

# *Prologue*

*Nuneaton, March 1863*

Nancy Carson loaded the last of the clean washing into a small wooden cart and laid a white sheet neatly across it. A fine drizzle had started to fall and the last thing she needed after all the effort she had put into washing and ironing was for it to be ruined. It had been a long, hard day and there was nothing she would have liked more than to put her feet up at the side of the fire, but needs must. At least now that she was taking washing in and Reuben, her seventeen-year-old son, had started work, they were managing to make ends meet a little. Wednesday, her daughter – affectionately known as Nessie – who was two years younger than Reuben, had recently started work too at the local corner shop so at last the future was beginning to look a little brighter. Not before time, she thought ruefully as she wrapped a shawl tightly about her slim shoulders. The last six months had wrought so many changes in their lives that sometimes Nancy felt dizzy just thinking about it.

Much of this had been caused by the birth of little Joseph, who was fast asleep beside the fireplace in a wooden cradle that Reuben had carved for him. Her husband had not been at all pleased to know that there was to be an addition to the family and had walked out on the lot of them shortly before the child had been born. They had not seen hide nor hair of him since and Nancy

still missed him at times. Admittedly he had been no saint but he was her husband so his leaving had cut deep.

Nevertheless, Nancy was a survivor and when, soon after Joseph's birth, it became clear that they could no longer afford to live in their smart little cottage in Bedworth, she had moved them all, lock, stock and barrel, to a cheaper cottage in Stockingford in the neighbouring market town of Nuneaton.

Turning to Marcie, her youngest daughter, she told her, 'You'll have to watch Joseph for me until Nessie gets home. I'm delivering this clean laundry to Biddy Spooner. Goodness knows we need the money this week.' Biddy Spooner ran a lodging house in nearby Haunchwood Road and was well known for being somewhat eccentric and putting on airs and graces, but she was a good payer and one of Nancy's regular customers.

Marcie pouted. She hated their new home and constantly blamed her mother for bringing them there. She also resented the new baby and had as little to do with him as she could. Babies were dirty, smelly little creatures as far as she was concerned.

'It's no use pulling that face, my girl!' Nancy scolded as she dragged the cart towards the door. 'I'll not be gone long, so it won't hurt you to make yourself useful for a time. Nessie should be back soon.' With that she hauled the cart over the step and set off into the bitterly cold late afternoon.

No one would think we were into March already, Nancy thought, as she began to shiver. The weather had hardly improved since Christmas and soon her teeth were chattering and her thread-bare shawl clung damply to her shoulders as the cart bumped across the rough ground behind her. Already it was dark and she had to pick her way carefully to avoid the bumps and hollows in the field. Still, she thought, at least coming this way would take a good ten minutes off her journey and then she could hurry back to the warmth of her fireside.

She was passing a small copse when she had the strangest feeling

that someone was behind her. She wheeled about to peer into the darkness.

‘I-Is anyone there?’ Only the howling of the wind in the leafless trees answered her, so after a moment she grabbed the handle of the cart and set off again, but she had taken no more than a few steps when suddenly something hit her hard between the shoulder blades and she sprawled on to the muddy ground, winded. Somehow, she managed to turn on to her side and as she gazed up, a face slowly swam into focus.

*‘You bitch!’*

Her eyes stretched wide with shock. ‘But . . . what are *you* doing here? What do you want?’ she rasped as she struggled to catch her breath. And then she saw the cudgel of wood hurtling towards her again and felt a searing pain in her shoulder as she tried to raise her hand to defend herself.

*‘S-stop!’* she pleaded, but her attacker was beyond reasoning, his face twisted with hatred. Again and again the blows rained down on her as she struggled to rise from the muddy ground.

*‘Please . . . no more!’* But her pleas fell on deaf ears and if anything, the attack became more frenzied as the man grunted with exertion. Soon, realising that her pleas were useless she curled herself into a ball until at last a comforting darkness rushed towards her and she knew no more.

Once he saw her take her final breath, the man stopped, staring down at the woman’s inert form until his breathing returned to some sort of normality, then, with not an ounce of remorse, he slipped away into the night, leaving her lifeless body exposed to the cruel winter air.

# Chapter One

*September 1864*

‘Mr Grimshaw is at Ma Baker’s, Nessie. Shall we hide under the table and pretend we’re not in?’ fifteen-year-old Marcie asked fearfully.

‘No we will *not*!’ her sister Nessie replied proudly. ‘I’ve never hidden from the rent man yet and I’m not about to start now. Just sit down at the table and leave him to me.’ Seeing the frightened look on her younger sister’s face, her expression softened. ‘It’ll be all right, love,’ she assured her. ‘I’ve got some of the rent for him, he’ll wait for the rest.’

Despite her brave words, Nessie’s stomach was in knots. It was a well-known fact that their landlord was not a man to be messed with, but what alternative did she have? Before her horrific death some eighteen months before, her mother had always insisted that all of her offspring were out of the way when the landlord called and somehow she had always paid him. But now, with only Reuben’s wage coming in, things were going from bad to worse and some days Nessie, as the oldest girl, struggled to even feed them all, let alone pay the rent.

She felt a moment’s resentment as she thought of her father who had abandoned them all two years before when he had run off with the landlady of the local inn close to where they had lived.

They'd not seen him since and in some ways it had been a blessing. At least now they didn't have to live in fear of him rolling in drunk and aggressive from the pub. Compared to where they used to live, the rent on this cottage was much cheaper but it was reflected in their living conditions, which were sparse to say the least. 'But needs must,' their mother had told her brood cheerfully, and somehow, she had managed to hold the family together, bless her.

Blinking back tears as she thought of her mother and the unthinkable way in which her life had come to an end, Nessie smiled at her sister. 'Take Joseph out into the back yard for a few minutes, Marcie. The fresh air will do him good.'

Joseph was now almost twenty months old with light brown hair and hazel eyes. He was small for his age and had never been a robust child, but unlike Marcie, she and her brother, Reuben, adored him and spoiled him shamelessly. Nessie watched as her sister swept him up into her arms and hurried away with a resentful look on her face. Then taking a deep breath, she squared her slight shoulders and waited for the knock on the door.

It came soon enough and with what she could muster of the rent money gripped tight in her hand, she went to answer it.

'Mr Grimshaw.' Her voice was icily polite and he grinned at her, his eyes sweeping over her lasciviously.

There was no doubt about it, this little filly was turning into a head-turner. Admittedly she wasn't beautiful in the classical sense. Her hair, which was unfashionably straight, hung almost to her waist like a shimmering copper cloak streaked with gold and her nose was a little too upturned to be deemed pretty. Her cheeks were deeply dimpled when she smiled and her mouth was just a fraction too wide. Even so, her lips were full and red and her skin like peaches and cream. But it was her eyes, easily her best feature, that fascinated him. They were fringed with dark, gold-tipped lashes and were a deep, tawny colour that could change to darkest brown if she was upset. They were quite unlike anything he'd seen

before. At sixteen years old, her slim figure was filling out nicely and Seth Grimshaw desperately wanted to own her.

‘So, me beauty, got me rent ready fer me, have you?’ he asked as he licked his fat lips lecherously.

‘Some of it, I’ll make sure to have the rest ready for you the next time you call.’ Nessie opened her hand and as he stared at the collection of ha’pennies and coppers he sneered, his nostrils widening repugnantly.

‘That’s no good to me, lass. The rent is three and sixpence per week, as you well know. There’s just short of two bob there.’

‘I’m quite aware of that,’ Nessie answered coolly. Her face was outwardly calm but inside her stomach was churning. ‘But Reuben sprained his ankle last week and had to have three days off work until he could put his weight on it again and it’s made us short.’

She had expected him to turn nasty, he was known for it hereabouts, but instead he surprised her when he leaned in and told her in a low voice, ‘Well, just see as you have it next time, pet . . . otherwise we’ll have to think of another way you can pay me, eh?’ His putrid breath enveloped her as, reaching his hand forward, he suddenly tweaked her breast.

Cheeks flaming, she sprang away from him as if she had been burned. He had left her in no doubt of what he wanted and Nessie felt sick to her stomach as she stared at the disgusting creature. Seth Grimshaw was fat and forty if he was a day and even now he was at arm’s length, the ripe smell of him assaulted her. He had a large moustache and the sight of the food caught in it made her want to gag. He was grossly overweight and his fat stomach strained against the buttons on his grubby, brightly coloured waistcoat. His hair was grey and plastered to his head with Macassar oil and Nessie found him totally repulsive.

‘It will be here for you,’ Nessie muttered primly as she thrust the money into his podgy fingers.

He grinned as he dropped the coins into the bag about his

waist. 'See that it is,' he said, then he walked away without another word.

Nessie hastily slammed the door and leaned heavily against it, shaking like a leaf in the wind. At that moment, Marcie's head popped around the back door and her eyes swiftly swept the room. 'Has he gone then?'

'Yes, he's gone.' Nessie sank onto the nearest chair, suddenly feeling weary. She was so tired of having to rob Peter to pay Paul and make ends meet, but what choice did she have? She had promised her mother, before she had been so cruelly taken away from them, that should anything ever happen to her she would keep the family together, and up until now she had, although she was well aware that she couldn't have managed it without the support of Reuben. He worked laying the train tracks that were springing up all over the country. Sometimes this meant that he had to work away from home but every Friday he turned up, as regular as clockwork, to tip his wages onto the table for her and Nessie wondered how they would ever manage without him. He was her rock and she depended on him.

Marcie, on the other hand, was a different matter altogether. Since leaving school, she'd worked in three different jobs but none of them had held her interest for long, much to Nessie's annoyance. Marcie wanted to be a lady and considered herself too good for manual work, so recently Nessie had suggested that they should change roles. She would go out to work to bring a little extra in while Marcie stayed at home to care for Joseph and keep the house running. But Marcie had been horrified at the idea. She was no fool and realised that staying at home would probably be harder than going out to work. 'No,' she had told her, 'I'm going to wait until a rich man comes along and sweeps me off my feet, then I shall be waited on and spoiled.'

Nessie knew that the girl was living in cloud cuckoo land. That sort of thing didn't happen to the likes of them. And yet, despite

Marcie's selfishness, Nessie loved her and tried to turn a blind eye to her behaviour. Usually she managed to keep her patience, but just the day before they'd had a terrible row after Nessie had sent Marcie to the market for some food. Admittedly, Marcie had shopped wisely and got everything on the list, but then finding she had a few precious pennies spare she had bought a length of red ribbon for her hair. Nessie had cried tears of rage and frustration. Marcie didn't seem to realise that those miserly few pence might mean the difference between them eating or not towards the end of the following week, and worse still, she didn't seem to much care. But that was Marcie; she would always put herself first.

But all that faded into the background now as Nessie relived in her mind her confrontation with Seth Grimshaw. She shuddered. He'd made it more than obvious what he wanted from her and the thought of him laying his horrible fat hands on her made her tremble with fear. No matter what, somehow, she must find a way to pay him the rent next week.



That night when Reuben arrived home he found Nessie in a subdued mood, and as he washed the worst of the dust from his face, hands and arms in the deep, stone sink and dried himself on the piece of huckaback his sister had laid ready for him, he eyed her curiously.

'Is everything all right?' he questioned. Nessie didn't seem to be her usual cheery self at all.

'I suppose so,' she answered dully as she carried a pan of stew to the table before lifting Joseph onto a chair. He rewarded her with a smile that melted her heart and she quickly dropped a kiss on his springy curls. Marcie had been out for the last hour, as she was most nights, visiting her friends.



Reuben crossed to the table, slouching slightly to avoid banging his head on the low-beamed ceiling and Nessie realised with a little shock how tall he had become. 'Come on, out with it.' He lifted his spoon as she filled his dish and gave her an encouraging smile.

'Well, Seth Grimshaw called for the rent today and when I wasn't able to give him the whole amount he was quite . . .' She struggled to find the right way to explain his behaviour. 'Suggestive, I suppose,' she finished lamely, keeping her eyes downcast.

'I see.' Reuben frowned as he spooned stew into his mouth. Working out in the fresh air all day always gave him a hearty appetite. 'Then I'll work some extra shifts to make sure we can pay him properly next week.'

'You most certainly *will not!*' Nessie objected. 'You work far too many hours as it is. Why, if it wasn't for you, we'd all have ended up in the workhouse long since.' Her thoughts flew unbidden, as they often did, to the terrible night her mother had been found murdered. She would never forget that night for as long as she lived and still had nightmares about it as she imagined how her poor mother must have suffered. There was also always the niggling fear that whoever had murdered her was still out there somewhere and she found herself constantly looking over her shoulder and worrying about Marcie every time she went out, especially after dark.

Reuben shrugged and as her thoughts returned to the present Nessie was again struck by the difference between her brother and sister. Reuben had a heart as big as a bucket and would have done anything for any of them, whereas Marcie thought only of herself; although looking back, Nessie realised that she hadn't always been that way. Marcie had been a placid, good-natured child, and their father's favourite, until she hit her teenage years and then it was as if someone had suddenly waved a magic wand and she had changed dramatically.

‘Happen it’s time we gave our Marcie a good kick up the backside and got her out to work again,’ he said, as if he had been able to read Nessie’s mind.

‘Hmm, you can try,’ she answered with a wry grin, but Reuben wasn’t smiling.

‘I’ll speak to her tonight,’ he promised. ‘And I’m going to tell her that she either gets out there and finds herself another job or she’ll have to leave.’

Nessie was shocked. He sounded like he meant it, so she didn’t argue. Glancing across at him she smiled. Reuben and Marcie were very much alike in looks if not in nature. They both had deep-brown eyes and dark Brunette hair which had a tendency to curl, unlike her own, which her mother had always teased her was as straight as pump water! Little Joseph tended to take more after herself with slightly lighter hair and eyes. Now Nessie focused her attention on the youngest member of the family who was swirling the vegetables around his dish rather than eating them. It was nothing new. Joseph had always been a sickly child with little appetite and she constantly worried about him.

‘Come on, sweetheart, you won’t get to be a big, strong boy like your brother if you don’t eat your dinner up,’ she encouraged.

Holding his arms out to her for a cuddle he gurgled gleefully and she couldn’t help but smile, but eventually she managed to coax a few spoonfuls into him.

Reuben meanwhile dropped heavily into the fireside chair and gingerly inched his boot off. His foot was still very painful from the injury he had sustained the week before at work. Nessie was only too aware that he had returned far too soon – the instant he could get his boot back on, in fact – but that was her brother all over and the difference between him and Marcie struck home once again. Planting Joseph gently on the floor, where he listlessly went back to playing with some wooden bricks Reuben had carved for him, Nessie leaned over and stared at the swelling worriedly.

‘You shouldn’t even be walking on that yet, let alone working,’ she fretted as she stared at his ankle, which looked no better, but Reuben just smiled.

‘It’ll be fine. The swelling will have gone down again by morning.’

Nessie didn’t bother to argue with him. She knew of old that there would be no point. Reuben could be as stubborn as a mule when he had a mind to be. Instead she began to carry the dirty pots to the sink and soon she was up to her elbows in water as she scoured them.

While she was washing up she couldn’t resist peeking at her brother. Since their father had left them, Reuben had become the man of the house and she worried about what would happen to them all if he should meet someone he wanted to wed. After all, he was a good-looking lad – well, man almost now – and Nessie knew that more than the odd girl from the cottages thereabouts had set her cap at him. His arms and shoulders were heavily muscled from the many hours of strenuous manual work he did and his smile could light up a room. Sooner or later one of the girls was bound to catch his eye and then . . . She stopped her thoughts from going any further. There was no point in looking for trouble when as yet there was none, and she felt selfish for thinking that way. Reuben was entitled to a life, after all. She shouldn’t expect him to spend the rest of his life supporting them.

Once she had finished washing up, Nessie lifted Joseph into the sink and tenderly washed him from head to toe while Reuben sat reading the local newspaper, which Mr Clarke from further along the row always supplied him with when he himself had read them. He’s so small for his age, she thought worriedly. Despite all her best efforts to tempt him to eat, he hardly ate enough to keep a bird alive and she was concerned that as yet he had made no attempt to walk but she hoped that as he grew he would become stronger.

Eventually, when Joseph had been changed into a clean night-shirt and tucked into Nessie's bed in the room she shared with Marcie, she made her way back downstairs and lit the candles. It was late September and the nights were drawing in rapidly, which meant they needed extra candles – adding to their expenses. Taking up one of Reuben's socks that needed darning she sighed. It had had so many repairs there was hardly anything of the original sock left, but new ones were out of the question for now. She was still busily sewing when the back door opened, letting in a blast of cold air, and Marcie appeared. She kicked off her boots and pouted, saying, 'These boots are killing me, they pinch my toes. When can I have a new pair?'

'When you get off your lazy backside and go out to earn the money to buy some,' Reuben told her sharply.

Nessie held her breath as she felt a row brewing.

'And what am I supposed to do?' Marcie sniffed. 'It's all right for you. The railroad supply you with decent boots, at least.'

Reuben glared at her. 'Aye, they do. I need 'em working out in all weathers,' he ground out. 'I'm throwing heavy railway sleepers and train tracks about all day long whereas you never step out o' the house unless it's for pleasure. I'm tellin' you now it has to change so first thing tomorrow I want you up and out looking for a new job otherwise you'll answer to me when I get home tomorrow evenin'.'

Seeing that her brother meant it, Marcie threw herself on to the wooden settle and crossed her arms across her chest with a sullen look on her face. Life was so unfair!

## *Chapter Two*

Marcie did get up and leave the house early the next morning, although Nessie suspected she wasn't looking for work. The town was flooded with navvies who had come from Ireland to work on the railways with Reuben, and Ma Clarke, who lived along the row of cottages, had confided to Nessie that she had seen Marcie strolling out with one of them one evening. Nessie hoped that she was mistaken, but knowing what a flirt Marcie could be she didn't put it past her. Although she was a year younger than Nessie, Marcie had the shapely figure of a woman and used it to her advantage. Often, she came home with small presents from the numerous men who wanted to take her out and that always enraged Reuben even more.

Nessie made a number of fresh loaves with the small amount of flour she had left then cleaned the cottage from top to bottom while Joseph had a nap. It had rained during the night and the sky was leaden and overcast and, as always, she worried about Reuben and hoped that he wouldn't get soaked to the skin if the rain started again. She emptied the buckets she had stood beneath the leaks in the roof in the two upstairs rooms then hurriedly replaced them, just in case. The roof had leaked ever since they had moved in but she had given up complaining about it to Seth Grimshaw. He was not a good landlord and considered that things like that should be attended to by the tenants of the properties he let rather than himself.

Thinking of him now, Nessie shuddered and lifted the tin box she kept on the mantelpiece to check how much was inside it. There was still only exactly the same amount as there had been the day before and she smiled ruefully as she wondered why there should magically be any more. There would certainly not be enough to get completely out of Grimshaw's debt even if she cut the food shopping down to the bone and she dreaded to think how he would react to the fact. But that was still some days away yet so she tried to push him to the back of her mind as she hurried to fetch Joseph who had just woken from his sleep. He gurgled at her as she lifted him from his cot, and the smile on his face melted Nessie's heart. Soon after, she carried a basket of washing out to the line which was strung across the yard they shared with their neighbours, the Hewitts.

Mrs Hewitt was hanging her load out too, although she commented through a mouthful of wooden pegs, 'Don't reckon we'll get much dry today, pet. Looks like rain to me.'

Mrs Hewitt was a great Amazon of a woman with hands like hams and a tongue as sharp as a knife; woe betide anyone who upset her. Yet she had a kind heart and had been good to the Carson family ever since the day they moved in, particularly after they lost their mother.

'I think you could be right, Mrs Hewitt.' Nessie stared up at the dark sky and sighed.

The older woman frowned. 'Is everything all right, Nessie? Only I couldn't help overhearing Old Grimshaw havin' a go at you t'other day. If it's money you're short of I could happen lend you a few bob.'

'Oh no, it's all right, really,' Nessie said hastily. She was a proud little thing. 'Although I do appreciate the offer.'

'Hmm, well just bear it in mind. That Grimshaw ain't to be trusted, 'specially wi' a pretty little thing like you. He's chatted our Zillah up when she's come visitin' more than once and she

ain't that much older than you. Did I mention that my sister, Zillah, is a maid to a lady?' Her chest swelled with pride and Nessie grinned. She and Zillah had got on well during the few occasions she had visited and Nessie was happy for her to have acquired such a good position. Mrs Hewitt was so proud of her younger sister and had told Nessie at least two dozen times that she was a lady's maid to a woman who was married to a lord. In fact, she told anybody that would listen.

Smiling to herself, Nessie pegged the rest of the washing to the line where it hung limply in the damp air. Mrs Hewitt had disappeared off back into her own cottage again by the time she'd finished and Nessie couldn't help but marvel at the woman. She had given birth to thirteen children over the years. Five of them had not survived their fifth birthdays but she and her husband had somehow managed to raise the eight surviving ones in the tiny cottage that was no bigger than Nessie's.

She hurried back inside out of the chill air then, to find that Joseph had fallen into a doze on the rug in front of the fire, which was burning low. After removing the old brass fire guard she threw a few chunks of coal onto the flames. She'd noticed with concern that the wood supply piled up outside the back door was dwindling. Reuben usually went off most evenings with the little cart he'd fashioned out of old bits of wood to collect fallen branches from the surrounding copses, but because of his injury he hadn't been able to go for some days.

*Never mind, I'll go myself when he and Marcie get in this evening, she told herself. And happen I'll pay a visit to the slag heap an' all.*

The slag heap was situated outside the gates of the local pit. It was where the poorer quality coal was dumped and locals were always scavenging there. After all, even poor-quality coal burned and it was essential that they kept the fire lit, for it was their only source of heat. It was also the only way for them to heat water and to cook in the little oven at the side of the fire. Even now the kettle

was dangling above the dying flames, hissing softly, and just for a moment Nessie was tempted to make herself a pot of tea. But then she thought better of it. The tea leaves in the tea caddy were almost gone and she was determined that she would cut back on food this week so that she could pay the landlord what was owed. So instead, she gently drew a blanket over Joseph's slight body, careful not to wake him, then set about scrubbing the floor to keep herself warm. As she worked she began to feel a little more optimistic. If she could just catch up with the rent and Marcie managed to get a job they would be fine again. Perhaps Marcie would breeze in at any moment to tell her that she'd succeeded in securing a post. On that happy thought she began to hum quietly.



Her happy mood vanished mid-afternoon when the back door suddenly opened and Reuben appeared, his face ashen, leaning heavily on one of his workmate's arms.

'I 'ad to bring 'im 'ome, love,' the man apologised, dragging off his cap respectfully. 'His ankle 'as swelled so bad he can 'ardly put 'is weight on it. Wouldn't surprise me if it weren't broken. Per'aps yer should get the doctor to call an' take a look at it? He can't work like this, that's a fact, so I've 'elped 'im to get 'ome.'

Nessie ushered the men towards the fireside chair and Reuben dropped into it, wincing with pain.

'Thank you for bringing him back.' She flashed the man a radiant smile. 'I've been telling him he went back to work too soon but would he listen?'

'Right, well if yer can manage now I'd best get back ter work.' Slightly dazzled by her smile, the man backed towards the door telling Reuben, 'Hope all goes well fer yer, squire.'

Once he'd gone, Nessie stared worriedly at her brother as she dropped to her knees beside him.



‘Right, we’d better get this boot off and have a look at it.’ As she undid the laces, Reuben lolled back in the chair, his face contorted with agony as she gently manoeuvred the boot over his swollen ankle. It was at least twice the size it should have been and Nessie’s small white teeth nipped at her lower lip in concern.

‘Your friend was right,’ she muttered. ‘And you really *should* let the doctor see it.’

Reuben shook his head. ‘And where are we goin’ to magic the money for a doctor’s visit from, eh?’ He was all too aware how much they needed money at the moment, and he blamed himself for the fact that they had fallen behind with the rent.

‘I dare say we’ll manage,’ Nessie assured him with a confidence she was far from feeling. ‘Meantime, I’m going to make you a nice hot drink and then I’ll strap it up for you and see if that’s relieves the pain a bit. But I warn you, if it’s no better tomorrow I shall send for the doctor whether you like it or not.’

She bustled away to make some tea then, after leaving it to mash, she took one of her mother’s old pillowcases and tore it into strips and began to bind his ankle as tightly as she could. Reuben’s face was almost grey with pain but he bit down hard on his lip and didn’t complain. Anything was better than having to pay for a visit from the doctor.

‘It’ll probably be better by tomorrow,’ he remarked hopefully when she was done but they both knew that he was lying. Looking at the state of it, it could be days, weeks even, before he would be able to walk on it again and now Nessie began to really worry. What would they do with no money at all coming in? There was the rent to find and how were they to eat? After propping Reuben’s foot up on a low wooden stool, she began to prepare the vegetables for the evening meal at the sink. There was no meat to go in the stew but at least she had plenty of freshly baked bread so they wouldn’t go hungry, for now at least. The vegetables were

cooking in a pot over the fire when Reuben commented, 'The wood pile is lookin' low, I notice.'

Nessie gave him a bright smile. 'I already saw that but don't worry, once Marcie comes in to watch Joseph I'm going to take the cart along to the slag heaps.'

Reuben flushed. 'But you shouldn't have to do jobs like that, you do enough as it is.'

'Oh, so who will do it then?' Nessie asked firmly. 'You certainly can't, can you? And it won't hurt me just for once. I'll try and collect enough wood and coal to keep us going for a few days. At least we can have hot water and be warm then.'

Reuben crossed his arms and stared into the low-burning fire, deeply ashamed that his sister was having to do what he considered his job.

Two hours later, Marcie breezed in as if she hadn't a care in the world and instantly Nessie asked her, 'Any luck? In finding a job, I mean.'

Marcie pouted as she flung her shawl over the back of a chair. 'Nothing,' she answered sullenly.

'And did you even *try* to get one?' Reuben asked sarcastically and her head snapped towards him.

'Just what is *that* supposed to mean?' she retorted. '*Of course*, I tried but there's nothing going.'

'Oh aye, an' exactly *where* did you try? I didn't realise jobs were suddenly so hard to come by.'

Flustered now, Marcie pretended to brush the creases from her skirt as she avoided his eyes. 'Well er . . . I tried a few places. Shops an' that . . .'

Reuben didn't believe a word of it. 'Hmm, well when me mate brought me home you weren't tryin' very hard. I saw you walkin' arm in arm through the marketplace with a bloke! He looked a right dandy!'

His eyes were like hard pebbles and knowing that she had

been well and truly caught out, Marcie hung her head. But only for a moment because the next instant she lifted her gaze to him and asked insolently, 'So what were *you* doin' coming home anyway? You're supposed to be at work, aren't you?'

Sensing the tense atmosphere, Joseph began to whimper and Nessie hastily scooped him up from the rag rug where he was playing and sat him on her hip. She hated it when her brother and sister argued, even though Reuben had good cause to scold Marcie.

'Now then, you two arguing isn't going to improve the situation, is it?' she butted in. Then to Marcie, 'Reuben's ankle is too swollen for him to walk on so we'll have to manage as best we can for the next few weeks. Meantime I've got to go and get some wood and coal for us when we've had our meal so take your bonnet off and come to the table. Then you can watch Joseph and wash the pots up while I visit the slag heap.'

'*What?*' Marcie looked horrified as she stared at the small child on Nessie's hip. 'But I were plannin' on goin' out tonight!' she objected, much to her brother's disgust. 'And I suppose this means I shall have to wait even longer for some new boots now,' she ended peevishly.

'Here!' Nessie quickly dropped Joseph onto Reuben's lap. He looked in danger of exploding, but the sight of Joseph softened him slightly, although he gasped as the slight weight of the child made him move his ankle and Nessie hurriedly ran to fetch the stew to the table, placing the sooty-bottomed pan on a large brass trivet.

Marcie meanwhile took a seat and glared at her brother defiantly as Nessie began to fill their dishes and slice wedges from one of the loaves she'd baked that morning.

'Now can we *please* just eat our meal with no arguments!'

Hearing the note of despair in her voice, Reuben clamped his mouth shut as she carried a tray over to him and lifted Joseph

back up. He knew how hard she worked to keep the house running and look after Joseph and the last thing he wanted to do was upset her more than she already was, although at that moment he could quite happily have throttled his younger sister, the selfish little madam. Sometimes he wondered how his mother had managed to give birth to two such different girls.

Soon, Joseph was settled at Nessie's side, dipping his bread into the stew with his sister's help and sucking it noisily. Every now and again, Marcie stared at him in disgust before suddenly saying, 'Shouldn't he be feeding himself by now? And what's this supposed to be anyway? I haven't found a single piece of meat in it so far!' As she spoke she was swilling the food around the dish with a look of distaste on her face and once again, Reuben's temper flared.

'Per'aps if we were both bringin' in a bob or two we could afford a bit more meat,' he snapped.

'There's plenty of bread to fill up with,' Nessie chipped in cheerily before Marcie could reply, once again hoping to avoid an argument, but Marcie merely slammed away from the table leaving her food untouched and stamped upstairs. Joseph began to gently cry.

Suddenly, Nessie's appetite was gone too. Very soon now Mr Grimshaw would be calling for his rent and once again she wouldn't be able to pay him. The thought of how he would react and what he would want from her made her feel sick to the stomach.

## *Chapter Three*

When Nessie arrived at the slag heap later that evening she found the local women swarming across it like flies. A cold wind had blown up and a fine rain had begun to fall, soaking her to the skin in seconds. Yet it was almost a relief to be away from the tense atmosphere between Marcie and Reuben back at home. She had left a begrudging Marcie to care for Joseph and now, pulling her thin shawl over her hair, she bent and began to search among the pile of cobbles. Very slowly the cart began to fill and after a back-breaking hour she straightened and rubbed her grimy hand across her eyes to wipe the rain from them. Her hands and feet were so cold that she could barely feel them and her fingernails were caked with dirt, as was the hem of her skirt.

But her work wasn't done yet. Now she would visit the copse at the back of the cottages and collect whatever fallen branches she could find. Wearily she grasped the handle of the cart and began to drag it across the rough ground, glancing fearfully over her shoulder all the time. After a while, the cottages came into sight and she sighed with relief. Smoke curled lazily from the chimneys and the curtains were drawn against the cold night. Only now did she realise just how hard Reuben worked to keep them all supplied with fuel for the fire, yet never once had he complained.

When she reached the fringes of the trees, she left the cart and tentatively stepped beneath the dark branches, her heart pounding.

It looked totally different at night. In the daytime, when she could spare the time, she would sometimes bring Joseph here to play, and with the sun dappling through the trees, especially in the spring when the floor was a vast sea of bluebells, it was a magical place. But now it felt sinister and the swaying shadows made her jump and look nervously from side to side. Eventually her eyes adjusted to the light and she began to feel around the ground for any small branches that had fallen. When she was lucky enough to find any, she would carry them back to the cart, breathing heavily, before venturing back into the woods again. A dog fox suddenly barked loudly making her plaster herself against the trunk of a tree but when she realised what it was she sighed with relief and stood there for a time as her heart steadied to a gentler rhythm.

That's it, I've had enough for one night, she thought as she picked her way across the uneven ground to where she had left the cart. It was quite heavy and by the time she had hauled it to the back door of the cottage, she was puffing with exertion. But still she hadn't finished. Now she must load it all into the small wooden structure that Reuben had built to shelter their fuel in the back yard. She would chop the branches into fireside sizes tomorrow, she decided. When eventually she staggered into the kitchen she was almost dropping with exhaustion. Reuben glanced up from his fireside seat. Guilt stabbed at him sharp as a knife as he saw the state of her. Her hands were bleeding, her face was scratched and her clothes, which clung to her wetly, were filthy.

'Eeh, love, I'm so sorry you've had to do this.' He shook his head in frustration. 'Coal pickin' ain't no job fer a woman. Especially in this weather.'

Nessie managed a smile as she hurried to the fire and held her frozen hands out towards it. 'You wouldn't say that if you saw how many women there were at the slag heap tonight,' she answered. 'Happen they're all trying to stock up before the really

bad weather comes, though I have to say it's so cold tonight you would think it was November instead of late September. I wonder if this is a sign we're going to have a really bad winter.' She looked about the room.

'Marcie's gone to bed,' he told her as if he were able to read her thoughts. 'I reckon she knows I'm sick of her behaviour so went up to get out o' me way.'

'She doesn't mean anything,' Nessie said in her sister's defence. 'She's just young, that's all.'

'Aye, and so are you,' he pointed out. 'But you're not on the want all the time. Fact is, I can't remember when you last had sommat new.'

'I don't need anything,' Nessie crossed to the teapot and felt it. The tea would be stewed by now no doubt but at least it would be wet and warm so she poured them both a cup. 'I'm afraid there's no milk left till I fetch some in the morning,' she told her brother but Reuben shrugged and took it uncomplainingly as Nessie peeled her wet shawl from her shoulders.

'I shall have to wear my Sunday best tomorrow,' she muttered as she looked down at the state she was in. 'This lot will have to be washed before I can wear them again.' She filled the kettle from the pail of water she kept full on the wooden draining board and set it on the fire to boil so that she could wash, before asking Reuben, 'Do you need me to help you out to the privy before you go to bed?'

He flushed and nodded. Truth was he had been dying to go for the past hour but hadn't been sure how he was going to manage it alone.

'Better still, why don't I fetch the chamber pot down for you from under the bed?' she suggested then. 'Better that than have to venture out in the rain, eh?'

Deeply embarrassed, he nodded as Nessie hurried away to fetch it. She discreetly left the room while he used it then began to help

him upstairs to his bed. She soon discovered it would be no easy task as Reuben couldn't put any weight on his foot at all without crying out with pain. Eventually he sat down on the stairs and shuffled up on his bottom while Nessie supported his injured foot, and at last she helped him onto his bed.

Once she knew he was as comfortable as she could make him she quietly closed the bedroom door and crossed the landing, peeping into her own bedroom on the way. Joseph was curled up into a little ball in her own bed but a glance at Marcie's showed her that it was empty and Nessie's heart did a little flip. Reuben had said that Marcie had gone to bed some time ago so perhaps she had just gone downstairs for a drink? Yet the kitchen was deserted and Nessie scowled as she realised that the girl must have slipped out while she was settling Reuben. Now she would have to wait up until her sister decided to put in an appearance. There was no way she would be able to sleep until she knew she was back safe and sound. After placing her dirty clothes to soak in a bucket overnight she curled up under a thin blanket in what had been her mother's favourite chair at the side of the fire, and before she knew it she fell into an exhausted sleep.

The wind howling around the cottage like a wounded child woke her in the early hours of the morning and she blinked blearily. The fire was almost out and she felt cold and shivery. Glancing towards the tin clock on the mantelpiece she saw that it was almost one o'clock in the morning. She groaned softly, every bone in her body ached and she was sick with worry about Marcie but she felt too ill to wait up for her sister any longer. At least she could lie in comfort in bed and wait for her. A thought occurred to her then. Perhaps Marcie had returned and crept upstairs while she was asleep? It was the sort of thoughtless thing she would do. Hastily, she threw just enough coal on the fire to keep it burning then wearily climbed the stairs. Marcie's bed was still empty and for a while she lay awake with Joseph's warm little body pressed



against her; the wind rattled the window panes as she listened out for the sound of Marcie coming home, but finally exhaustion claimed her and she slept.

When next she woke, it was morning and Joseph was still fast asleep. A glance at Marcie's bed told her that it hadn't been slept in. Gently, so as not to disturb the sleeping child, she crept out of bed and after pulling an old shawl about her shoulders she went down to the kitchen and threw some wood onto the dying fire. She then raked the ashes and once a weak flame appeared she filled the kettle and placed it on to boil. She was shivering, hot one minute and cold the next and she guessed that she must have caught a chill the night before, but perhaps she would feel better with a hot drink inside her. But how was she going to explain Marcie's absence to Reuben?

Unbidden tears sprang to her eyes as her mind slipped back in time. Just a couple of years ago she'd had a mother and father and they'd all lived in a very comfortable little house in Bedworth. But then her father had disappeared and just weeks after moving to this cottage, Joseph had been born, adding to their financial burden. Yet even then they had managed to keep their heads above water, thanks to her mother who would take in washing and ironing or do any job she could find to supplement their income. It was only when her mother had been killed that the real hardships had begun.

She wondered where her father was now. They'd seen nothing of him since he left them and despite the numerous times he had rolled in drunk and aggressive, Nessie sometimes missed him. He hadn't been all bad. In fact, when he was sober he could be very kind and loving. She remembered the sleigh he had made for her and Reuben one winter and the way he had dragged them along on it in the snow; the way he would sometimes come into their bedroom at night to plant gentle kisses on their brows and tuck the blankets under their chins. The stories he would tell them.

Giving herself a mental shake she brought her thoughts back to the present. Her father was gone so now they would have to manage alone . . . somehow. It was a daunting thought.

Soon after, she carried a cup of tea up to Reuben. They decided that it might be sensible if he stayed in bed all day to completely rest his ankle. Hopefully he needn't ever know that Marcie had stayed out all night, it would only cause yet more arguments if he did. By the time Marcie breezed in around mid-morning, Nessie was worried sick.

'Where the hell have you been?' Nessie hissed, deliberately keeping her voice low so that Reuben wouldn't hear her.

Marcie flashed her a brilliant smile. 'Well, if you must know, I've been securin' a post for meself,' she answered smugly.

'*You've got a job!*' Nessie's mouth dropped open. 'Doing what? Where?'

'Hmm, I thought that would shock you.' Marcie crossed her arms and stared back at her sister. 'I'm to start at Haunchwood House next Monday, so what do you think about that?'

'Haunchwood House? Doing what?'

'Well, I shall be a kitchen maid for a start off but I intend to get to be the parlour maid afore too long, you just watch me.'

Nessie straightened from the poss-tub and wiped her wet hands down the coarse huckaback apron that enveloped her small frame from the waist down. 'And how did this happen?'

Marcie sniffed as she adjusted her bonnet and studied her fingernails. 'I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. I was in the post office when the housekeeper from the house came in all of a fluster to place an ad for a new kitchen maid in the window. The other one had cleared off unexpectedly, apparently, so when I heard her telling the postmistress about it I piped in an' told her that I was lookin' for a post. She eyed me up an' down an' asked if I'd be able to start within a week an' when I told her I could she nodded an' told me the job was mine, though

I'll be on trial for the first three months o' course. But it don't really matter how it came about, does it? All you need to know is I'll be working . . . and I'll be living in an' all so that will be one less for you to worry about, won't it?'

'But what about Reuben . . . and Joseph?' Already she was realising that if Marcie had a live-in post it was highly unlikely she would be willing to contribute any of her wages towards the family's keep.

Avoiding her sister's eyes, Marcie stared down the long, narrow garden that stretched beyond each cottage to the privy that was shared by all four cottages.

'I shall only be paid quarterly and I'll get one Sunday in every four off, so I shan't have any wages for some time.'

Nessie sighed as she grappled with a mixture of emotions. She was pleased that Marcie would have a job. The Dorseys who lived in Haunchwood House were well known in the area and Mr Dorsey owned many of the local pits and brickworks thereabouts, as well as many smaller shops in the town. Nessie often saw them being driven about in their fine carriage and sighed with envy at the sight of Mrs Dorsey's and her daughter's fine gowns. They also had two sons who had both attended university. It was rumoured that the younger one was being trained to take over his father's businesses when he chose to retire. He was certainly rich enough to, if what she heard was true. The oldest son, Oliver, had been to medical school and word was out that he was soon to take a post in town as Dr Peek's assistant. She wasn't surprised at that; Dr Peek was knocking on in age and she supposed he'd want to retire before too much longer. And now here was her sister telling her that she was going to go and work for them and, furthermore, live in their house. She was thrilled for her and yet she also felt sad. Marcie could be a little minx, yet Nessie knew that she would miss her.

'Well, I don't mind saying you've right taken the wind out of me sails,' she admitted. 'And you've done well for yourself.'

Marcie perked up then and grinned. 'I know. I shall be supplied with a uniform *and* new boots,' she added pointedly. 'So you won't have to worry about layin' out any more money for me.'

'We'd best go and tell Reuben the good news then,' Nessie said after a moment, pushing her concerns to the back of her mind. 'He's having a day in bed to try and get his ankle right but if it's still as bad tomorrow I shall be getting the doctor to call, whether he likes it or not. Don't tell him you didn't come home last night though. He doesn't need any more stress at the minute.'



Reuben's ankle wasn't any better the next morning so after leaving a reluctant Marcie to keep an eye on Joseph, Nessie set off for the doctor's house to ask him to pay them a call. They could ill afford the penny it would cost, which would eat yet further into the rent money, but, Nessie asked herself, what choice did they have? The longer Reuben was off work the deeper in debt they would get so it was imperative that his injured ankle was treated.

The doctor was out on a call when Nessie arrived at his house but after leaving their address with his wife, Nessie set off for home again. It was the first day of October and already the leaves were turning to reds and golds and beginning to flutter from the trees like confetti. Normally, Nessie would have found joy in the sight but she was so concerned about how they were to manage financially that today she barely noticed and hurried along in the biting wind with her head bent.

It was late afternoon when Dr Peek arrived, looking cold and weary, but his smile was warm when Nessie answered the door to him. He had developed a soft spot for the girl, for there weren't many who would have cared for their family as she did, especially following the horrific way her mother had died. Most girls of her age would have cracked under the strain and many of them were

already walking out with chaps, or had even wed and had babies, but Nessie seemed to be totally devoted to her siblings. She was completely different to that younger sister of hers from what he could make of it; there was a little flibbertigibbet, if ever he'd seen one.

'So, what's the problem, pet?' he asked and when she told him about Reuben's accident, he sighed. This family had already had more than their share of bad fortune and he knew that Reuben was the only one bringing any money into the house, and if he couldn't work, how were they to eat or pay the rent?

'Let's have a look at him then,' he said brightly, hoping that the injury might prove to be just a bad sprain, as Nessie had suggested.

He crossed to Reuben, who had insisted on coming downstairs, and was sitting with his face downcast and his foot propped up on a stool, and smiled, asking, 'So what have you been up to then, me laddo?' Kneeling, he gingerly began to feel around his ankle making the colour in the young man's face leak away like water down a drain.

'I'm afraid it's not good news,' he said after a time, sitting back on his heels.

Nessie, who was standing close by, began to wring her hands nervously as she stared at him.

'It's broken, all right,' Dr Peek told them. 'And God alone knows how you've managed to hobble about on it. You must have been in agony. So, now I've got to get the bone back into position and strap it as tightly as I can and I have to warn you it's going to be very painful.' He began to rummage in his black bag and removed a small bottle with a cork stopper and a roll of bandages.

'But how long will it be before I can go back to work?' Reuben asked worriedly.

The doctor sighed. 'To be honest, I think your days of hard manual work are going to be over, lad. I can set your ankle as

best I can but it's always going to be weak after this. There'll be no more throwing railway sleepers about and walking miles a day for you, I'm afraid.'

Reuben looked horrified as he sat up in the seat which made him wince again. 'But then how am I supposed to earn a living? I'm not trained to do anything but manual work.' A vision of them all incarcerated in the workhouse flashed in front of his eyes, and he visibly shuddered. He could picture the tall, forbidding gates and the dreary exterior, the long, grimy, sash-cord windows, and knew that somehow he must ensure that none of his family ever ended up there.

'I'm a great believer that as one door shuts another one opens,' the doctor said calmly as he coated a piece of rag with the evil-smelling contents of the bottle. 'But now just breathe this in for me, there's a good chap; it will soften the pain. And you, Nessie, I'll need you to help me.'

Reuben opened his mouth to object but then the cloth came across his nose and suddenly darkness was rushing towards him and thankfully he knew no more until the bone in his ankle had been eased back into place and his foot tightly strapped.

By the time it was done, Nessie looked almost as pale as he did but she thanked the doctor and hurried to fetch his fee from the tin on the mantelpiece.

The kindly doctor waved it aside. 'It's all right, my dear,' he told her. 'I was coming past here anyway so I didn't have to come out of my way. There's no charge for this time.'

'B-but . . .'

He held his hand up. 'Really. Now, give him a few drops of this in water whenever the pain gets too bad and whatever you do make sure that he doesn't try to walk on it for at least a couple of weeks.' He handed a small bottle of laudanum to her and she took it with shaking hands, wondering if things could possibly get any worse.