was all his fault.

After an hour, the man who'd spoken to them before came to stand nearby so they left the library, to find it still raining steadily outside.

'We can't just walk the streets,' Renie said. 'I'm soaked already. Surely Cliff's cousin will let us wait in the house?'

They went back, but when Pauline opened the door, she didn't invite them in, just kept them standing on the doorstep.

'I wonder if we could shelter in your house?' Nell asked. 'Cliff's gone to somewhere called Milnrow and we've nowhere else to go.'

'You should have been more polite to your landlady.'

'Polite? She refused to give us any tea or breakfast. And it was Cliff who quarrelled with her because of that, not us.'

'She told me you'd turned up your nose at bread and marg.'

Nell drew herself up and said quietly, 'Not one crumb was offered, and she didn't give us a cup of tea, either. But if you'd prefer to believe her, I can't stop you. Don't let us prevent you from getting on with your housework.' She turned away and put her arm round Renie, who was shivering. 'Come on, love.'

'I suppose you'd better come in.'

'Not if we're unwelcome.' Nell began walking away, calling over her shoulder, 'We'll

be back at six. Cliff should be home by then.'

'You should have gone in, even if she was unfriendly,' Renie said. 'I'm so c-cold.'

'Not when she thinks we're immoral and liars. And she hasn't called us back again, has she? She's just let us walk away.'

'What are we going to do for the rest of the afternoon?' Renie asked.

'Find shelter, if it's only at a bus stop. Cheer up. Things will get better once Cliff finds a job.'

'He looks at us as if he hates us.'

'He's worried about money, isn't himself at the moment.'

'We've lost our jobs too.'

'It's different for a man.'

'I don't see why,' Renie muttered.

'Because he's the breadwinner.'

'We all have to buy food. And I'm starving hungry again.'

'Don't let's argue, love. Now, keep your eyes open. There must be somewhere we can shelter.'