

PART ONE

Lancashire, July 1848

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Dora sighed in relief as the final siren went and the mill machinery began to slow down and switch off. She picked up the broom and swept her area, then set everything ready for the following morning. The overlooker came round and peered suspiciously under her rows of spindles for fluff, but was unable to fault her on anything. He'd have liked to, though. Benting loved to fine people. You'd think the money went into his own pocket.

It had been hot and stuffy all day, so bad inside the mill that the women tending the spinning bobbins had removed any clothes they decently could. But even that hadn't been enough to make them comfortable, it never was, because *he* refused to let them open the windows. He never seemed to suffer from the heat so that pale face of his was never marked by a flush like the women's were.

Outside the air was fresh, getting cooler now that it was past seven o'clock. Dora breathed in deeply, walking along for a while with one of her friends, not saying much, just feeling pleased that the working day was over. When they parted company, she decided to take the longer way home by the river. She could see a man walking towards her along the curve in the river bank, moving even more slowly than she was, but apart from that distant figure she was blissfully alone.

The grass was soft and green beneath her feet and the shallow water sparkled as it flowed over the pebbles. She glanced longingly up at the moors which overlooked the

small town. They were dotted with sheep on the lower slopes, with gentle curves of dull green above. Perhaps she could persuade her little sisters to go for a walk on the tops with her on Sunday. The bracing air up there would clear her lungs of cotton fluff and you could see for miles, something she craved after being shut up in the steamy heat of the mill all week.

She stopped to breathe deeply again, half-closing her eyes. And then she heard it, the sound of voices jeering and taunting further along the river, followed by a yelp of pain. It was coming from a clump of trees and bushes, so she couldn't see who it was, but lads could be so cruel. She couldn't bear to think of them hurting some poor creature on a lovely evening like this, so she turned in the direction of the sounds.

When she saw what was happening she began to run, shouting, "Stop it! Stop it!" at the top of her voice.

The three youths spun round in surprise as she shoved one out of the way and ran past them, bending to pick up the puppy that was tied to a stake. It had been huddled down, quivering with fear, blood showing on its brown and white coat where the stones had hit it.

"What do you think you're *doing*?" she demanded, untying the rope from its neck and flinging it aside as she cuddled the shivering creature to her bosom. "Get off home with you at once!" And then she recognised the leader: Huey Benting, eldest son of the overlooker at the mill and just as much of a bully as his father.

"I'm only doing what Dad told me. It's been coming round the houses trying to steal food and leaving its messes on the footpath. It don't belong to anyone, so he said to kill it."

Her heart sank. Interfering in this would make yet another reason for Benting to pick on her at work, she was sure, but she wasn't going to give in. "So you decided to torture

it.” Anger made her voice louder than usual. “Brave, aren’t you? Three big lads against one little pup. Well, I won’t let you do it.”

Huey took a step forward, grinning. “It’s none of your business what I do an’ I reckon I’m stronger than you, so it’s you as can get off home. But you can give that dog back to me afore you go so that I can finish what I started.” He took a step forward, hands reaching out to take the puppy.

She turned to run, but his friends had moved to either side of her to prevent escape. Her heart was thudding now because they had a gloating look on their faces and there was no one within earshot if she called for help. But she couldn’t, she just couldn’t give them back their victim, which was still pressed against her in a warm, shivering bundle.

And then someone stepped out from behind a nearby tree and shoved Huey away from her. “Leave the lass alone!” ordered a deep voice.

She looked in relief at the man now standing between her and the three bullies, a man who looked as if he could take care of himself. He was tall, his dark hair sun-streaked and his skin tanned, as if he’d spent a long time in the sun. He was almost good looking, but his nose was too long for that and there were deep creases in his cheeks. His clothes were shabby and hung on him as if he’d lost weight, but they were well cared for, and he was clean shaven, unlike most men, without even a hint of side-whiskers.

The three lads moved closer together and Huey opened his mouth to answer back but at a glare from the stranger, he closed it again. That surprised her. Not many folk could face down a bully with only a look, especially when it was one against three, for these were well-grown lads of fifteen or so, not children.

“Be off with you,” the stranger repeated.

Huey hefted the stone in his hand and all hung in the balance for a moment or two, then he hurled it towards the river. They shuffled away with occasional backward scowls

and when they were out of reach, Huey turned to yell, "You'll be sorry, Dora Preston!"

She could guess that she'd be at the receiving end of rubbish thrown in the street for some time to come. She'd seen these three do it to others, usually people weaker than themselves. Once it had been an old man who hadn't got out of their way quickly enough. The police constable had stopped that eventually and had a word with them. Well, she didn't care if they did pick on her. She'd saved the puppy and that was what counted. She smiled at the stranger. "Thanks ever so much. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"It's a good thing I heard you shouting. You were foolhardy to stand up to them on your own, lass."

She looked down at the puppy, now nestled trustingly against her as if he knew there was no longer anything to fear. "I couldn't let that Huey kill him."

"He's hurt. Let me have a look at him."

As the man took the puppy from her, she saw that his right hand was missing parts of the first three fingers and the injury still bore the fading red of skin healed recently. She could tell that he was waiting for her to flinch away from it as other people had probably done.

"I had an accident. Doesn't hold me back much," he said off-handedly.

"We're used to accidents like that in a mill. One of my friends lost part of her little finger when it got caught in the machinery. She said it didn't hurt till over an hour afterwards. It stopped her working for a week or two, though. How did you do yours?"

"I was in the Army. A rifle exploded." He looked down at his hand and a bitter smile twisted his face because he knew it had been a deliberate act of sabotage not an accident, though he'd never found out who'd done it. Someone he'd disciplined, no doubt. "This stopped me for longer than a week or two because it got infected. They thought I was

going to die.” He stared at it, then added in a low voice, as if talking to himself,

“Sometimes I wish I had.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. You couldn’t ask too many personal questions of a complete stranger.

He glanced at the river then back at the pup, changing the subject completely. “We could wash its injuries, if you like. It’s best to keep wounds clean.”

“Oh, yes. The water will be all right here because we’re upstream of the dye works. On the other side of the mill where I work the river was bright red today with the run-off.”

He stopped at the edge of the water to look sideways at her. “My name’s Gideon. Yours is Dora, I think that lout said?”

“Yes.” She pulled a face. “Such a silly little name, Dora.”

His smile warmed his whole face and quite took her breath away, and somehow now he seemed good-looking. “What would you like to be called if you could choose?”

“Anything except Dora. It’s short for Theodora, which is even worse. My mother chose stupid fancy names for all of us girls.”

“I think Dora suits you. It’s a nice, neat name.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, but wished he hadn’t described her in such an ordinary way—nice, neat!—she’d rather he’d said she was pretty. She held out her hands for the puppy, but he moved with it to the edge of the water.

“I’ll wash him. You’ll get your skirt wet, and my boots are fairly waterproof.”

“It doesn’t matter. These are only my working clothes and they’re all sweaty today. It was so hot in the mill.”

“It must be hard work keeping those bobbins going.”

“Yes, and boring, but there’s not many other ways for lasses to earn their bread in Hedderby—unless you go into service, and I don’t fancy that at all. I’d hate to be shut up

in a house all day.” She couldn’t hold back a sigh. “I’d love to do something more interesting, though. One of my older sisters works in music halls, in a comedy act with her husband. Imagine travelling all over the country and wearing pretty clothes every day. She has some lovely clothes.” She looked down at herself and grimaced. “She used to work in the mill, too, but what she’s doing now is a lot better.”

“Travelling’s not always pleasant, especially in winter. Anyway, you’ll probably get wed one day then you’ll be able to stop working at the mill.”

“Hah! There are lots of married women in the mill. They have to keep working there to feed their children. They come in tired in the mornings and they go away even more tired at night. And when they get home they still have their families to look after. I don’t want to live like that.”

He crouched in the shallow water, immersing the puppy, calming it when it panicked and gently cleaning the blood off with the fingertips of his left hand. “I don’t think there’s any serious harm done, just cuts and bruises.” When he’d finished, he held up the little creature eye to eye and smiled at it. “Now, young fellow, I hope you’re duly grateful to Miss Dora.”

The puppy let out a shrill bark and tried to lick his nose, which brought another of those wonderful smiles to his face. Dora sighed, wishing she could stay here talking to him, but the light was fading and it must be tea time. “I’d best be getting home. They’ll be wondering where I’ve got to.”

“What shall we do with this little fellow?”

“I’ll have to take him with me. I’m not leaving him here to be killed.” As she spoke she caressed the puppy, who licked her hand and bared his sharp white teeth in what looked like a grin. Her movement brought her close to Gideon and she found herself staring up at him, her breath catching in her throat again. He was such a fine figure of a man and

kind with it. She wanted to know him better. And she could tell that he too felt that instant attraction between them from the way he was looking at her.

Then his smile faded and he took a step backwards. "Don't!" His voice was harsh now, no hint of a smile.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not for young girls like you. I've seen too much, done too much . . ." His voice cut off abruptly and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. When he opened his eyes again, he seemed cool and distant, the smile gone completely. "I'll walk you back to the streets where you should be safe from those three louts."

He did so in silence then handed her the puppy. "Here you are. You'll be all right now." After a nod of farewell he strode off along the main street.

She stood and watched him go, wondering why he had said "Don't!" to her in such a way when all they had done was look at one another. *All!* Her cheeks grew warm as she thought of how it had felt being close to him. None of the lads she knew had ever made her feel like that.

Then she realised why he'd said it. He was older than her, so of course he'd be married. Yes, that would be why. All the best men were.

She wondered where he lived, what sort of woman he'd married. She'd never seen him before and she knew most people in Hedderby by sight. Now that she came to think of it, he hadn't spoken like someone from her town, either, though he didn't have a southern accent as some of the performers at her brother-in-law's music saloon did. Strange.

And why she was standing here thinking about him instead of making her way home, she didn't know.

That same morning Eli Beckett received a letter he'd been waiting for impatiently. He tore it open right there by the door, read it quickly, then went to find his wife. "Carrie, love, that architect we wrote to in London wants to see us to discuss building our music hall."

She turned from spooning food into their little daughter's mouth, her face lighting up. "That's marvellous." Then she noticed his arm. "Eli Beckett, what's happened to your sling? You know the doctor said you should still support that arm till it's properly mended."

He pulled a face at her. "It's all right now. He said it was only a simple fracture, though it hurt like hell at the time."

"As soon as I've finished giving Abigail her breakfast, I'm going to find that sling and you'll wear it if I have to knock you out to fit it on you."

He grinned. "You wouldn't win, but we'd have fun trying. Look, love, I'm favouring that arm, not picking anything up with it. I'm not stupid. But I'm going mad with nothing to do. The sooner we get the Pride rebuilt, the sooner we can start bringing in money again."

"You're a stubborn man, Eli Beckett."

"And you're a wonderful woman, Carrie Beckett."

"Oh, go on with you! Read that letter to me while I finish feeding this young madam." Expertly she caught the food in the spoon and slipped it into Abigail's mouth again.

My dear Mr Beckett

I found the letter from you and Mr Jeremiah Channon very interesting and am sorry for the troubles you've had with your music saloon. I don't like to think of someone impersonating a member of my profession like that and building the sort of theatre that falls down. I'm

glad you caught the miscreant.

I'm very busy but I do want to help you. I haven't the time to design a new theatre for you, but I could modify a previous design. Since your neighbour Mr Channon is a responsible architect, he would be able to supervise the day-to-day work.

I wonder if the three of you could come down to see me in London to discuss it, bringing measurements and site plans? For the coming week you can find me any afternoon at the above address, but after that I shall be travelling part of the time.

Yours sincerely

Saul Barton

Eli and Carrie beamed at one another.

“No fear of him cheating us like that other fellow did,” she said. “Barton has an excellent reputation, Jeremiah says. When do you want to go to London?”

“How about today? Then we can see him tomorrow.”

She gaped at him in shock. “Today? But . . . what about Abigail?”

“Someone in your family would have her for us. There are many advantages to being part of a big family. It wouldn't take a minute to throw some things into a travelling bag. We wouldn't need much for a couple of nights in London. And I know Jeremiah has already made new site plans, so we can just up and go.”

She reached out one hand to clasp his briefly. “I'm still getting used to having the old Eli back, the one who's always impatient and wants to do things yesterday.”

He shuddered. “I'm glad I can't remember those months after the Pride burned down, from what you tell me about how I behaved. Getting hit on the head when the new building collapsed was a blessing in disguise.” He looked at her expectantly. “Well? Can

we go down to London today?”

“Why not? You go and see Jeremiah, ask if it’s convenient for him, and I’ll nip round to Gwynna’s to see if she’ll have Abigail. If we hustle, we can catch the midday train. I just hope we can find somewhere decent to stay. It’ll be quite late when we arrive and—”

But Eli had already left.

As she went into the house Dora braced herself for arguments. In the kitchen savoury smells filled the air and made her mouth water. There was no sign of her stepfather Nev, but her stepmother was stirring something on the stove and her little sisters were setting the table. Raife was sitting in his usual corner reading a newspaper. He was a great one for reading newspapers. She smiled just to see him. Nev’s father was like a kindly grandfather to them all, though he wasn’t really a relative, and she was hoping desperately that he’d be on her side about the dog.

Essie turned to greet her, spoon in hand, and stared. “What have you got there?”

“It’s a puppy. He is, I mean. That Huey Benting had him tied up and was trying to kill him by throwing stones at him, so I rescued the poor little thing. Then Huey and his friends turned on me, but a man came along and sent them away.”

“No need to bring the puppy home with you,” Essie said sharply.

“He doesn’t belong to anyone and if I let him go, those three will catch him again and kill him. Anyway, he’s a lovely little fellow, aren’t you?”

By that time her sisters had come over and were stroking the puppy, making cooing noises at him. Dora looked at Raife pleadingly over their heads and he winked at her, so she said it straight out, “I thought we could keep him and—”

“Oh, no! We definitely don’t need a dog,” Essie said at once. “They’re a lot of trouble and they make a right old mess of the floor in wet weather. Let it loose on the other side

of town then that Huey won't find it."

"He will. I know he will. And anyway . . . I don't want to let the puppy go. He's the dearest little creature."

Essie sighed. "Look, love, you're not here most of the day. It'd be left to me to deal with the puppy and I don't have the time or inclination with three toddlers in the house as well as you lot."

"I could look after him for you," Raife said in a mild voice. "I'd like a puppy to keep me company. I had a dog when I was a lad. They make good friends if you train them properly and you know I'd do that, Essie."

Dora held her breath, willing her stepmother to change her mind. "Please," she said softly when the silence continued. "He's such a little love. Look at the way one ear flops over at the top."

"He may be little now but he'll grow bigger," Essie said. "They always do."

"I don't think this one will grow very big." Raife took the puppy out of Dora's arms to examine it more closely. "Look at his feet. They're small and neat. Puppies that are going to grow big have much larger feet compared to their bodies. I think this one will be quite a small dog."

The puppy swiped a quick lick at his chin then looked round, bright-eyed, from one person to the other, as if he knew they were discussing him.

"He must have a nice nature. If he's been ill-treated, it's not made him snap at anyone. And see what an intelligent look he has in his eyes." Raife looked at Essie. "I'll see to him in the daytime, love. Time hangs a bit heavy for me since the music saloon burnt down, so I'd be glad of the company. Eh, I miss playing the piano there, I do that."

Essie threw up her hands. "On your own head be it, but what my Nev will say when he gets back, I don't know. Just make sure you keep that creature from under my feet, clear

up after him out back and don't let him traipse mud into the house when it's wet."

"We will." He winked across the room again.

"What are you going to call him?" Grace asked.

"I don't know." Dora took the puppy from Raife. "What are you called?" she asked it.

The dog put its head on one side, then gave her finger a small, experimental bite.

"Ow!" She looked at him and then slowly smiled. "Are you telling me we should call you Nippy?" When he let out a soft woof and gave her another of his doggy grins as if to approve, everyone laughed.

"Nippy it is, then," Raife said. "Now, Essie love, I reckon this young fellow needs something to eat. Have we got any scraps?"

She sighed and spread her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Yes. Get two of those old tin bowls off the shelf in the scullery and give him a drink of milk first. Better wait a bit then to give him food if he's been clemming or he'll make himself sick. He's very thin."

"I'll get it for him," Gracie said at once.

"No. He's your sister's pet so she must be the one who looks after him when she's at home," Essie said firmly. "And we'll get one thing straight from the start. When you get married, Dora, the dog goes with you."

The girl looked at her in amazement. "I'm not even walking out with a fellow, let alone thinking of getting wed."

"You're nineteen and pretty. It's bound to happen within the next year or two, and I'm not being left with a dog."

Dora pulled a face. There was yet another reason for not getting married, though she didn't say it now. If she was anything like her mother, she'd have one baby after the other. Eleven of her mother's babies had lived and a few others had died, but bearing the final one had killed her mother and it was a good job Nev had married Essie because she

was raising the child. Dora's earliest memories were of minding a little brother or sister, or changing a dirty clout, and she'd had enough of it, thank you very much. To her relief, Essie turned her attention to someone else.

"Gracie! Hurry up and finish setting that table. I'll be serving the meal as soon as your brother gets home."

"Aren't you waiting for Carrie and Eli?" Dora walked across to the scullery for the old bowls.

"They've gone off to London for a couple of days to see an architect about rebuilding the Pride, so your niece has gone to stay with Gwynna. Eh, it'd never have been possible to gallivant about like that when I was young, but now people can set off for London by train without thinking twice about it."

Nev came in just then, smiling round at everyone then going to hug his wife. "That smells good, love. I'm a bit sharp-set tonight. Eh, who's this?" He stared across the room at Nippy, who was far too busy gulping down the last of the milk and polishing the empty bowl with his tongue to pay the newcomer any attention.

"It's Dora's dog," Raife said. "But I reckon we s'll all enjoy having him."

Nev beamed at them. "Eh, yes. I've allus wanted a dog."

Dora heaved a sigh of relief. Essie would do anything to keep Nev happy. The two of them had married late in life after Dora's mother died, but were more like young lovers than old ones, showing fondness for one another in word and deed. Her younger brother and next sister Edith came in shortly afterwards and by the time she'd explained Nippy's presence to them, the food was on the table. And good food it was too. No going without in this house, thanks to Nev's ability to turn a penny into a shilling.

Essie waited till everyone had been served to continue her explanation of why their eldest sister was missing. "Carrie and Eli had a letter today from some architect in

London who builds theatres and it seems he can design them a new one. So they went down to see him and Mr Channon went with them. He's going to oversee the building and do it properly this time, so that it won't fall down. Eli was that set up about it. Now he's better, he's itching to get his music saloon up and running again.

"Music halls they're starting to call those places now," Raife reminded her. "And this one's going to be much fancier than the old one."

"We'll all be glad to have our shows back, shan't we?" Nev said. "There were so many clever folk playing at the Pride—singers, acrobats, minstrels, even dogs." He looked across at Nippy who was standing by his now empty bowl, sporting a milky moustache and wagging hopefully. "Would you like to go on the stage, young fellow?"

This time the dog came across to sniff the newcomer's feet and look up at him with a bright, expectant air.

"He looks hungry."

"No feeding him scraps from the table," Raife said firmly, "else he'll be a pest at meal times. Our Nippy's going to be the best-behaved dog in Hedderby."

"He'd better be," Essie said. But she found Nippy some scraps after the meal was over and smiled as he ate them, so everyone could see that she was gradually being won over.

Later on they all sat drinking their usual cup of hot milk and honey before they went to bed. Dora watched happily as the puppy sighed in its sleep and turned over, snuggling down in the old basket Essie had found for him, warm and comfortable on top of the ragged blanket Essie had provided without anyone asking.

"We must agree on the words we use to train that dog," Raife said, following Dora's gaze. "We don't want to confuse him by one person saying something and another saying something else."

His son looked at him across the fire. "Mother would never have a dog in the house,

but you had one while you were living with my brother, didn't you, Dad? I don't rightly know how to treat them or what to expect, so you'll have to show us."

"You treat puppies as you would any of God's young creatures, son, with firmness and kindness. Everyone responds to kindness, but all youngsters have to be taught what's right and wrong."

Dora edged closer to Nippy, putting out one hand to stroke him.

"Let him sleep, lass," Raife said. "He's had a confusing day."

So had she, Dora thought, taking another mouthful of warm milk and remembering her reaction to Gideon Shaw. She couldn't seem to get him out of her mind . . . but she didn't want to share that information with anyone.

"I'm not for young girls like you," he'd said.

Was he married or was there some other reason for him saying that? And what was he doing in Hedderby? She very much wanted to know.