

Prologue

March: Swindon, Wiltshire

Renie woke with a start as her sisters shook her. She stared at them for a few moments, then realised it was morning and the adventure had begun. They were all running away from home today to escape their bully of a father.

Then she remembered that her eldest sister Mattie was going somewhere on her own, while Renie had to go with Nell. As she got dressed, she tried one last time to persuade them otherwise. 'I really ought to go with Mattie. If I don't, she'll be on her own.'

'Shh! You'll wake Dad.'

Renie lowered her voice but didn't give up. 'Yes, but you've got Cliff, and you know he doesn't really want me living with you two after you're married. Please. It's not too late for us to change our plans.'

Mattie put one arm round her shoulders and whispered hoarsely, 'We went through all this last night. I don't know where I'll be going or what I'll be doing. You'll be much safer with Nell and Cliff. He has a good trade and will always be able to get a job.' She broke off to cough.

When Renie opened her mouth to argue, worried about how ill Mattie still looked, Nell came to her other side. 'Shh, love. Do you want to wake Dad? If he finds out what we're doing . . . '

Nell didn't have to finish the sentence. Renie shivered at the mere thought of that. If Dad found out they were running away, he'd beat them senseless. He'd done that to Mattie once, when she started courting and insisted she was going to get married. She

still bore the marks of his belt buckle on her back. Dad had lamed her fellow, who had left Swindon for good—without Mattie.

Dad didn't want any of them to marry, just earn him money and then look after him as he grew older. That wouldn't be much of a life, would it?

But though Renie was eager to get away, she wasn't looking forward to living with Cliff, either. There was something mean about him. She didn't think he'd thump her or anything—he'd better not even try—but she didn't think he'd be kind, either.

She couldn't say that to Nell, of course, because her sister loved him and thought he was wonderful. Anyway, Nell had no choice about marrying him now, because she was expecting his child. But he didn't seem even a tiny bit pleased about that.

Renie wasn't going to let any man have his way with her. She wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it sounded awful. She'd heard some of the married women at work talking about their husbands and how they had to put up with them in bed, always 'at it'.

She had decided not even to walk out with a fellow. She was only sixteen, after all, and there was time to enjoy life before she settled down—if she ever did settle down. Oh, she wanted so much more from life than marriage and children and housework; she wanted adventure, travel, excitement.

She read about it in books, the sort of life people from her part of town rarely managed. And whatever anyone said, she was going to—

'Renie!'

Mattie shook her again, smiling. 'Stop day-dreaming and finish getting ready.'

1

Lancashire, April 1910

It was hard settling down in Lancashire and Renie missed Swindon and her oldest sister greatly. She missed Wiltshire, too. It was much softer countryside, prettier.

Cliff's relatives in Rochdale were not helpful, and looked down on Renie's sister Nell for being in the family way. As if she'd done that on her own!

But help had come from the congregation of a small Methodist church, and Cliff had found a job with one of its members.

Renie helped her sister scrub out their new house, but she hated it and knew Nell wasn't happy with it, either. Cliff had chosen to live in Milnrow, near Rochdale, because he'd found a place that was cheap and close to where he worked.

The five small houses in Willow Court opened on to a yard and shared one old-fashioned lavatory, situated right next to the only entrance to the yard. They were back-to-back houses, which meant they had no rear doors, just a front one, with one big room and a scullery downstairs, and two bedrooms upstairs.

'You'd think Cliff could find us somewhere better than this to live,' she grumbled. 'It's horrible, as well as filthy.'

'He wants to be near his new job.' Nell sighed as she looked round. 'It's only for a few months. I'll look for somewhere better later, once he's settled in his job. He'll be happier then.'

Later, as they finished scrubbing the floors, Nell said, 'As soon as this is dry, I want to whitewash all the walls.'

'Wallpaper would look nicer.'

'Bugs can live in wallpaper. Whitewash is cleanest in a place like this.'

A slum, Renie thought. That was what it was, a slum.

A few days later, Nell married Cliff and they all moved into Willow Court. Renie hated living there from the start, the smell, the slovenly neighbours, the way Cliff acted like lord of the world, tossing out orders, telling her off for nothing. He wasn't *her* husband!

It was a relief when the minister's wife helped her find a job working in the canteen of a local mill. At least it got her out of the house all day and stopped Cliff complaining of how much she was costing him for food. The job was more pleasant than her old one in the laundry, but the wages were the same.

Cliff wanted to take all her money to pay for her keep, just like her father had. He and Nell had a big row about that, but for once Nell won. If she hadn't, Renie would have moved into lodgings rather than hand over all her money.

At the canteen, she had peel mountains of potatoes and wash the same dishes and pans day after day. Her hands were just as red and raw as they had been in the laundry. But at least she made friends with the other girls and they had a bit of fun together.

After they'd served the meals to the mill hands, two of them had to clean the tables and mop the floor in the canteen, while the rest cleared up the kitchen and got it ready for the night shift. Daytime workers could either bring their own dinners or buy food cheaply. The night shift had to bring their own food, but one of the lads made them tea and coffee.

In the morning Renie had to start all over again, cleaning up after the men who worked at night and who always tramped dirt in and left the tables in a mess. They

should at least have thrown their rubbish in the bin, not left it lying around. That encouraged mice.

One of the best things about this job was that she didn't have to provide her own midday meals, because the canteen staff could eat the leftovers free. By the time her birthday came in August, she had grown a full inch and some of her clothes were too tight.

She and Nell celebrated her birthday together. Cliff didn't care whether it was her birthday or not, just whether his food was ready on time and his clothes washed and ironed, so they left him out.

She continued to eat well and Cook even let them take leftovers home now and then, so Nell benefited too. Renie noticed Cook always had food to take home, but knew better than to comment on that.

She felt as if she had grown up very quickly and learned a lot since they left Swindon. She missed it, wished they were still living there. Lancashire just didn't feel like home.

After a few weeks, one of the women at the canteen took Renie aside. 'I've been watching you. You're a real hard worker.'

'Thanks, Mary.'

'I wondered if you'd like an extra job on Saturday nights. It'd earn you three shillings.'

'Doing what?'

'Working in the kitchen at The Rathleigh Hotel in Rochdale. It's mostly washing up, but if they think you're worth it, they'll teach you to do other things, like they did me. I've been learning waitressing. They're always on the lookout for good workers, you see. I'm going to give notice at the canteen tomorrow and work in the hotel full-time

as a waitress.'

'You lucky thing!'

'It's not just luck. I've earned my new job by hard work and you can too. Waitresses get tips as well as wages, and they don't ruin their hands. One day I want to work as a housekeeper in a big hotel. I'm never getting married. I don't want to spend my life running round after a fellow and going without to feed the kids, like my sister does.'

Renie was happy to hear another woman say she wasn't getting married. Whenever she said that, people laughed at her and told her she'd change when she met the right man. But she wouldn't. Watching how unhappy Cliff made her sister proved how chancy marriage could be. Her father had made her mother unhappy too.

'It's really kind of you to think of me, Mary, and I'd love to try for it.'

'Like I said, you're a good worker.'

'How do we get back after work?'

'The last train. They make sure I can leave on time for that and they give me my fare. They're good employers. Have you ever been inside the hotel?'

'No. I walked past the door one day and it looked very posh.'

'It is. People of our sort don't go there, just rich folk. You should hear how they talk.' She stuck her nose in the air and said, 'How do you do?' in a plummy voice, making Renie laugh.

'The hotel guests eat meals in the restaurant, three courses at least, the lucky things, and they stay the night in fancy bedrooms. The housekeeper let me have a peep at them. They're lovely.' Mary's eyes grew dreamy for a moment. 'One day I'm going to sleep in a bedroom like that.'

She shook her head and smiled. 'Listen to me going on. I can take you to meet the housekeeper after work, if you like, to see if she'll take you on. I've already told her about you.'

Renie nearly said yes, then looked down at herself. 'Not today. I'll look a mess by then and this is my oldest skirt. How about tomorrow? I can bring some clean clothes to change into after work.'

She didn't tell Nell about this chance of an extra job, because Cliff might find out and stop her even trying. He didn't want anyone to be happy, that one didn't.

The next day after work, Mary took her into Rochdale and they went into The Rathleigh by a rear entrance. She explained to a man in a black suit that she was taking Renie for an interview with Mrs Berton.

The further into the hotel they went, the more nervous Renie became. What was a girl like her doing in a place like this?

The housekeeper's room was so grand she wanted to clutch Mary's arm. But then she realised she was being a coward, so took a deep breath and stood up straight. Her sister Mattie always said you had to face things you were afraid of. Her heart clenched, as it always did, at the thought of Mattie and she wondered where her oldest sister was.

'This is Renie, Mrs Berton.'

After a series of questions, the housekeeper said, 'I'll give you a trial, Renie, because Mary speaks well of you and you look like a strong, healthy sort of girl.' She frowned. 'Is Renie short for Irene?'

'Yes, Mrs Berton.'

'Then I think we'll use your full name here. Renie sounds rather common.'

When they got out of the hotel, Renie said indignantly, 'Fancy changing my name!'

'They do things like that in posh hotels. Everything has to sound right, as well as look right. What does it matter? You'll be earning three shillings every Saturday.'

Three whole shillings for herself. She'd not give a farthing of it to Cliff.

Nell was delighted for her, but *he* threw a fit about her being out late. After Renie told him she'd be coming home with Mary, he said the three shillings would be very welcome.

'I'm not giving you any more money. It doesn't cost you anything for me to work in Rochdale.'

'I'm the head of this household and you'll do as you're told, young woman.'

'I won't go to work there at all if you take my money.'

'Don't be cheeky. You live under my roof and you'll do as I say.'

'I'm not being cheeky, but it's my money. And if you don't like me living here, I can always go into lodgings.'

'Cliff, let her do it. She'll be saving me the meal on Saturday night, because they give her something to eat, so we do benefit.'

The dirty look he gave Renie said he'd not forget this, but she'd had enough of him and his grasping ways and she didn't care. Nell might have to put up with him, but she didn't.