

1

Lancashire, May 1846

Marjorie was hurrying back into the mill from the necessary. Closing the outside door she stepped back into the warm, moist atmosphere that kept the cotton happy but was uncomfortable for the operatives in summer. She was wearing as little as was decent because of that, they all were.

When the overlooker stepped out of the store-room into the corridor and put one arm across to bar her way, her heart began to thump and she took a quick step backwards. They all knew what he was like.

“I could fine you for lingering,” he said.

“I’m not lingering. I’m on my way back to my spindles.”

“Then start moving.”

But she knew if she stepped forward he’d make free of her body before he let her pass and she couldn’t bear the thought of him touching her again. He kept the girls he fancied working on the ground floor and often tried to fumble with their breasts. Some of them let him, knowing they’d not get fined or scolded if they did. “I’ll move if you step back and let me pass.”

He smiled and stayed where he was. Then Mr Forrett, the owner, came round the corner and she sagged against the wall in relief.

“Ah, there you are, Benting.” The owner looked from one to the other and his smile said he

knew exactly what was going on.

Marjorie seized her opportunity and slid quickly sideways past the two men, hearing them laugh as she rounded the corner and waited for the carriage that pulled and twisted the yarn to move across and let her get into her station.

“Something wrong?” the girl next to her asked.

“Benting! He caught me coming in.”

Her companion pulled a sympathetic face. “He’s awful, isn’t he?”

As they walked home Marjorie told her sister Dora what had happened. “I don’t know what to do about him. He’s getting worse lately.”

“Slap his face for him. I will if he ever touches me.”

“He won’t. You’re too flat-chested. That’s why he’s got you working upstairs.”

“But I’d definitely slap him if he did.” Dora tossed her head.

Marjorie sighed. It would take a lot to drive her to that. She was too soft for her own good, she knew. She hated quarrels and upsets, just wanted to live her life in peace. And she could do that at home now, because they’d all moved in with her mother’s second husband a few months ago and Nev had proved to be a kind man, who always made sure there was food on the table, didn’t drink and didn’t thump you for no reason.

She considered telling Nev what was happening, but couldn’t see that doing any good, so she just tried to put it behind her once she left the mill. But she didn’t sleep well, had nightmares about Benting sometimes.

The following morning she was nearly late and arrived at the mill breathless from running.

The overseer was standing by the gate, watch in hand, checking the operatives in. He didn’t say anything, but the way he watched her made a shiver of anxiety run down her spine.

She tried not to go to the necessary until the midday break when there would be other girls around, but in the end she was so uncomfortable she had to seek his permission to leave her

place.

The look he gave her worried her sick, it was so triumphant. When she'd relieved herself, she had to brace herself to leave the necessary and go back inside.

He was waiting for her in the corridor again, put out his arm again to bar her way just as he had the day before, and smiled at her like a huge cat about to pounce on a helpless bird.

When she backed away from him he followed her swiftly, trapping her at the end before she could open the door. He waited a minute, looming over her, clearly enjoying her fear, then he reached out and grabbed her breast.

As she batted his hand away, he laughed. "Behave yourself, Preston."

"It's *you* who should behave yourself. Shame on you, Mr Benting. You've a wife and children at home."

He scowled at her then and pressed his lower body against hers.

She felt disgust rise like sickness in her throat and suddenly found the courage to raise her knee sharply and catch him in the groin. There was surprise as well as pain on his face. She shoved him aside before he could pull himself together and ran back into the steamy atmosphere of the main room.

He watched her for most of the hour that had to pass before the siren sounded for the midday break. And all afternoon long, she could feel his eyes following her.

As they walked outside, her sister Dora came up to her and whispered, "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That you kneed Mr Benting in his privates."

"How do you know that?"

Dora chuckled. "Betty was going to the necessary and saw what happened. She came running back up the stairs before he could turn and see her. She said you didn't even notice her."

"He'd got me cornered and was touching me. Why won't he leave me alone?"

“Because you’re pretty. He watches you more than he does the other lasses. Everyone knows that.”

When he came in again, the overlooker’s expression was so black and furious that Marjorie’s heart quailed inside her.

He walked across. “Don’t think you’ll get away with skimping your work this afternoon, Preston!”

“I’ve never skimped my work, Mr Benting.”

“Only because I keep my eyes on you. And don’t be so cheeky.”

A short time later he came by again and fined her twopence for “insolent language”.

She stared at him in shock. “I didn’t even speak.”

“You were insolent earlier, though.”

“I was defending myself.”

He leaned towards her, “And you told folk what’d happened. I take exception to that, Preston!”

“I didn’t tell anyone. Someone saw us.”

“Liar!”

Half an hour later he told her he’d be docking her a further twopence for leaving waste on the floor. She was so angry now she couldn’t hold the words back. “That’s not fair! Fluff blows all over the floor and you know it. You’re just getting back at me for what happened.”

“*Not fair!*” His voice rose to a shout that could be heard above the clicking and whirring of the spindles, “How dare you speak to me like that! You’ve cheeked me for the last time, Preston! You’re sacked. I can find a dozen lasses who’ll be glad of your job, lasses who won’t answer me back like you do.”

She stared at him in shock. “But—”

“You heard me! Pick up your things and leave the mill this minute.”

There were murmurs of disapproval all around, but he glared at the women under his control, daring them to side openly with Marjorie.

“And don’t think we’re paying you anything. You’ve been getting lazier by the week.”

“But I’ve nearly a week’s money owing.”

He laughed in her face. “We don’t pay wages to folk we dismiss.”

Just then the mill owner came over to them, drawn by the shouting. “What’s the matter, Benting?”

She turned to Mr Forrett and answered before the overlooker could speak. “He’s just sacked me, that’s what’s the matter, sir, and I didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

Mr Forrett looked down his nose at her. “If Benting has sacked you, there must be a good reason.”

“But there wasn’t!”

“Get out!” He jerked his head in the direction of the door.

“I’m owed nearly a week’s wages.”

He too laughed at her. “We don’t pay money to sacked hands. Get out of my mill this minute and don’t come back, or I’ll call the police and have you thrown into jail for trespassing.”

She stood there for a minute, feeling so shocked she couldn’t move or speak. Benting was smirking at her from beside the owner, so somehow she held back the tears and went to fetch her shawl and the cloth that had held her dinner from the bench at the side of the room, then walked out with her head held high. At the door she turned and stared across the big room with its machinery moving slowly to and fro, but the other women were looking anywhere except in her direction and two men had turned their backs. Benting was talking away, waving his arms about, making up to the owner as always. He was a good overlooker, that was the trouble, and under his rule, the machinery was kept in good working order, so Mr Forrett let him do as he pleased.

Why should they care that they’d taken her living away from her? They could always find

someone else to take her place?

What was she going to do now? Just as important, what would her stepfather do when he found out she'd been sacked and had no money for him? Nev was very careful with money.

Once she was out of the mill she didn't try to hold back the tears, couldn't, so ran down to the river and found a place to weep where no one would see or hear her.

When she'd cried herself to a standstill she sat for a few minutes looking along the shallow, rushing water towards the bridge that had given the town its name—Hedderby Bridge, nestling in a long, narrow Pennine valley. She'd often wished she could follow the river right to the very end. She'd never seen the sea, had never seen anything but this one small town.

She wished men would have more respect for her, didn't like the body that had grown plump in embarrassing places now that she was getting enough to eat. If she was ugly perhaps they'd leave her alone.

She stood up. There was no putting it off any longer. She'd better go home and tell Nev and her mother what had happened.

Athol Stott pushed his manservant's arm away, hating how clumsily he moved his hand now. The accident had left him badly scarred, robbed him of one leg and turned his right hand into a useless claw. It had also robbed him of his independence. His gesture spilled the small glass of laudanum over the bedcovers. "I told you not yet, fool!" he said in the slurred voice which was all he could manage from a face twisted into a gargoyle by the scars caused by the scalding steam. He still dreamed of the night the boiler had blown up, woke screaming with the memory of the pain.

"But sir, the doctor said to give it to you at—"

"I know exactly what the doctor said, but if I can manage without that damned stuff for a few minutes more, then I shall. And each day, I'll push back the time I take the dose. That stuff turns

you into a mindless idiot.” He winced as he moved incautiously and jarred the stump of his leg, which was taking a long time to heal. “Send my wife to me.”

He lay there staring round the bedroom which had become a prison to him. The past few months had passed in a blur of pain and the dreamy haze caused by the laudanum, but during the past week or two he felt to have started regaining some ground and he intended to take control of his life from now on.

It took longer than he’d expected for Maria to come upstairs. She stood at the end of the bed, staring at him. She rarely came closer nowadays.

“Terson says you’re refusing to take your laudanum.”

“Yes.” He frowned at her. “I delayed my last few doses and the pain wasn’t too great to bear for a while. That fool of a doctor has been giving me too much and I intend to reduce the amount I’m taking. I want to see him at this time tomorrow. Tell him not to be late. I need to talk to him while my mind’s clear.” He gestured towards the side of his body which had been worse affected. “There’s got to be something we can do about this. I won’t spend the rest of my life lying in bed.”

“Dr Barlow said you’d improve slowly and you have. You must be patient, Athol. I know it’s hard, but—”

He glared at her. “Damned if I’ll be patient! And don’t talk to me like that, woman, as if I’m a child. You’re still my wife, still owe me obedience, and if you don’t do as I say I’ll make you regret it, I promise you.” She looked at him steadily, didn’t speak a word, but her eyes spoke her resentment for her. And something else, something that flickered into life and then vanished again.

“No one can perform miracles, Athol, not me, not the doctor.”

“Dr Barlow, tomorrow,” he repeated.

“I’ll arrange it. Now let Terson give you the laudanum.”

He watched her leave the bedroom, then Terson came back in, looking wary. “Three-quarters of the usual dose, please.”

“But sir—”

“Did you hear me?”

Frustrated beyond bearing, Athol deliberately spilled another dose of laudanum before he let his manservant tip the reddish liquid into his mouth, coloured by the wine they mixed the painkiller with. And it still tasted foul. At a lowered dose he didn’t sink completely into the grey nothingness the drug had brought him at first. That had been the price he’d paid for relieving the unbearable pain.

He lay there trying to think but his thoughts had blurred again, even if not as badly. He’d consider his future plans later, when this damned stuff wore off.

As Maria left her husband she shuddered and let out a long sigh of frustration. She hesitated for a moment, then went along to her bedroom. Once there, she sat on the rocking chair by the window, closing her eyes and leaning her head back. There were noises coming from the servants working downstairs and she had household duties to attend to, but she ignored them and concentrated on regaining her composure.

Since the accident, each time she visited her husband the loathing she felt towards him seemed to deepen. She’d known for a long time that he was a truly evil man and she’d considered running away from him, would have done so if it hadn’t been for her sons. She had cousins who would hide her and give her money to live on . Only—if she took his sons away from him, Athol would hunt her down, she was sure. And she loved Isaac and Benjamin so much, couldn’t bear to leave them, let alone allow them to be brought up by a cruel man like their father. No child deserved that.

When the doctor had visited her a few days after Benjamin’s birth, she’d wept hysterically

and begged him to tell Athol it would endanger her life if she had any more children. And dear Dr Latimer had done that for her. Athol had declared himself satisfied with two sons and mocked her for being stiff and useless in bed, telling her she'd be no loss and he'd be happy to find other women who would enjoy his attentions. That hadn't upset her at all and knowing he wouldn't be sharing her bed again had been the main thing that enabled her to stay with him.

Sadly, Athol wouldn't allow Dr Latimer to attend his family any more, because the doctor and he had quarrelled over the way Athol treated the men who worked at the family's engineering works. So now they called in Dr Barlow, whom Maria disliked intensely and who was, she felt, far less modern in his ways than Dr Latimer.

After the accident she had hoped, heaven forgive her, that Athol would not recover from his horrendous injuries, but he had astonished everyone by clinging to life. Now, when he was not drowsy from laudanum, the light of evil seemed to burn even more malevolently than before in his eyes. So she'd done a wicked thing. She'd increased his dose and kept him in a twilight world, which had spared them his viciousness and allowed her to run the household as she wanted.

But if he'd realised he could manage with less laudanum . . . She shuddered. What would her life be like if he recovered enough to leave his room and take charge of the household again?

As usual the rocking and a few quiet minutes alone soothed her and soon she was able to return to her daily tasks. Whatever it took, she would have to cope for as long as her children needed her. But once they were grown, she'd leave. Somehow.

Marjorie entered Linney's Lodging House by the side door and found Nev and her mother in the kitchen. Her heart sank. She'd hoped Raife would be there, because the kindly old man always seemed to make things easier between her and her stepfather.

"Eh, what are you doin' home at this time of day?" her mother exclaimed.

“I’ve been sacked. And it wasn’t fair!” She couldn’t help it, she burst into tears again.

Nev came to guide her to a chair. “Sit down and tell us about it.”

So the story came out.

“Why didn’t you tell me that overlooker was pestering you?” he asked

She shrugged, feeling uncomfortable even to talk about it. “He does it to all the lasses who work there. He doesn’t usually settle on one person, but lately . . . well, it’s been mostly me. And I haven’t encouraged him, I haven’t!”

“I’d have had a word with him if I’d known. What’s the fellow’s name again?”

“Benting. But it wouldn’t have done any good because he’s good with the machinery and can do no wrong in Mr Forrett’s eyes. Anyway, the master touches the lasses sometimes as well.”

Nev leaned forward to put an arm round Marjorie’s shoulders, the first time he had made any gesture of affection towards her. He pushed his handkerchief into her hand. “Here. Wipe your eyes, love. It doesn’t matter about the job. I was going to ask you to give it up anyway.”

She wiped her eyes and blew her nose for good measure. “Why?”

He gestured to his wife. “You know the doctor’s told Jane to rest till she’s had the baby, and she has been doing, but she gets lonely on her own, needs company. My father’s busy with his music these days and anyway, it isn’t a man’s job to run a house, so I’ve decided I need someone to look after this place for me and keep an eye on Jane and the lodgers for me. And who better than Jane’s own daughter? Do you think you could do that?”

She stared at him in surprise. It was the last thing she’d expected him to suggest. “You mean, you’re not angry with me about losing my job?”

“Not with you, it’s *him* I’m angry with.” He gave her one of his quick, shy smiles. “Will you do that for us, Marjorie love, look after the house and keep an eye on your mother till after the baby’s born?”

She thought about what he’d said then looked at him doubtfully. “I’m not all that good at

housework and organising things. Our Carrie's the one for that. I know I'd make a lot of mistakes." And she didn't fancy being shut in the house most of the time, not seeing her friends, being with her mother who would expect lots of attention and fuss. The work at the mill was hard, but at least she had some fun with her friends there. They had sing-songs sometimes at the dinner break or when they walked home. She loved that.

Nev frowned at her. "You'll have me and my dad to help and advise you, and you know the rules for running a common lodging house after living here for a few months—the town council's rules *and* mine. I'm sure you'll be able to cope all right."

"What about Mrs Terrill and the washing? Will she still be coming in?" Marjorie hated washing, the way it made your hands red and crinkly, the sheer hard work of lugging hot water to and from the boiler, heaving sodden clothes in and out. Nev might have a modern box mangle, but washing day for such a large family still left you exhausted.

It was his turn to screw up his face in thought. "Yes, she'd better keep doing it. There's a lot of washing with all of you children, especially now that we've bought you enough clothes. You'll have enough on with the rest of the housework and cooking."

Marjorie watched him give his wife a fond smile. He'd never complained about Jane bringing six of her ten children to live with him, you had to grant him that, and he'd proved a good stepfather. He looked at Marjorie expectantly and she could think of no way of refusing him. "I could try." But she knew how finicky Nev was about keeping his house nice and she wasn't sure she'd do it well enough to suit him. She did tend to go off into daydreams and her sisters were always teasing her about that. "I'll do my very best, I promise you."

"That's all anyone can do." He patted her shoulders again and moved away.

She didn't mind him touching her, because it was a friendly gesture, so unlike that other man's touch. The thought of Benting's big dirty hands pawing at her breasts still made her shudder.

Terson asked to see Maria that evening.

"I wish to give notice, ma'am and felt I should speak to you first, since the master is not—well, not fully himself yet."

She looked at him in dismay. "Oh, no! *Please* don't leave us. I rely on you to look after my husband. I'll raise your wages and—"

He held up one hand to prevent her continuing. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm not a nurse, wasn't hired for such duties, and since the accident Mr Stott has been impossible to please."

She could sympathise with him. Athol's bad temper seemed to permeate the whole house and everyone who lived there was only too aware of the brooding presence on the first floor.

"I'll stay on until you've found someone to replace me, ma'am—if he'll let me," Terson added. "But I'd appreciate it if you'd find other help as quickly as you can."

When he'd left the room, she stood there for a few minutes, dreading the scenes that would surely follow when she told her husband. She hoped desperately that she'd find someone reliable to take care of Athol, because she never wanted to touch him again.

After a while she decided to get it over with and went to tell him. His face turned dark red with fury and she thought for a minute that he'd have an apoplexy—wished he would. However, his colour gradually subsided and a calculating look replaced the anger in his eyes. "We'll need to get someone else quickly, then. In fact, get two people in so that one of them can be available at night. If we hire two strong men, they can carry me out into the sun as the weather improves. If I keep to the back garden no one will be able to gawk at me." He scowled round. "I'll go mad if I have to stay in this damned bedroom much longer."

"The doctor said you'd be better lying down. That leg still hasn't fully healed and you've been so restless lately you're irritating the stump again. You know how badly it reacted when they fitted you with that wooden leg. You should have taken things more easily."

“Damn the doctor! It’s my leg and my life. If I can’t walk again, I’ll have to be carried or pushed everywhere and I won’t put up with that. I’m *not* spending the rest of my life shut up in here. I’ll find a way to get free of it.”

He lay there for a minute with his eyes half-closed. She recognised that expression only too well and wondered what he was plotting now, feeling relieved when she heard the front door bell.

“That’d better be the damned doctor,” he said.

“I’d be grateful if you’d not use such coarse language in front of me, Athol.”

He let out a nasty, sneering laugh. “I don’t need your gratitude, so I’ll continue speaking how I choose. Now make yourself useful, for once. Go and fetch the doctor up.”

She was relieved to get out of his room but stayed at the foot of the stairs while Dr Barlow was with her husband, in case she was needed.

When shouting erupted in the bedroom, she went up a few steps, hesitated and went back down again. Whatever was going on in there, she didn’t want to be involved.

It seemed a long time till the doctor came downstairs, his colour heightened and an air of suppressed anger about him. “Can you spare me a few minutes, Mrs Stott?”

“Yes, of course.”

In the small parlour she used now that she was on her own in the evenings, she gestured to a chair.

“Your husband wants me to perform a miracle so that he can walk again and use that twisted right hand. I told him that couldn’t happen, but he wouldn’t accept my opinion. What’s more, I don’t think it wise to reduce the dose of laudanum, which he did without consulting me. He’s too restless and one part of the stump has begun suppurating again.”

“He hates taking laudanum, but when he takes less he becomes rather—difficult.”

Dr Barlow looked at her with sympathy in his eyes and after a minute added, “He also tells

me Terson is leaving.”

“Yes.”

“Pity. The man is meticulous in keeping Mr Stott clean and in carrying out my instructions.”

Upstairs, Athol looked at his manservant who was preparing his next dose of laudanum. “If you want good references and a bonus when you leave, I need you to do something for me.”

Terson looked at him, head on one side. “How much are you offering?”

Athol let out a crack of ragged laughter. “Five guineas extra if you do as I ask and keep your mouth shut.”

“I’ll be happy to help you, sir.”