

Prologue

Treetops Manor, Hartshill near Nuneaton, September 1870

‘Still no news?’

The maid paused to stare coldly at the tall, handsome man who was pacing up and down the long landing like a caged animal, before answering, ‘No, more’s the pity. The poor lamb is havin’ a terrible time of it.’

‘It will all be worth it if it is a boy,’ Sir Ashley Hunter said unfeelingly.

She glared at him, making no attempt to hide her dislike. Zillah had never wanted her young mistress to marry him in the first place but the girl had been besotted by him. ‘She should at least have had a proper doctor to attend her,’ she grumbled as she made to pass him.

He caught her arm in a grip that made her wince with pain and his handsome face turned ugly as he ground out, ‘The midwife I selected is *more* than capable.’

Aye, of keepin’ her mouth shut, the maid thought, but she didn’t say it aloud.

‘And just remember, if it *is* a girl . . .’

A shudder ran through her as he went on, ‘You know what you must do – otherwise it will be the asylum for your darling and the workhouse for you. A woman who can’t provide me with an heir is no good to me nor any other man.’

Shrugging her arm from his grip, she stamped away downstairs for more hot water. He was a devil, that's what he was, and God willing one day he would get his comeuppance. But for now, all she could do was pray that the poor mistress would give birth to a male. What Zillah was being ordered to do – should the child not be a boy – was just too awful to contemplate.

Minutes later she tramped breathlessly back into her mistress's bedroom and placed the large jug she had just fetched from the kitchen down on to the table that had been placed at the side of the bed. The hot water and the towels would be used to wash mother and baby when the birth was finally over; dear God, let it be soon.

The house was quiet as a graveyard. The master had given the rest of the staff the day off, the moment his wife had gone into labour. He had told them all it was so that she could have some privacy – but Zillah knew better. The less that they saw of what was going on the better, as far as he was concerned. Most of them had gone to church, it being Sunday, and then to visit family.

Now she took the young woman's hand and stared down into her face. Strands of Lavinia's fine blonde hair were sticking to her damp forehead and she looked exhausted.

'Wi-will it be much longer?' she gasped.

The midwife who was attending her – a plump, hard-faced woman with a beaked nose – answered shortly, 'Not if yer do as yer told an' save yer breath.'

The maid gritted her teeth. There was nothing she would have liked to do more than land the woman a clout but instead she plastered a smile on her face and told her mistress, 'Almost there now, sweet'heart. Just bear down when the nurse tells yer an' yer'll be holdin' a fine son in yer arms in no time.'

'B-but what if it's not a son?' Lavinia moved her head restlessly.

'Shush now an' pay heed,' Zillah urged, and almost before the words had left her mouth another sharp contraction ripped through

the poor soul on the bed and she arched her back as she screamed in agony.

Two long hours had passed when the midwife announced triumphantly, 'Here it comes! The head is crownin'. The next good push should do it.'

By then the mother-to-be was slipping in and out of consciousness, barely aware of what was happening.

'That's it, pet. Did yer hear?' her maid asked gently. 'Just one more good push now on the next pain an' it'll all be over.'

But her beloved girl was too far gone to respond so the nurse lifted a wickedly sharp knife and did what had to be done . . . and seconds later the sound of a newborn's wails echoed around the room.

The child was quite exquisite, with eyes the colour of bluebells and a head full of soft, blonde, downy curls exactly the same colour as its mother's but Zillah's heart sank as she saw that it was a girl. And then the door suddenly crashed inwards and the father was standing there, demanding, 'Well?'

'It . . . it's a little lass,' the maid told him fearfully and watched as his hands clenched into fists of rage.

'Then you know what you must do – get rid of it!' He picked up a pillow and threw it at her. 'And you also know what will happen if you ever speak of this to anyone.' He cast one withering glance at his wife then marched from the room, saying, 'I shall tell Matthews to prepare the grave.'

The midwife rinsed her hands in the bowl that was placed ready for her. When the master finally sent for the doctor she would testify that the child had been born dead and he would then issue the death certificate. But right now she felt the need for the large glass of gin that Sir Ashley had promised would be waiting for her in the kitchen so, leaving the maid to clear up, she gathered her things and departed. As far as she was concerned, her job was done and she didn't much care one way or another what happened to the mother or the baby now.

An hour later, Zillah carried a tiny bundle through the kitchen and past the stable block until she came to the orchard where lay two other tiny graves. Within them rested the latest baby's two sisters who had been born a year apart. Unlike this one, they really had been born dead and she almost wished that this one had been too. Matthews, the master's valet, was waiting for her at the side of a gaping hole, leaning heavily on his shovel.

'About bloody time,' he grumbled and the maid looked down her nose at him. She was sure that he would have jumped off a cliff if his master had told him to and she disliked the man intensely. Most of the staff did too, if truth were to be told.

'Give it here then and let's get this over with.' He reached out for her precious bundle but she slapped his hand away and clutched it to her ample bosom.

'She's not an *it*, she's a little lass,' she snapped as tears slid down her cheeks. 'And I shall lay her in the grave meself, so you keep yer hands to yerself.'

Regardless of the muddy earth, she dropped to her knees and tenderly leaned into the grave to lay the pathetic bundle within.

'Sleep tight, me little one,' she whispered brokenly, then standing again she gave him a curt nod. 'So get on with it then!'

Matthews began to shovel earth across the tiny form as the maid looked on, and in no time at all the job was done and he patted the ground level with the back of his spade.

'That's it then,' he muttered, and leaving her standing there, he hurried back to the warmth of the kitchen. Once he'd gone, she followed him back to the house. Her mistress could regain consciousness at any time and then it would be Zillah's unfortunate duty to inform Lady Lavinia Huntley that she had given birth to yet another stillborn little lass. Better that than for the beloved girl to ever discover the truth.

Chapter One

Nuneaton Union Workhouse, November 1880

As the cane whistled through the air and cracked down across the crouching child's back she started but not a sound left her lips; instead she stared up at her attacker with a mutinous expression on her small face.

'What do you think you're doing, Small? I told Daisy to do that, not you!'

The small girl tucked into ten-year-old Sunday Small's side began to whimper with terror but Sunday continued to stare back at the woman undaunted.

'I've already finished my job, Miss Frost, so I thought I'd help Daisy. She's only little and this is a big floor for her to scrub.'

Miss Frost – aptly named, for she didn't have a warm feeling in her body – seemed to swell to twice her already considerable size. The matron, and housemother to the girls, was a tall, well-made woman with steel-grey hair which she wore in a tight bun at the nape of her neck, and cold, steel-grey eyes.

'You,' she stabbed a finger towards Daisy, 'get on with what you were told to do. And don't think I won't be back to check on it. If it isn't done to my standard, it will be the punishment room for you and no supper. Do you understand?'

'Y-yes, miss.' The child snatched the heavy scrubbing brush from

Sunday and began to swipe the floor as if her life depended on it, while the housemother grabbed Sunday by the arm and hauled her to her feet before shaking her much as a dog would have shaken a rat.

‘How many times do I have to warn you not to interfere with my orders?’ she raged, her cheeks flushed with anger. ‘Let’s see if a day or two in the punishment room will get you to be a little more obedient, shall we?’ The woman began to drag Sunday along and the child went without protest. She had learned long ago that to argue only made things ten times worse.

At the end of the long, gloomy corridor Miss Frost paused to select a key from the chatelaine about her waist, then after unlocking a heavy wooden door she pushed Sunday ahead of her down a stone staircase. The steps were worn in the middle where feet had trodden on them over many years and the walls were damp and smelled fusty. By now, most of the children in the workhouse would have been screaming blue murder, but not Sunday. Her chin jutted with defiance and her deep-blue eyes looked straight ahead with not a tear in sight. This only incensed the woman more, and once at the bottom of the steps she unlocked yet another door and flung the child into a tiny dark room.

‘There then.’ She was panting with exertion now. ‘At least you’ll be company for the spiders and the rats,’ she added spitefully, and with that she slammed the door resoundingly shut leaving Sunday to cower in the darkness.

The child had fallen heavily on her elbow and now she leaned against the rough-plastered wall and rubbed it, wincing with pain. She could hear Miss Frost’s footsteps receding and then there was nothing but deep darkness and biting cold – but still she wouldn’t cry. Her main concern was for Daisy and how the little girl might cope without her. Ever since Daisy and her brother, Tommy, had been admitted to the workhouse some months before, following the death of their mother, Sunday had taken the pair under her

wing. She felt fiercely protective of them and, whenever she could, she'd try to find ways to make things easier for the two of them. Having never known any other life than that of the workhouse, Sunday expected nothing – but Daisy and Tommy had known love and missed it sorely, poor little mites.

Sunday centred her thoughts on her friends as she huddled on the damp floor, wrapping her arms about her knees to try and keep warm. A worn wooden bench stood against one wall, but she knew from past experience that if she chose to sit on it she risked splinters so she preferred to stay where she was on the floor. There was no window so the darkness was all-consuming. She shivered. The other children would all be going into the dining room soon for their evening meal, such as it was. Probably some thin, greasy gruel with a few chunks of vegetables floating in it and dry, grey bread washed down with cold water. Meat was only served three times a week and even then it was so gristly that Sunday often wondered how she didn't break her teeth on it. Sometimes at night as they cuddled down in their beds, which were next to each other, shivering under their one thin blanket, Daisy would whisper to her about the wonderful meals her mother had used to cook, and the cakes she would bake before she became ill, and the cosy little house they had lived in. It had opened up a whole new world to Sunday, who would listen enviously.

Now she tried to ignore her rumbling stomach as she rocked to and fro. She doubted very much whether Miss Frost would let her out before the next morning at least. Miss Beau, who came to the workhouse each day for two hours to teach the children, had told her that the guardians of the workhouse had ruled that the punishment room should only be used as a last resort for short periods at a time, but as Sunday knew to her cost, what did Miss Frost care for rules? As far as the housemother was concerned, what the guardians didn't see wouldn't hurt them and none of the children were brave enough to tell them what really went on. Miss Frost

seemed to enjoy making their miserable lives even more bleak. Over the years Sunday had seen at least two children locked away, never to be seen again. Shortly after, two small new graves had appeared in the graveyard at the back of the workhouse. When questioned, Miss Frost had stated that the children had died of influenza. Sunday had her own thoughts about that. She firmly believed that the already undernourished children had been left to starve, but who would have listened to her, had she voiced her opinion – and would she be left to the same fate?

She tried to think of something nice as her breath floated on the cold air in front of her. *Think of Sunday School*, she told herself. Sunday was the highlight of the week, for on that day the children were only made to work until it was time to attend the morning service at the church at 11 a.m. Even the lunch they were served was slightly better on a Sunday. They had meat, albeit gristly, and potatoes and vegetables if they were lucky; sometimes they even got a bowl of rice pudding to follow, but not very often. Now she tried to imagine the sweetness of the rice pudding on her tongue but she was shivering so hard she couldn't manage to do it.

After lunch, when the children had washed and dried all the pots and returned them to their rightful places in the kitchen, the girls would be lined up for inspection and Miss Frost would walk along, inspecting them. Anyone who hadn't taken the trouble to brush their hair or change into their Sunday-best clothes would be sent back to their room. If they offended twice in the same month they would be whipped. Those that passed muster would then be frogmarched down the Bull Ring to All Saints Church at Chilvers Coton and left to the tender ministration of Miss Beau for an hour in the afternoon. Sunday loved the walk in the fresh air, past the florist's shop on the corner, which always smelled wonderful, over the canal bridge and under the Coton Arches, a huge viaduct that spanned the road.

The girl sighed as she thought of Miss Beau. The kindly teacher

would read the workhouse children wonderful stories from the Bible. Sunday's favourite story was about baby Moses being found in the bulrushes, and with Miss Beau's help she could read it all by herself now – a fact of which she was very proud. The guardians insisted that all the children should learn to read and write, and Sunday was like a little sponge, eager to read anything and everything she could get her hands on. It was Miss Beau who had told her of the town's history. Until not so very long ago, Nuneaton had been the heart of the ribbon-weaving industry and had housed many ribbon-weaving factories; the ribbons that were made there had been transported all over the world. Some of them had gone to the hat factories in nearby Atherstone to trim the hats for which they were famous; others had gone to London. But now the town relied mainly on the local brickworks and the pits.

Despite the bitter cold and her hunger pangs, Sunday smiled into the darkness. She was beautiful, was Miss Beau, just like her name, inside and out. Her bouncy brown hair matched soft brown eyes that always seemed to be smiling. The child would have walked over hot coals for her if asked, for Verity Beau was the only adult who had ever shown Sunday an ounce of affection. As well as teaching the girls, Miss Beau spent time in the nursery with the babies and also helped out in the sick wing. She had often told Sunday tales of how, when she was a baby in the nursery after being found on the steps of the workhouse, Sunday was the only one who ever cried.

'The other babies soon learned that crying achieved nothing,' Miss Beau said sadly. Though Verity did what she could for them whilst she was there, no one ever came to them apart from to feed and change them occasionally. The shocking fact was that the majority of them never made it to their first birthday. All except for Sunday, that was, and Miss Beau had told the girl that even as a small child she could always be heard protesting loudly about the lack of care shown to the infants. 'You were a force to be reckoned

with even back then,' the woman had informed her with a grin as they sat in the makeshift schoolroom for a small snatched moment after the other children had been dismissed one afternoon.

'And who gave me my name?' Sunday had asked.

'Well, I think you were named Sunday for obvious reasons,' Miss Beau informed her. 'And you were given the surname Small because you were so tiny.'

Miss Frost and Miss Beau were quite regularly at odds; the latter's questions or forthright suggestions enraged the other woman. Miss Beau was the only one, as far as Sunday could see, who ever stood up to Miss Frost or dared to question her disciplinary methods or matters such as the children's diets. Sunday sometimes wondered why her idol had never been dismissed. No doubt it was because Miss Beau was engaged to Mr Lockett, the local vicar, who gave the orphans religious instruction at Sunday School with his fiancée. Even the formidable matron wouldn't dare to upset him, because he was a very influential man in the community.

The girl was so deeply lost in her thoughts that for a moment she wasn't aware of the approaching footsteps – and when she did become aware of them her heart began to pound with fear. Could it be Miss Frost coming back with her cane to eke out yet more punishment? Sunday was the only child in the workhouse who refused to show her fear of the sadistic housemother – and this usually caused her punishment to be much more severe than if she had cried and shown remorse as the others did. She often went without a meal or was whipped and she knew that she sorely tried Miss Frost's patience, but she didn't care and would rather die than weaken and shed a tear in front of her.

Now she watched with trepidation as the key turned in the lock. As the door inched open, the gloomy light from the corridor filtered down into the room and suddenly there was Miss Beau, standing at the top of the stairs, holding a wooden tray.

Sunday let out a long sigh of relief.

‘Oh, you naughty girl, whatever am I going to do with you?’ Miss Beau said kindly. ‘What have you done to upset Miss Frost now?’

‘I were only helping Daisy to scrub the floor,’ Sunday told her indignantly. ‘Daisy’s only little an’ there was too much for her to do all on her own.’

Miss Beau tutted sympathetically as she handed the tray to the child.

‘Eat this up as quickly as you can so I can get the tray back to the kitchen,’ she urged. ‘Daisy managed to whisper to me where you were when I missed you in class, but if Miss Frost should catch me down here I shall be in trouble too, for flouting her authority.’

Sunday obediently lifted the bowl and quickly drank the thin gruel before emptying the water glass. The gruel was lukewarm and salty but she was grateful for it. She then sat back with the chunk of bread in her hands to chew on when she was alone again.

Miss Beau stared sadly down at her. Sunday knew that Miss Beau cared for her and seeing how she was picked on upset her.

‘Why can’t you try to be a little more subservient to Miss Frost, dear?’ she said now. ‘It would make life so much easier for you.’

Sunday sniffed. ‘I don’t like bullies,’ she replied simply, and the teacher shook her head. The child had spirit and Verity Beau knew that it was going to take a lot more than Miss Frost to break her.

‘I have to go now.’ Bestowing one last smile on the girl she went back up the stone steps and slowly closed the door again. As the key turned in the lock, Sunday was left once more in darkness. Something warm with a long tail ran across her foot and she hastily kicked it out of the way. It was a rat, no doubt after any crumbs she might drop. She shuddered, then began to chew on her chunk of bread. At least her hunger had subsided and after all the cleaning she had done she was tired now. Eventually she lay down on the cold floor, using her unhurt arm as a pillow, and in no time at all

was fast asleep, dreaming of the day when, with her best friends Daisy and Tommy, she would leave the workhouse for ever.



Sunday had no idea how long she stayed in the punishment room. There was no way of determining night from day down there but she supposed that she had been there for at least a day and a night before she heard footsteps again, for her stomach was growling ominously.

The door creaked open as Sunday peered up through bleary eyes to see Miss Frost staring down at her.

‘So, are you ready to do as you are told yet?’

Sunday opened her mouth to tell her captor to go away but then thought better of it. Daisy might need her and she couldn’t help her while she was locked away. She was also afraid that Miss Frost might leave her there for ever if she didn’t agree with her.

She forced herself to nod although it went sorely against the grain and the woman smiled a cold smile.

‘Come along then. There is work waiting to be done. You know the saying “idle hands make work for the devil”. But first you must clean yourself up. You smell like a sewer.’

It was hardly surprising, Sunday thought, seeing as there was only a bucket to use as a chamber pot. It was half-full now and the smell rising from it in the confined area was overpowering.

‘Bring that with you,’ the woman snapped. ‘And make sure it is emptied and thoroughly washed out.’

Sunday lifted it, feeling as weak as a kitten, but she didn’t say a word. She knew all too well that Miss Frost only needed the slightest excuse to push her back into the room and leave her there again.

Once she had lugged the heavy bucket upstairs she found that it was afternoon. There was no sign of any of the children so she assumed they would all be at their lessons with Miss Beau. She

trudged outside to the privy block and emptied the contents of the bucket then washed it out at the pump as she'd been instructed before heading for the grey stone wash-house. Normally she would have loved to be out in the fresh air but she was so cold that her teeth were chattering and she just wanted to get back inside. She was almost halfway there when she realised that she would need some clean clothes so she darted back to the dormitory that she shared with Daisy and six other girls. Like the rest of the building the dormitory was a bleak place. It contained eight iron beds on which lay thin straw mattresses and one ragged blanket each, four on either side of the room. Between each bed was a small wooden locker to house the girls' meagre belongings, and on the end wall was a window set high up, through which the wind whistled. There were no pictures or ornaments of any description to soften the austere surroundings but Sunday didn't miss them for she had never known any different. She had expected to find the room empty at this time of the day so was shocked to see a slight form huddled beneath the blanket on the bed next to hers.

'Daisy, is that you?' she asked, instantly forgetting what she had come there for.

A tiny voice moaned, 'Yes.'

'But what are you doing in here at this time of day? Are you feeling ill?'

There was no answer so Sunday approached the bed and gently drew back the blanket.

'Oh, poor Daisy – what's happened to you?' The child was naked save for her faded cotton bloomers, and angry red weals made a striped pattern across her back.

'It . . . it was Miss Frost,' Daisy whimpered. 'She punished me for allowing you to do my work for me.'

Sunday swallowed the lump that had risen in her throat before tenderly placing her arm about the skinny shoulders.

'For as long as we're here I'll try to protect you, Daisy, and one

day we're going to get out of here,' she promised in a voice that trembled with rage. 'We'll go somewhere where Miss Frost can never hurt any of us again, you just see if we don't!'

There was such determination in her friend's voice that Daisy allowed herself to believe her as the girls clung together, drawing what comfort they could from one another.

Chapter Two

Miss Beau was tidying the empty schoolroom later that afternoon, for her pupils had returned to their chores, when a little voice interrupted her and she spun around to see Sunday standing in the doorway, nervously wringing her hands. For most of the time the child put a brave face on things but just now and again something happened to remind the kindly teacher that Sunday Small was just a little girl.

‘Miss Beau, will you come and look at Daisy, please? She’s in a lot of pain and I don’t know what to do for her.’

The young woman was just about to leave for the day and it was the first chance Sunday had found to get her alone for a private word.

‘What do you mean, dear?’ Verity asked. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

Sunday licked her lips and glanced furtively around to make sure they couldn’t be overheard before whispering, ‘While I was in the punishment room Miss Frost caned her for allowing me to help her with her work. She didn’t seem too bad yesterday but now I think she’s running a fever and she’s very poorly.’

Miss Beau’s pretty face darkened as she replied, ‘I see, then you go about your work, Sunday. I don’t want you getting into even more trouble. I shall go and check on her.’

Sunday let out a huge breath of relief before she hurried back

to the entrance, dropped to her knees and began the unenviable task of scrubbing the foyer floor again. A thankless task, for no sooner was it done than people traipsed in from outside and it was dirty again. Today, however, Sunday was so concerned about Daisy that she was glad of the diversion, and at least Miss Beau was going to look at her now. When she had told Miss Frost earlier on that she feared Daisy was really ill, all she'd got in return was a good clout around the ear.

Keeping one eye on the stairs, Sunday worked on and at last Miss Beau reappeared, heading purposefully for the housemaster's office. Sunday rose and tiptoed after her, hiding behind the stairs and able to hear all that followed.

'Ah, Miss Beau. What can I do for you, dear lady?' Sunday heard Albert Pinnegar enquire sweetly. His table was loaded with all manner of treats and as Miss Beau pictured the disgusting food that was served to the children every mealtime she eyed him disdainfully.

'I fear young Daisy Branning is very ill,' she told him. 'She's running a high fever and I believe she should be in the sick quarters.'

'What concern is that of mine, Miss Beau? I suggest you inform the housemother.' The workhouse master popped a sweetmeat into his mouth and licked his fingers noisily.

'That is not possible,' Miss Beau replied, clearly trying her best to hide her feelings as she stared at his plump figure. His waistcoat was straining across his fat stomach and the buttons on it looked in danger of popping off at any second. He was quite short and almost as far round as he was high with a bald head, a large red nose and a thick handlebar moustache that was usually full of morsels of food. All in all, he was quite repulsive. 'I believe the fever was caused due to a severe beating,' the teacher went on.

'A beating?'

'Yes. Miss Frost thrashed Daisy the day before yesterday and it appears she was a little over-zealous.'

At that precise moment Miss Frost herself appeared as if she had been conjured up by black magic. 'Is something amiss?' she enquired. 'If so, you should have come to me to discuss it, Miss Beau, rather than bother dear Mr Pinnegar.'

'It's Daisy Branning,' Miss Beau informed her tersely. 'She should be in the sick quarters. Her temperature is dangerously high.' She would have liked nothing better than to be able to tell the matron what a wicked woman she was, but Miss Beau had long since learned that if she gave vent, it was inevitably the girls who would suffer.

'I see.' Miss Frost turned to the housemaster with a simpering smile. 'I'm afraid I had no choice but to chastise her,' she explained. 'Daisy would try the patience of a saint. Nevertheless, if she needs medical attention you may rest assured that she will receive it. But now, Miss Beau, isn't it time you left?'

Clenching her teeth, Verity Beau nodded, turned abruptly and blindly left the office without seeing or acknowledging Sunday on her way out.



All the way home Verity fumed as she thought of the way the workhouse children were treated. If only she could do something about it! Miss Frost was clearly in awe of Albert Pinnegar. He resided in a small cottage in the grounds of the workhouse and it was common knowledge that the matron idolised him, though what she saw in him Verity had no idea. The thought of the pair made her shudder but once again she was powerless to do more than she was already doing. She couldn't afford to lose her job.

With a sigh, Verity moved on across the frosty ground. She had lived in a small rented room in a terraced house in Henry Street for some years, but all that would change soon when she married dear Edgar and would go to live in the vicarage with

him. The thought brought a smile back to her face. The Reverend Edgar Lockett was the kindest of men, handsome too, and sometimes she could hardly believe that he had looked upon her as suitable wife material. Verity had become orphaned herself in her late teens and for a time had gone into service in one of the big houses on the outskirts of Nuneaton as a governess before taking a post teaching the girls in the workhouse. As the years passed by and she realised she was fast approaching thirty, she had sadly resigned herself to becoming an old maid, but then she had met Edgar when she started helping out at the Sunday school, and everything had changed. Edgar was some ten years older than herself and had tragically lost his first wife in childbirth some years before, but there had been an instant rapport between them. She had been so happy when he had asked for her hand last summer and now Verity could hardly wait to become his wife. They had already discussed her post at the workhouse. Edgar understood that she was very fond of some of the children there and he was happy for her to continue volunteering for a few hours each week, in her capacity as the vicar's wife.

Verity's footsteps quickened as she remembered it was Wednesday – the night she helped Edgar with choir practice in the church hall – and she went on her way feeling a little better and humming softly, vowing that she'd go to see Daisy first thing in the morning.



Back in her dormitory in the workhouse, Sunday was lying in bed staring morosely at Daisy's empty bed. She missed her little friend more than she could say but at least Daisy was in the best place now. While she was in the sick bay she would be excused work duties and the wounds on her poor back would receive attention.

Shivering, Sunday snuggled further down beneath the holey blanket. One of the other younger girls in the room had started to snuffle and soon the snuffles turned to full-blown sobs.

‘Shush, Susan,’ Sunday urged her, but it was too late. The door was already opening and Miss Frost was marching towards the weeping girl’s bed. Sunday screwed her eyes up tight and pretended to be asleep. The girl was beyond her help for now.

There was the sound of a faint tussle then suddenly everything became silent again. Sunday was aware of someone standing at the end of her bed and she lay as still as a stone. She heard Miss Frost sniff then the housemother stalked out of the room and relocked the door, leaving a foul smell behind her that Sunday recognised all too well. The rag that the woman used to quieten the children by pressing it across their nose and mouth would have been soaked in some bitter-smelling stuff, and little Susan would be out for the count for the rest of the night now. Her entire family was in the workhouse after losing their tied cottage in Bedworth when Susan’s father had been crippled in a pit fall.

Sunday waited until she was quite sure that Miss Frost had gone before sneaking out of bed and hurrying across to the child, sighing with relief to find that, although comatose, Susan was still breathing. She remembered an incident from the previous year when one little girl had not woken up after such treatment. When sent for, the doctor simply said that she had died of a weak heart and her small body had been interred in the graveyard at the back of the workhouse. However, Sunday had always had her own doubts about why the girl had passed away that night. Now she always tried to soothe the ones who were becoming upset, in order to try and avoid such a situation happening again but sometimes, like tonight in Susan’s case, she didn’t succeed. Thank goodness Susan was a strong little girl.

Sighing, Sunday glanced towards the window and to quiet her anxiety allowed herself to indulge in her favourite daydream. One

day soon her mother would come to claim her and would take her to live in a splendid house surrounded by sweet-smelling flowers and green, green grass, where birds sang in the trees and the sun always shone. They would have wonderful things to eat every single day; she would never be hungry again and in that beautiful place she would be treated like a princess. The lonely girl had convinced herself that her mother had wanted desperately to keep her, but that some circumstance had made it impossible. Perhaps she had been too ill to keep her when she was born but was recovered now? And one day, Sunday told herself, she *will* come and we'll live happily ever after. On that happy note her eyelids drooped and at last sleep claimed her.



The harsh ringing of a bell brought Sunday snapping awake early the next morning and she blinked. Surely it couldn't be six o'clock already?

'Come along, all of you. Let's have you into the wash-room.'

Miss Frost looked exactly as she had the evening before and Sunday wondered if she had even been to bed. Her greying hair was pulled back into the usual severe bun, and in her dark clothes and with her hook nose she reminded the child of one of the huge blackbirds that sometimes flew into the workhouse garden.

The girls hastily fell out of their beds and formed a line, blinking the sleep from their eyes before following Miss Frost along to the austere wash-room. A row of tin bowls full of ice-cold water with a slice of carbolic soap, a wash rag and a rough piece of huckaback to dry themselves on placed at the side of each one was waiting for them on a long trestle and the woman pointed at them, barking, 'Get to it now.'

The girls stumbled in their long drab nightgowns in their haste to do as they were told and within minutes they had all stripped

naked to the waist and were shivering as they scrubbed themselves down from top to toe in the freezing water. It was either that or feel the length of the evil-looking split cane Miss Frost was slapping against the sides of her long black bombazine skirts. There was no room for modesty here. Saturday evening was the ultimate humiliation, when they were each forced to strip completely naked and sit in the rows of tin hip-baths spaced along the opposite wall whilst whichever members of staff who were on duty that night scrubbed at their hair with vile-smelling soap before wielding the dreaded lice combs. The least sign of lice and the girls' heads would be shorn like lambs. It was worse still for the older girls who had begun their courses. They would throw their bloody rags into a soak bucket in the corner that would be taken to the laundry the next morning, and many of the younger girls found the sight frightening. Strangely, this routine didn't overly concern Sunday, for she had never known anything else. But she knew that some of the girls who were newly admitted often cringed with misery and embarrassment.

The workhouse was divided into four sections, women in one part, then boys, girls and the men in the others. During work days some of the able-bodied men and the stronger boys were set to work oakum picking, which involved teasing out the fibres from old hemp ropes into threads; these were then sold to shipbuilders who would coat them with tar and use them to seal the lining on wooden ships. The rest of the men were put to work at bone crushing which, Sunday knew, was a particularly unpleasant job if the smell that issued from the large shed where the men were working was anything to go by. The bones were delivered daily from the local slaughterhouse and once they were crushed they would be sold to farmers for fertilizer. The luckier of the men and boys worked in the gardens growing the fruit and vegetables for the workhouse meals. The women and girls were also made to work hard at a variety of jobs. They had a sewing room where they made

the workhouse uniforms. The more skilled needlewomen were set to making clothes for the better off of the parish or doing repairs; others worked in the kitchens cooking or cleaning or were sent to slave in the laundry. The inmates rarely came together apart from on Sundays when they were allowed to go to church, and Sunday had seen too many times the devastating effect this separation could have on families.

Now, she hurried through the morning ritual and then was led with the other girls back to their dormitories where they hastily dressed and brushed their hair before making their beds. God help any of them who didn't do it properly, for Miss Frost inspected their rooms each morning when they went down to breakfast.

In the dining room they silently took their seats as the staff seated themselves at the top table with the housemaster and Miss Frost who led them in prayer. Today the matron from the sick bay was present, along with the head of the nursery, but sometimes one of the guardians might stay for a meal or even the vicar, Mr Lockett, on the rare occasion.

'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful,' Miss Frost intoned.

'Amen,' the children chorused, then lifting their tin bowls and spoons they formed an orderly queue before the table where women were slopping dollops of porridge into each dish. When they reached the end of the table they each took a wedge of grey bread before resuming their seats and beginning their breakfast. It was utterly tasteless but Sunday cleared her dish. Anything was better than suffering hunger pangs and she had long since ceased expecting anything better. Each child had a tin mug full of watered-down milk, and all the time those at the staff table were being served with plentiful rashers of sizzling bacon and fried eggs with bright yellow yolks.

One day when my mother comes for me I shall have a breakfast like that every day, Sunday thought and a little smile lifted the

corners of her mouth, but then some instinct made her glance up, to see Miss Frost glaring at her, and she hastily lowered her head and began to chew on the bread.

As soon as the meal was over Miss Frost rose from her seat and began to read out the list of duties for that day.

‘Small, kitchen duties,’ she rapped out when it came to Sunday’s turn and again Sunday stifled a smile. Her hands were already sore and chapped from scrubbing the floors the day before, but at least it was warm in the kitchen with her arms up to her elbows in hot water as she washed the piles of dishes. It could have been worse; she might have been allocated gardening duties, for summer or winter there were always jobs to do out there. Her favourite job was working upstairs in the nursery with the babies but she never told Miss Frost that, for she knew that had she done so, the woman would never have let her go up there out of spite. She was only allowed up there occasionally as it was.

The children filed away to their various chores as Sunday collected a large wooden tray and began to pile the empty dishes onto it. She actually liked working in the kitchen. Some of the local women came in during the day to help the female inmates with the cooking and many of them were kind. They would chat to each other about their families and their homes and it gave Sunday an insight into what family life must be like; she would sigh and wish again that her mother and father had kept her.

She was in the process of unloading the second tray of pots onto the side of the huge stone sink when Miss Beau suddenly appeared in the kitchen. Spotting Sunday, she hurried over to her.

‘Ah, I’m glad I’ve caught you, dear.’ She smiled. ‘I just wanted to let you know that Daisy is a little better today so you can stop worrying. Her fever has come down although I fear her back will be scarred.’ The smile disappeared then and she frowned. ‘I really don’t know why Miss Frost has to be so heavy-handed and I’ve told her so as well. Not that it will do any good.’

‘Thank you, miss.’ Sunday stared up at her adoringly.

‘Well, that’s all I came to say. I must get about my duties now,’ Miss Beau said then. ‘Oh, and make sure you wear your shawl when you go out for your airing. It’s bitterly cold out there. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t have some snow.’

It was mid-morning before Sunday had washed and dried all the dishes and returned them to their rightful places and she raced upstairs to her room to fetch her shawl. The garment was a drab brown colour like the rest of the shapeless uniform she was forced to wear, but at least it kept her warm. She then went to stand in the hallway with the rest of the girls until they were led outside to a yard that was divided by a high wire fence through which they could see the boys also taking their airing in the other side.

‘All right, *walk* – no dawdling! The whole purpose of this is for you all to get some exercise,’ Miss Frost barked but then luckily she left them under the watchful eye of another member of staff who was not nearly as strict as she was whilst she went back into the building to enjoy mid-morning tea and biscuits with Mr Pinnegar. The girls, of various ages, began to stamp their feet and blow on their hands as Sunday sidled over to the fence hoping for a sight of Tommy, Daisy’s brother. She was soon rewarded when she saw him hurrying towards her.

‘Where’s our Daisy then?’ he asked anxiously, looking over her shoulder.

‘It’s all right. She’s in the sickbay because she had a fever but she’s over the worst now,’ Sunday assured him.

She watched his face fall and wasn’t surprised; he was fiercely protective of his little sister. At eleven, Tommy was tall for his age, although he was dangerously thin, and had deep-brown eyes and unruly hair that had a tendency to curl. He was two years older than Daisy, and a year older than herself. ‘Do yer promise?’ he said.

Sunday nodded solemnly. 'Cross my heart. She'll be back here before you know it. But are *you* all right, Tommy?' She stared at his latest black eye. Scuffles often broke out in the boys' quarters, but noting her concern he grinned.

'I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me – I can take care o' meself.' He winked at her boldly as if to add emphasis to his words but then as he thought of his little sister lying in the sickbay his face crumpled.

He looked so miserable that Sunday's heart went out to him. Both he and Daisy had taken their mother's death very badly. Tommy looked remarkably like his sister. Daisy also had curly brown hair and brown eyes, and if Tommy had been a girl Sunday thought it would have been difficult to tell them apart.

'Will they let me go an' see 'er?' he asked then.

'I doubt it,' Sunday said honestly, 'but if she's better you'll get to see her at church – so it's not so bad, is it?'

His bottom lip wobbled perilously and Sunday felt like ripping down the fence that separated them so she could give him a cuddle.

'Look after her for me, won't you, Sunday?'

'Course I will,' she mumbled, feeling helpless.

He brightened slightly then as he told her, 'I've been in the workshop today learning carpentry and I've really enjoyed it. I think I might like to work with wood when I get out of here . . . *If* I ever get out of here, that is.' He glanced at the dismal surroundings, the cold grey walls that made them all feel as if they were in prison and the horrible wire fence that separated them. Even the sky overhead was grey today.

'You will get out,' she promised. 'We all will one day and we'll go to work on a farm. We'll look after the animals and grow our own food and never be hungry and no one will ever hurt us again.' She flushed slightly following her outburst as he stared at her intently, praying that what she had said would come true.

The moment passed and all she could do was watch as Tommy walked away, his shoulders sagging.

I will get us all away from here one day, she silently vowed as she too turned and began to walk about the yard.