

1 - September 1908

‘Eeh, our Lizzie, don’t do it! You’ll get what for if Mam finds out.’

Her sister Eva’s words were all Lizzie needed to push her into accepting the dare. She tossed back her straight dark hair, half of which had fallen out of its plaits as usual, and scrambled up on top of the wall which kept the end of their street from sliding down the hill - at least, her dad said it did. The wall was only three feet high, but the drop on the other side was about twenty feet and suddenly, as she stood there wobbling and staring down, she wondered if this was a good idea.

Glancing over her shoulder, however, she saw the triumphant expression on Mary Holden’s face and gritted her teeth. She wasn’t going to back out now, not when her arch-enemy had dared her to walk right along the top of the wall.

Straightening up, she spread out her arms. That felt better. Glancing back again at the other girl, who was watching her now with a tight, annoyed expression on her plump face, she jeered, ‘It’s no worse than walking along the edge of the pavement. See! Easy! Your turn next.’

But it wasn’t easy and Lizzie had a funny, shivery feeling in her stomach as she faced the narrow line of bricks. Taking a deep breath and keeping her eyes off the drop on her right, she began to walk slowly forward, one foot in its scuffed shoe edging into place in front of the other. There was nothing in the dare about doing it quickly, after all, just getting to the far end without falling off.

As Lizzie continued to move, her confidence rose. Ha! She would do it all right and then wouldn’t Mary Holden look stupid? Because she wouldn’t dare do this. She had a big mouth on her, but no guts. Five steps completed. Ten. It helped to count them, made her forget the drop

tugging at her from the right.

Fifteen steps. Nearly halfway there. 'Nothin' to it!' she jeered, but she didn't dare turn her head, not now. She could hear her sister's soft breathing over to her left - well, everything about Eva was soft and soppy - and she could feel the anger beating out from Mary behind her, as it had beaten at her many times before, for they'd been enemies from birth, even though their families lived opposite one another in Bobbin Lane. She let out her breath slowly, glad she'd made it a condition nobody spoke while she was walking the wall. That helped. A bit.

In the distance, she could hear the sound of clogs clattering over the cobblestones towards them. Oh, no! If it was a grown-up, she'd be for it. The sound kept coming closer, but although the footsteps slowed down at the corner, no voice called out to her to get off. Sighing in relief, she took another careful step forward.

Three quarters of the way there now. She was going to make it. She was. But her legs felt stiff, sweat was trickling down her neck and she hated, absolutely hated that drop. This was a dead stupid idea, but Mary had made her so angry, mocking the whole Kershaw family, especially Eva for being the teacher's pet! Well, Eva was a teacher's pet, but no one else was going to say that when Lizzie was around.

The footsteps had stopped now, but she didn't turn her head to see who was watching her. No one in her family, that was sure, for the Kershaws didn't wear clogs. Her mam took pride in turning out her children in proper shoes, even if they were bought second hand and pinched, as Lizzie's did, or let in water, as her younger brother Johnny's did.

Thirty steps. She wobbled, but regained her balance. 'Thirty-three an' I'm there!' she called in sudden triumph as her toe touched the wall of the first house in Carters Row. Then she wobbled again and this time lost her balance as she tried to get off the wall. She shrieked in terror, sure she was going to crash twenty feet down to the cobblestones of Mill Road - but

hands grabbed her, snatching her into the air, away from the drop. Safe! For a moment, she couldn't speak, couldn't breathe with the relief of it all, just held on to her rescuer for dear life, shuddering.

'You lost!' Mary's voice crowed behind her. 'You lost the dare, Lizzie Kershaw. Now you have to carry my books to school.'

She came out of her brief paralysis, struggling to get away from the hands that were still holding her. 'I did not lose! I touched that wall with my toe and my hand. It was only when I was jumpin' down that I lost my balance.'

'Did not!'

'Did so!'

'Be quiet, the pair of you!' roared a loud voice.

Only then did Lizzie realise who had rescued her - Sam Thoxby, who lived in the narrow alley at the end of her street. He was only a bit older than their Percy, but he was a big fellow and she'd never seen him look so angry!

Even as she stared up at him, he took her by the shoulders and shook her hard. 'Stay there, you! I'll skin you alive if you move one step!'

With a gasp, Mary turned to flee but Sam caught hold of her skirt and dragged her back to his other side. 'You, too, young lady! You can stay right here till I've done with you. An' you,' a nod across at Eva, 'had better not move, either!'

Lizzie saw how frightened her sister looked, though even after a whole day at school, Eva's dark, wavy hair was neat and tidy and there was hardly a speck of dirt on her pinny. It wasn't fair how pretty and tidy she always looked.

A heavy hand on each girl's shoulder pulled them round to face one another. 'You two are going nowhere,' another shake, 'till you've promised me never, ever to try that stupid trick

again.'

Mary stopped struggling to smile up at her captor, her voice soft now. 'I won't if you say not to, Sam.'

Lizzie closed her mouth firmly. She wasn't going to promise him anything. He might work with her brother, but he wasn't family and he had no right, no right at all, to interfere.

His fingers dug into her shoulder. 'I'm waiting, Lizzie Kershaw. An' I'm not moving a step till I hear you promise.'

She scowled up at him. 'Shan't, then.'

He gave Mary a push. 'I shall know if you break your promise. Get off home with you.' The look he turned upon Lizzie was severe in the extreme. 'You could have been killed, you silly little fool.'

'What have you been doing now, our Lizzie?'

Oh, no! Their Percy would have to turn up. He was always trying to boss her around. If she had to have a big brother, why couldn't she have a tall, good-looking one like Peter Dearden, who gave his little brother sweets from the shop and never had a cross word for anyone? Lizzie scowled at Percy, who looked so thin and faded next to other men, especially a huge fellow like Sam Thoxby.

'What have you been doing now, Lizzie Kershaw?' he repeated, catching hold of her arm.

'Nothin'.' She tried to twist away, but was held fast between the two men.

Sam's fingers tightened. 'You can stop that wriggling, young lady. You're going nowhere till you've promised.' Without taking his eyes off her, he said to Percy, 'She were walking along the top of that there wall. If I hadn't caught her, she'd have fell down on to Mill Road.'

Lizzie saw Percy turn pale. He was nervous of heights, always had been. 'It was a dare,' she explained sullenly. 'An' it was Mary Holden what dared me, not me her, an' I'm not letting her

tell folk I'm afraid of owt, 'cos I'm not. An' - an' you're just a big bully, Sam Thoxby. Let go of me, will you?'

But the fingers were still digging into her shoulder and she couldn't shake them off, though her brother let go of her when she pushed at him again.

Percy turned to his other sister, still hovering nearby. 'You should have run to fetch someone when this started, our Eva.'

'We don't tell on one another.' She hunched her shoulders and walked off down the street.

Lizzie glared up at Percy. Same features as Eva, same dark wavy hair - but he always looked worried about something, sighing over his tea, poring over his books. She knew he was a good son, because people were always saying so, but she just wished he wasn't so soft.

'If you don't promise me an' Sam not to do it again,' his voice sounded thin and weary, 'I'll have to tell Mam about this. Or Dad.'

Tears came into Lizzie's eyes. She was always in trouble with Mam and Percy knew it, though Eva was Mam's pet. And their dad worked so hard at the brewery he was tired out by evening and didn't need extra worries. But if she promised - and she always kept her promises, always - Mary Holden would crow at her and goad her. 'I hate you, our Percy!'

'Promise!' Sam gave her another little shake.

'Oh, all right, then. I promise I won't do it again.' They let her go, but she waited till she was a few paces away before yelling, 'Yer a pair of silly bloody sheep, you two are! So there!'

'I'll wash your mouth out with soap when you come home, Lizzie Kershaw!' Percy roared, ashamed of being shown up in front of his workmate.

She danced around, pulling faces at them. 'Ya, ya, ya! You'll have to catch me first, won't you?' And when he took a step towards her she was off again, running down Bobbin Lane, as lithe and graceful as a young colt Sam had seen frolicking in a field on the last works picnic.

Percy sighed and turned to the man next to him. Sam was older, twenty-three to his twenty, and towered over him by a good six inches, for none of the Kershaws was tall. 'Thanks for stoppin' her.'

Sam watched the child disappear round a corner, admiration on his face. 'She's a lively one.'

'Too lively. There's only Dad can keep her in order an' he's been so tired lately. That new manager at the brewery's a right slave-driver.'

'Your Lizzie's going to be pretty, too, when she grows up.' Sam frowned. 'No, not pretty exactly, but she'll attract the fellows, you'll see.' She attracted him, if truth be told, for all her scrawny child's body. She had such bright eyes and she was so alive compared to other lasses. He had seen her several times lately, seen and stopped to watch.

'Our Lizzie? You've got to be joking! It's Eva as is the pretty one.'

Sam looked at him thoughtfully. Everyone knew that Percy Kershaw was as soft as butter and a worrier. You couldn't help taking to him, though. He'd do anything to help you and was well respected at the works, knew his job better than most and was studying to learn more at night classes. 'Come an' have a drink, lad. We need one after that.'

'Thanks, but I can't.' He'd have loved to go into the warmth and bustle of the pub after a hard day's work, especially with a big confident fellow like Sam, but Percy didn't allow himself luxuries like beer at the moment. He had to watch every farthing if he was to save enough money to go to Technical School part-time next year. Mr Pilby himself had given permission for Percy to work part-time in order to do that. It was all arranged.

'The drink's on me,' Sam offered. 'I had a win on the horses.'

But Percy was stubborn as well as soft. 'No. Thanks all the same, but I couldn't afford to buy you one back, an' I prefer to pay my own way.'

‘Just a half, then. I don’t like drinking alone.’ Sam took a grip on his companion’s arm and led him firmly, still protesting, into the Hare and Hounds. They passed a woman with soft dark hair and green eyes, and for a moment he was reminded of Lizzie. But this woman’s eyes were dull and she was slouching along.

As he chuckled at the memory of the little lass spitting fury at him, Sam knew suddenly that he wanted her. Not now, but later. He didn’t lust after children and for all her lively wits Lizzie was a child still, but when she grew up - ah, then he’d be waiting for her. Something in her wild, defiant nature appealed to him, as other girls’ flattery and admiring glances never did. He’d enjoy taming her, wooing her first and then mastering her, as all women loved to be mastered. Marrying her, perhaps. Yes, that idea pleased him. He didn’t want his sons mothered by a whining fool like that other lass. And Sam was going to have sons, lots of them.

He waited to be served, brow creased in thought. The Kershaws were well respected in Southlea, the district at the bottom end of the low hill across which the small town of Overdale sprawled. Mrs Kershaw was a cut above her neighbours, for she’d been a housemaid to the gentry before she married, and she talked better and ran her home better than most. So would her daughters, with her training, which would suit Sam just fine. He had ambitions for his future. Oh, yes. Big ambitions.

He grinned as he paid for the two half-pints and pondered on his tactics. He was about to become Percy Kershaw’s best mate, and all for the sake of that cheeky little brat! And he’d better soft-soap the mother a bit, as well. He enjoyed making folk do what he wanted, setting his sights on something and getting it, too. He hadn’t done badly for a whore’s bastard - he scowled briefly as he thought of the mother he’d never met, but heard of, oh, aye, heard of and been taunted about many a time.

The two young men’s glasses of light ale were only half empty when someone came

pounding into the pub. 'There's been an accident down at the brewery!' he gasped, then his eyes fell on Percy, sitting at the back, glass halfway to his mouth. 'Oh, you're there, Percy!' His voice became gentle. 'Eeh, I'm that sorry, lad. It's your dad, I'm afraid.'

Several weeks before the accident at the brewery, another man had died suddenly in a comfortable house on the edge of the moors. Bonamy Harper had been haranguing his two daughters, a pastime in which he often indulged, playing out all the tricks of a domestic tyrant and shouting at them for their extravagance, - though indeed, they had no capacity for extravagance with the meagre amount he gave them on which to keep house. Suddenly he clutched his throat, his face turned an even darker red than usual and he keeled over.

It was a moment before they bent over him and then, after another moment of startled disbelief, the main emotion each felt was relief.

The next morning the family lawyer paid a hurried visit to warn them to keep the funeral costs down. 'There are debts to be cleared, you see, due to some rather rash investments your father made.'

'How much is owed?' Emma asked.

'Several hundred pounds, I'm afraid.' Mr Peelby inclined his head towards Blanche. 'Your annuity from your godmother is safe, of course, Miss Harper. However, that only amounts to about fifty pounds a year . . . Um, you'll have to sell this house and its contents, I'm afraid, but I can tell you now they'll barely cover the debts. You can stay on here till it's sold, but don't remove anything apart from your personal effects - though you can give your father's clothes away, if you like. None of the debtors will want those.'

Blanche, white and trembling, clutched at her sister's hand. 'But - where shall we live?'

‘With your aunt, I suppose. I’m sure Mrs Reed will offer you a home when she hears how things stand.’

Emma groaned. ‘Oh, no! Not Aunt Gertrude.’ For their sole surviving relative, was as domineering as their father had been.

Mr Peelby spoke somewhat impatiently. ‘Times are hard. Poorer people lack work and whole families are starving. You’re lucky to have someone to turn to.’

Immediately he’d left, Emma turned to Blanche. ‘Whatever happens, I’m not going to live with Aunt Gertrude. You can if you wish, but I absolutely refuse.’

‘But what else can we do?’

‘I don’t know, but I’ll find something. For a start, I’m not going to give Father’s clothes away, I’m going to sell them. Even if they’re only worth a pound or two, it’ll help.’

‘But how . . . ?’

Emma pondered for a moment, then said slowly, ‘Sam Thoxby will probably know what to do. I’ll send him a message.’

‘But the debts . . . ’

‘Are Father’s, not ours.’

That evening, when Sam turned up at the house he’d been in and out of since the days his gran had done the rough charring work for Mrs Harper, he said the wardrobe of fine suits and hats was worth something and agreed to sell the stuff. Emma was a little older than he was and Blanche older still. They and their mother had been kind to him as a lad, feeding him leftovers and giving him old scarves and gloves of Mr Harper’s to keep him warm in winter. He never forgot a kindness because he hadn’t known many. Mind you, that wouldn’t stop him turning a penny out of this.

‘What about selling some of the other stuff as well?’ he asked, looking round at the furniture and ornaments.

Emma shook her head. ‘This all belongs to the creditors now.’

‘Only if they get their hands on it.’

The two women stared at him, then at each other. It was Emma who nodded. ‘I suppose we could sort out a few things.’

‘Smaller stuff would be best. I’ll come back with my handcart after dark.’

Only when he’d left did Blanche ask, ‘Should we?’

‘We need to. And,’ Emma added thoughtfully, ‘we’ll keep Mother’s jewellery for ourselves.’

‘I don’t like to think of leaving debts unpaid.’

‘Well, I don’t like to think of us not having something to fall back on.’

‘My annuity - ‘

‘Is not enough, dear. You know it isn’t.’

That night, Sam and a friend brought a handbarrow round to the back door and took away three loads of stuff. Some of it would be sold, the rest kept to give the sisters a start in their new home.

Emma worked herself to exhaustion sorting it all out. Blanche wept almost continuously and was of little use.

Lizzie was in the children’s playground when their neighbour found her. She was letting the swing move gently to and fro as she dreamed about a story she’d read at school. She was an orphan, the lost child of a duchess, kidnapped when she was very young by gypsies. She had long, curly golden hair, and -

‘There you are, Lizzie Kershaw! I’ve been looking all over for you.’

She jerked out of her daydream and scowled at Mrs Preston from across the street. 'Well, now you've found me, haven't you?'

That should have earned her a scolding, or at the least a muttered, 'Cheeky young madam!' but all Mrs Preston did was mop her eyes and pat Lizzie's shoulder. 'Eeh, you poor thing!'

Lizzie jerked to her feet, leaving the swing rocking to and fro behind her. 'What do you mean?' she demanded, arms akimbo. 'We're not poor.' Poor people only had bread and dripping for tea. They wore clogs and their clothes smelled sour. How dare anyone call her that?

Mrs Preston's hand dropped from her shoulder. 'You'll be cheeking the angels as folk lower your coffin into the grave, you will!' Then her mouth trembled and she flourished a handkerchief. 'Look, lass, there's been an accident. At the brewery. You're wanted at home. Your father's - '

'Dad!'

Before the explanation was complete, Lizzie set off running, twisting between the iron posts at the entrance to the playground with barely a pause and haring off down the road as if she were being chased by a mad dog. When she arrived home, she found a knot of people gathered near the front door, as always happened when there was trouble. She pushed her way past them and they started saying, 'Poor lass!' as well.

The fear became stark terror and she stopped for a minute at the door, suddenly afraid to go inside. Why were the blinds pulled down in the front room? It wasn't dark yet. She went into the long narrow hall and pushed the front door to behind her with her foot, then stopped again, not daring to take another step.

Percy appeared in the doorway of the front room. 'Oh, Lizzie,' his voice broke, 'our Dad's - he's been killed.'

She stood there for a moment with the words echoing inside her head, then started bawling,

sobbing as loudly as any five-year-old child.

Her mother's voice was sharp. 'Lizzie Kershaw, you can just stop that!'

With a gulp, she forced back the tears and the panic. She'd never seen her mother look so white and sad, not even when their Timmy, who had been older than her, died. 'M-mam? Dad isn't - he can't be dead!'

Her mother's voice was dull. 'He is.'

As Percy's grasp slackened, the girl moved forward. 'Where is he?'

'In the front room.'

Lizzie took a deep breath. 'I want to see him.'

Meg Kershaw closed her eyes for a minute and prayed for strength, finding it briefly in Percy's quick hug, then she gestured her daughter past her into the front room.

Her son stayed in the hall.

Lizzie found Gran Thoxby in the front room. She always helped out when someone died, though Lizzie wasn't sure what she did. 'I want to see my dad.'

The old woman looked questioningly at Meg, received a nod of assent and lifted up a corner of the blanket.

Hesitantly Lizzie stretched out one hand to touch her father's cheek. She'd always been his favourite, always known he loved her whatever she did. As she let her hand drop, she half-expected him to wink at her, but he didn't. He lay so still she wanted to shake him, force him to move again. 'He feels cold.'

'Aye.' Gran drew the blanket back across the face. 'They allus do. An' he'll get colder yet.'

'What happened, Mam?' It was a whisper.

It was Gran who answered, for Meg was weeping into her handkerchief again. 'An accident at the brewery.'

‘It’s not fair! We need our Dad!’

Gran looked sympathetically at the child, who was as taut as a bow-string, her eyes seeming huge in the whiteness of her thin face. ‘Think on, lass. I never even met my father. At least you had yours with you for twelve year. At least you’ll never forget him.’

Lizzie was distracted for a moment. ‘You never met your own father?’

‘No. Not once. An’ our Sam’s never met his, neither.’ Well, how could he have? Even her daughter hadn’t known who the father was. ‘Nor he hasn’t seen his mother since he were three.’ Trust her Janey to run out on them. One daughter, she’d had, just the one, and a right heartless little bitch she’d turned out to be. But Sam was a good lad.

Meg gave Lizzie a push and gestured towards the door. ‘Go and look after the others. I want to spend a few moments alone with my Stanley.’

Lizzie walked outside into the hall where her brother was waiting for her. Only then did it occur to her that she didn’t know what had happened to her father. ‘What sort of accident was it?’

‘It were that new dray horse. Dad said it were a bugger, but Mr Beckins insisted on buyin’ it because it looked good. Somethin’ frit the damned thing and it trampled our Dad down in a corner of the stable yard before anyone could get to it.’ Percy had seen the bloody mess below his father’s waist and knew with shuddering certainty that no man would want to live on like that. He could only be thankful that the horse had finished off what it had started and that his dad had died quickly of a massive blow to the back of his head.

Lizzie looked round blindly. She hated to think of a horse trampling on her father. ‘It must have hurt him.’

‘They said it were over very quick.’ Percy suddenly leaned against the wall, feeling sick.

She saw how close to tears he was, so put her arm round his waist. ‘I’ll brew us all some tea,

shall I? I expect Mam'll be glad of a cup, too.'

In the kitchen, Eva was sitting at the table, with Polly cuddled up beside her and Johnny on her other side. For once, even clever Eva didn't seem to know what to do. They all three looked at Percy, but when he just stood there, they turned a questioning gaze upon their eldest sister instead.

Lizzie stepped forward and took charge. 'You put the kettle on, our Eva. Polly, get out the cups an' teaspoons. Johnny, you fetch the milk jug. We'll all have a nice cup of tea. That'll make us feel a - a bit better.' Her voice choked on the last word.

After that, it was comings and goings, strangers knocking on their door, neighbours coming to see if they could help, some men carrying a coffin into the front room. Lizzie hated the idea of her dad being shut up inside a big box.

For once, she was glad to go to bed. She hesitated in the hall, then whispered, 'Good night, Dad!' not liking to leave him on his own.

Years afterwards, Lizzie realised she'd suddenly and very painfully left her carefree childhood behind her that night. Afterwards, things were never the same. And she was never the same, either.

Gertrude Reed turned up for Bonamy Harper's funeral in a brand-new motor car. As an affluent widow, she could afford to indulge herself in such luxuries - and the gardener was only too happy to drive her around.

Afterwards she came back to the house and took a quick cup of tea with her nieces, questioning them about why her brother's funeral had been such a shabby affair, with no one invited back for refreshments afterwards.

Emma explained about the debts and the sale.

There was a long silence, followed by, ‘You’ll have to come and live with me, then, I suppose. I can let the parlourmaid go and you two can take over her duties. She’s always been a flighty piece. Mind, I’ll expect the cleaning to be done thoroughly.’

Emma tried not to let her indignation show. ‘We’re grateful for your offer, Aunt Gertrude, but we’d rather find somewhere of our own to live, thank you.’

‘You can’t afford it on Blanche’s fifty pounds a year, and I’m not giving you any money. You’re used to living in some style and comfort, not dwelling in the slums.’

‘We’re not used to that much comfort, actually.’ Emma held her aunt’s gaze. ‘Father was very stingy with us towards the end.’

‘Nonetheless, you’ll come to me.’ Gertrude heaved herself to her feet and glared at them. ‘It wouldn’t be fitting for a Harper to live somewhere like Southlea.’ She added sharply, ‘And I’d have expected a bit of gratitude from you, I would indeed. Beggars can’t afford to be choosers.’

It was Blanche who stepped forward then, surprising herself as much as the others, for she was usually the quiet one. ‘As Emma has told you, Aunt, we both prefer to live on our own. And - and we don’t appreciate being bullied.’

‘Bullied! Bullied! How dare you speak to me like that? Apologise at once.’

Blanche shook her head.

‘Then you can get yourselves out of this mess.’ Gertrude stormed from the room, pausing in the hallway, expecting one of them to run after her, but neither moved. So she muttered something and left. They’d soon realise which side their bread was buttered on.

Both the Harper sisters were delighted with the results of the sales. And Sam was equally delighted with his share, but that didn’t stop him accepting the gift of Bonamy Harper’s second pocket watch, a battered silver piece, in return for his help.

‘Silly buggers!’ he said as he walked home. Then, as his fingers stroked the watch case, he grew thoughtful. ‘I wonder if they have owt else tucked away? Old Mrs Harper used to have quite a few pieces of jewellery. I reckon I’d better keep an eye on them two. They may need my help again.’ He threw back his head and laughed, chuckling all the way home at his own cleverness.