

Prologue

Nuneaton, Tuesday, 15 December 1896

‘Excuse me, Mrs Branning, but I reckon I just heard sommat outside the front door.’

Sunday paused in the hallway to glance at the maid. She had been about to enter the dining room to join her husband and her mother for dinner, but now she asked, ‘What sort of thing did you hear, Em’ly?’

The young lass had only recently joined the staff at Treetops Children’s Home from the Nuneaton Union Workhouse and she was as nervy as a kitten.

‘Please, ma’am, it . . . it sounded like a knock – but it’s late an’ I’m scared to answer the door.’ The girl blinked furiously and began to twist her apron into a tight ball.

Sunday smiled at her kindly. ‘In that case we’d best check what it was, hadn’t we? We’ll do it together – how’s that?’

Striding across to the large double oak doors in a swish of skirts she swung one open – to be met by an icy blast of wind. It was dark as pitch outside and the grass on the lawns, or what could be seen of it in the light spilling out from the hallway, was stiff with hoar frost, each blade seemingly standing to attention and sparkling like diamonds.

‘I can’t see anyone or anything amiss,’ Sunday remarked, her teeth chattering as she peered into the darkness.

‘But I *’eard* it, ma’am – I did, ’onest!’

‘Perhaps it was just the sougling of the wind?’ That was the trouble with old houses, Sunday thought. They were draughty places. The wind seemed to find every opening there was, and sometimes it could be so fierce it rattled the windowframes. However, she ventured a little further out onto the top step all the same, wanting to put the girl’s mind at rest.

‘No, I still can’t hear anything,’ she said, and was just about to turn away when something caught her eye. Lying against one of the tall stone pillars was a tiny bundle wrapped tightly in a large blanket.

‘There *is* something here – you were right, Em’ly,’ she called to the wide-eyed maid, and as she bent to lift it, another voice wafted out from the hallway.

‘Where on earth is that wife of mine, Em’ly? Cook will be after us if she’s not allowed to serve the dinner very soon.’

‘I’m here, Tom.’ Gently lifting the bundle and holding it tight to her chest, Sunday hurried back into the warmth of the hallway while Em’ly quickly closed the door shut behind them to keep out the cold.

As Tom approached to see what was going on, Sunday’s heart flipped at the sight of him, just as it always did. Tom was now twenty-eight years old and the couple had been married for almost seven years, but she still loved him as much, if not more than she had on the day they had wed. With his expressive deep brown eyes and thick dark hair, he no longer resembled the skinny lad she had met so long ago. He had grown into a tall, handsome man and Sunday counted herself a very fortunate woman indeed. Her only regret was that, as yet, they had not had a child of their own. Still, the home for foundlings that they ran with the help of her mother, Lady Lavinia Huntley, ensured that she was never short of the company of babies and children, and as Lavinia often pointed out, there was still plenty of time for Sunday to give her a grandchild. She was only twenty-six years old, after all.

‘So what’s this that’s been left on the doorstep then?’ Tom twitched the blanket aside and they all gasped as they looked down into a pair of deep brown eyes. ‘My God . . . it’s a baby!’

‘Yes, another one,’ Sunday sighed, for this wasn’t the first infant they had found abandoned on the steps of Treetops Children’s Home.

‘But we ain’t got room fer any more, ma’am,’ Em’ly fretted.

‘Oh, I have a feeling we could fit just one more little one in,’ Tom told her, noting the dreamy look on his wife’s face. Sunday was busy crooning to the baby and drinking in the sight of the dear little bundle in her arms. ‘Run up and fetch Cissie from the nursery for me, would you, Em’ly? I dare say this little boy or girl will want feeding before very much longer.’

The young lass scuttled away and it was then that Tom noticed the edge of a large brown envelope protruding from the blanket. He plucked it free, noting that it looked to be very good quality stationery, and as Sunday looked on he tore it open and removed a single sheet of paper.

‘What does it say?’ she asked, so Tom obligingly began to read aloud.

To whom it may concern

It has been brought to my attention that you provide a safe and wholesome refuge for babies and children who are unable to live with their own families. I applaud you for this and with regret have to ask you most earnestly if you would do the same for this child. She was born yesterday and her name is Katherine. You will find a sum of money within the envelope that is intended to provide her with all she needs for the near future. Please rest assured that there will be more to follow at regular intervals.

With sincere thanks and kind regards.

Tom then rummaged in the envelope and produced a wad of bank-notes that made both his and his wife's eyes bulge.

'So it's a little girl – I shall call her Kitty,' Sunday breathed as her eyes returned to the perfect little face. She was easily the most beautiful baby she had ever seen, and a mass of dark hair lay about her head like a tiny halo.

At that moment, Em'ly came clattering down the stairs, closely followed by Cissie Jenkins, who was in charge of the babies' nursery. Cissie was heavily pregnant with her third child and was huffing and puffing by the time she reached them.

'Not another one!' She shook her head resignedly. 'Ah well, it's only a little scrap of a thing. I dare say it can sleep at the bottom of one of the other babies' cots till I get my George to fit an extra one into the nursery. That's if – an' I presume you are – lettin' it stay?'

Sunday gave her a guilty grin. 'Yes, we can't turn her away. It's a little girl and her name is Katherine but we're going to call her Kitty.'

'Hmm, well, that's a nice straightforward enough sort o' name,' Cissie said approvingly, then leaning over she remarked, 'Lordie, but she's a pretty little thing, ain't she?'

'She certainly is. She was born yesterday, wasn't she – and what is it they say? Monday's child is fair of face!'

With that, Cissie took the child from Sunday's arms and headed back to the nursery with her.

'I'll be up to help you just as soon as dinner is over,' Sunday called out.

'Take yer time,' Cissie answered, and Sunday watched her climb the stairs until she and the precious new addition to Treetops Children's Home were out of sight.

Once in the dining room, Sunday found that she had quite lost her appetite, and Lavinia and Tom exchanged an amused glance. Knowing her as they did, they were both aware that she was longing to get her hands on the baby again.

‘Now come along and eat something, darling,’ her mother urged. ‘You’ll be up in the nursery soon enough.’

Sunday flushed and dutifully lifted her knife and fork. Despite the fact that she and her mother had been unaware of each other’s existence for the first sixteen years of her life, they were as close as could be now – and sometimes Sunday was sure that her mother could read her like a book.

‘Sorry, I was just thinking of the newest addition,’ she said.

‘I’m sure you were, dear, but Cissie is more than capable.’

Knowing that she was right, Sunday forced herself to eat some of the food on her plate but her eyes kept straying to the ceiling.

‘Judging by the quality of the blanket the baby was wrapped in and the amount of money that was left to pay for her keep, I wouldn’t mind betting she’s of good stock,’ Tom commented as he lifted a forkful of tender roast beef to his mouth. Nothing ever seemed to put Tom off his food. ‘I wouldn’t mind betting that wad amounts to more than we get from our sponsors for a whole year.’

‘You may well be right,’ Sunday said, ‘although I haven’t counted it yet.’

The second dessert was cleared away and she shot upstairs to the nursery quarters without even waiting for coffee to be served.

The whole of the second storey had been given over to the eight foundlings they cared for – nine now, including baby Kitty. The first three babies had come at intervals during the year the home had opened, and were now cheerful, robust children. First had come Benjamin, a happy-go-lucky little lad with a mind of his own who had stolen Sunday’s heart the second she set eyes on him. Two months later he had been joined by Edwina, and a month after that, Marianne, affectionately known as Annie. Over the next six years, five other babies had found a home at Treetops and each of them was loved – but somehow, as Sunday pounded up the grand staircase, lifting her skirts in a most unladylike manner, she

had a feeling that little Kitty was going to be very important to her.

She found Zillah, her mother's devoted maid, and Cissie, her own dear friend, just tucking the babies into their cots and settling them for the night.

'How is she?' she asked immediately and Zillah grinned as she pointed towards the furthest cot. She had no need to ask which baby Sunday was enquiring after.

'She's had a bath, not that she needed one as she was clean as a whistle. And she took a bottle lovely – every last drop, in fact. She looks to be a healthy little mite to me. She's fast asleep already, top to toe with yon Maggie now.' Margaret was now six months old and had been the youngest of the foundlings until Kitty had arrived so unexpectedly.

As Sunday leaned over the cot she itched to lift the new arrival and give her a cuddle, but she knew that Zillah and Cissie would not appreciate it if she were to wake her. Between them, the two women had the nursery running like clockwork and Sunday didn't know how she would manage without them.

Further along the second-floor landing were three more rooms, a bedroom for the slightly older boys and another for the girls. The children ranged in age from two to seven and were always into some sort of mischief. The final room had been transformed into a schoolroom where Mrs Verity Lockett, a very close friend of the family, as well as the local vicar's wife, came to teach the younger ones their lessons each weekday for three hours in the afternoon. The older children attended the local board school, and always went to Sunday School. Sunday was very protective of all her charges and would have loved to keep them at Treetops, where she knew they were safe, for ever.

Now as she gazed down on the sleeping baby she felt a surge of love towards her. With her long eyelashes resting on her plump, rosy cheeks, Kitty looked just like a little angel. Each of the children

in Sunday's care had been deprived of the love of their natural mother for various reasons, just as she herself had in her formative years, and this and her yearning for a child of her own made every single one of them so very precious to her.

Chapter One

April 1900

‘Now then, Maggie, that wasn’t very nice, was it?’ Cissie scolded. ‘Say sorry to Kitty this minute else it’ll be bed for you tonight wi’ no supper, me girl!’

Three-year-old Maggie pouted and crossed her arms as her chin rose defiantly. ‘Shan’t!’ she muttered as she glared at Kitty. She knew, as all the children did, that Cissie’s bark was far worse than her bite.

Cissie meanwhile had hurried across to Kitty and lifted her to her feet. ‘There, pet,’ she soothed as she brushed the grass from the child’s skirts. ‘It was very naughty of Maggie to trip you up like that, wasn’t it?’

Kitty stuck her thumb in her mouth and lowered her head. She was used to Maggie bullying her and didn’t take much notice of her any more, unless she really hurt her, which she did whenever she got the opportunity. For some reason, Maggie had always been jealous of Kitty. There were only six months between them in age but they were as different as chalk from cheese. Maggie was stockily built with mousy-brown straight hair and grey eyes – she was quite a plain child really – whereas Kitty was already developing into a beauty. She was quite daintily built and her deep brunette hair hung in shimmering curls to her shoulders; her soft brown eyes seemed

to reflect her mood, for they could change from amber to almost black when she was upset; and her skin was like porcelain. All the staff did their utmost to treat each of the children the same, but it was clear that Kitty was a favourite, for her sweet nature matched her looks.

Unfortunately, Maggie's temperament wasn't much better than her looks and she tried Cissie's patience sorely. On being reprimanded, the child had run off in a temper and almost reached the edge of the lawn when Sunday suddenly appeared from the rose garden and caught hold of her.

'Whoa there, where's the fire?' she asked as she looked down into the sulky little face.

'Cissie is pickin' on me again,' Maggie whined, throwing a dark look at the woman across her shoulder.

'Now I'm sure that isn't true,' Sunday answered patiently. 'What did you do?'

'Nothin'!' Maggie sniffed indignantly. 'She reckons I tripped Kitty up but I never did. She fell over me foot.'

'I see. Your foot just happened to be in the way, did it?' Sunday was well aware how spiteful Maggie could be to Kitty, but she was also very aware that she was only three years old, so she made allowances for her. 'Well, she looks all right now, so let's just hope it doesn't happen again, shall we?'

Without answering, Maggie stalked off, making for the swing that George, Cissie's husband, had tied to the branch of the big oak tree. Heaving a sigh, Sunday went to join Cissie, who was watching the children play, with her own youngest son, Johnny, sitting close to her.

'I see madam's been at it again,' Cissie said, nodding towards Maggie as Sunday sat down on the grass beside her.

'Hmm, so I believe,' Sunday answered. 'I do wish those two could get on better.'

'Well, happen they're only babies as yet. No doubt they'll make

friends as they get a bit older. And because they're so close in age they're bound to vie for attention.' The words had barely left Cissie's lips when Kitty came toddling towards them, none the worse for her fall, to hand Sunday a small bunch of daisies she had plucked from the grass.

'Thank you, sweetheart.' Sunday took them and drew the child onto her lap, burying her face in the little girl's thick dark curls. At the same moment, Ben, who was now eleven years old, flopped down onto the grass beside her. For most of the time he was Kitty's protector and he had saved her from any number of spats with Maggie.

He's growing up so fast, Sunday thought to herself. He was almost as tall as she was now and already showed signs of turning into a very comely young man. His hair was thick and the colour of ripe corn, and his eyes were a lovely deep blue colour. Sunday felt a pang of regret as she realised that, in not too many years' time, he would be ready to fly the nest and make his own way in the world. She had tried her best to ensure that he and all the other children at the Home enjoyed the stability that she herself had lacked in her early years in the workhouse. But because Ben had been the first foundling she and Tom had taken in, he too had a special place in her heart and she dreaded the day when she would have to let him go. Not that he'd shown any inclination to leave as yet, fortunately. Ben loved nothing more than helping George and Tom with any odd jobs that needed doing when he wasn't attending the local school, and deep inside, Sunday secretly hoped that he might want to stay with them. They would be able to afford to pay him a small wage, if that was what he chose to do. Goodness knows, there was always more than enough to keep everyone busy about the house and grounds, and another pair of hands would be more than welcome. But that was still a few years in the future.

It was only recently that Sunday had realised what a wrench it was going to be when the first of her foundlings grew up and left,

but for now she pushed the thought away and turned her attention back to the children gambolling about on the lawn like spring lambs. *Life is almost perfect*, she found herself thinking. The location of Treetops Children's Home was idyllic. It nestled close to Hartshill Hayes, a well-known Warwickshire beauty spot. The Hayes consisted of over 137 acres of unspoiled forest, and the view from the top on a clear day was breathtaking: you could see many of the neighbouring counties. In the summer, Sunday and Tom and their brood, and many local families enjoyed picnics there and the children would romp amongst the trees. *Perhaps one day I shall have a child of my very own to join them*, Sunday mused wistfully, but for now she was grateful for the ones in her care, particularly Ben and Kitty. She hadn't included Maggie in her thoughts, she noted guiltily – but then Maggie was a particularly needy little girl, which was perhaps what made her so difficult to love.



The spring and summer of 1900 passed in the blink of an eye, and before they knew it they were into winter and the first Christmas of this new millennium was fast approaching. Sunday was spending every spare minute she had shopping for Christmas presents for the children with her mother and planning special activities. Christmas was always a joyous occasion at the Home. Already Mrs Rose, the plump and motherly cook, had a number of Christmas puddings soaking in brandy and a row of rich fruit cakes had been made weeks ago and were ready to be iced. Like many of the staff, Tabitha Rose had worked there since Treetops had opened as a home for foundlings. She and her late husband, Fred, who had been a hard-working miner at the Haunchwood pit, had never been blessed with children of their own and so working at the Home had fulfilled a need in her and she spoiled the children shamelessly. Sunday regularly scolded her for slipping treats to them between

meals although there was always a forgiving twinkle in her eye when she did so, well aware that her words went in one ear and out of the other. The way Mrs Rose saw it, Sunday was little more than a child herself, and so she spoiled her too.

The rest of the staff consisted of Mrs Brewer, the efficient house-keeper, who kept the house running in an orderly fashion, and Laura the laundry maid who somehow managed to plough her way through mountains of washing and ironing each week without complaint. Laura was in her late twenties and also lived in. Her parents had been only too glad to let her leave home and live at Treetops as Laura was, as her mother termed it, 'a little slow'. For all that she was a pleasant-natured young woman and another great favourite with the children. Bessie, the general maid, was the one responsible for cleaning the house and lighting the fires each morning, and she shared a bedroom in the servants' quarters with Laura, whom she had taken under her wing. Then there was Jessie, the kitchen maid who assisted Mrs Rose. Finally, the two girls Em'ly and Ruth served the meals and in between helped out with anything that needed doing as well as acting as the parlour maids. Both Em'ly and Jessie lived in the village and turned in for work each morning bright and early. Sunday, Lavinia, Cissie and Zillah cared for the children, while the men tackled the outside jobs, kept the gardens tidy and did any repairs that were required in the house, so all in all for most of the time the Home ran harmoniously and Sunday was content.



On the fourteenth of December, Kitty celebrated her fourth birthday. She rose that morning with her face aglow with excitement. As a special treat, Sunday had promised to take her into town and she was looking forward to it immensely.

She came step by step down the flight of stairs and went into

the dining room, where her eyes shone to see the small pile of presents waiting for her on the breakfast table. Maggie watched her enviously. Her own fourth birthday in June felt so long ago.

‘Come on, darling, open them up,’ Sunday encouraged and Kitty happily did as she was told. There were a number of small gifts from the staff, including a game of Spillikins, some marbles and a tin of toffees with a dog on the front, who looked just like Barney, the golden labrador at the Home. But it was the present from Sunday and Lady Huntley that made the child’s eyes pop. The beautiful doll with a china face and eyes that opened and shut was the one that she had admired in the toyshop window, the last time they had gone into town.

‘Oh, she’s lovely, thank you!’ The child was almost crying with delight as she cuddled the doll to her while the adults looked on indulgently. ‘I shall call her Annabelle.’

‘That’s a silly name,’ Maggie declared immediately and Sunday frowned at her.

‘That’s quite enough, Maggie. You don’t want to spoil Kitty’s birthday for her, do you?’

Maggie sniffed and crossed her arms. That was exactly what she wanted to do although she didn’t say it, of course. She just wished that someone would come along and take Kitty away so that *she* could be the baby of the family again. Only the year before, a childless couple had come along wishing to offer Kitty a home with them but Sunday had refused – and eventually they had gone away with a little boy called Alfred, who had only been at the Home for a week and was now the apple of their eyes. They hadn’t even looked at Maggie. Everyone made a fuss of Kitty, and the way the other little girl saw it, it wasn’t fair! Just because Kitty was pretty! Ben adored her too, although even at her tender age, Maggie would have laid down her life for him. Sinking down further in her seat, tears filled her eyes as she stared at the birthday girl. Bessie had mentioned that Kitty would be going into town with Sunday and

Tom in his new motor car later that day, but they hadn't taken Maggie into town when it was *her* birthday! She conveniently didn't recall the reason why: that she had been ill in bed with a cold!

Then Sunday shocked her somewhat when she suggested, 'Why don't you come into town with us, Maggie? You were too poorly to come when it was your birthday but I'm sure Kitty wouldn't mind you joining us today.'

Kitty smiled her agreement, for she wasn't one to bear a grudge, and Maggie wrestled with her conflicting thoughts. She didn't really want to be in Kitty's company for a second longer than she had to be – she just wanted to have Sunday all to herself – but if she didn't go along she would be cutting off her nose to spite her face.

'All right,' she agreed reluctantly.

'Good!' Sunday smiled. 'Then let's all get this lovely breakfast eaten and then we'll be on our way.'

Over the next few minutes the piles of bacon, eggs and sausages disappeared at an alarming rate and when the meal was over Sunday ushered Kitty and Maggie upstairs to put their Sunday-best clothes on. Maggie's coat and bonnet were made of a fine wool in a dark navy-blue colour, which suited her colouring, while Kitty's were made in an identical wool and design in bright red that set off her dark eyes and hair to perfection.

'There!' Sunday sighed with satisfaction as she tied the ribbons of Kitty's bonnet beneath her chin while Maggie stood to one side, scuffing her best shoes on the ground. 'You both look beautiful. Now let's go and see if Tom has brought the car around to the front, shall we?'

She took their hands and led them downstairs, one on either side of her, to find Tom standing proudly beside his new toy, explaining how it worked yet again to Ben, who was totally enthralled with it. It was a Daimler shooting brake, which had been manufactured in Coventry three years before.

'It's six horsepower, with twin cylinders and a four-speed gearbox,'

she heard Tom tell the boy as they peered in at the engine as if it was the best invention on earth. Then, spotting his wife, Tom grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry, love. I was just running over a few things with Ben.'

Sunday said tartly, 'I should think he knows it all by now, the amount of time you two spend playing with this contraption.' She was secretly still rather afraid of it and much preferred the horse and trap, but Tom asked for so little that she hadn't found it in her to deny him it.

Ben meanwhile had spotted Kitty, and bending down to her level, he chucked her under the chin, saying, 'My, don't we look smart today, eh? Off into town for a birthday treat, are we?'

Kitty nodded. She was clutching the small bird he had carved for her as a present for her birthday and his chest swelled with pride as he noticed. 'Right, well, I hadn't better hold you up.' He glanced up at the grey sky. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't have snow sometime soon. I reckon I can smell it.'

Sunday gave him a playful punch on the arm. 'Oh, you and your weather forecasting,' she teased, although truthfully she was forced to admit that nine times out of ten he was right in his predictions. They then settled the two little girls into the back seat, placed a warm rug over their legs and seconds later they were whizzing off down the drive as Sunday hung on to her hat.

'You're looking rather lovely today, pet,' Tom remarked, daring to take his eyes off the road for a moment to admire Sunday's new outfit. The days of the crinoline were gone and now women were favouring a longer, straighter skirt, with a small train at the back.

Sunday flushed with pleasure. She was wearing a light brown and cream heavy silk day dress with a darker brown coat over the top of it and a large hat boasting feathers that had been dyed to match her outfit. For most of the time she didn't have the inclination to worry about changing fashions but Lavinia had insisted she should have this one as a treat – and Sunday loved it.

‘Thank you, sir,’ she answered coyly, smiling prettily at him. ‘You don’t look so bad yourself.’

In the back seat, Kitty giggled and Maggie grinned too as the car motored on.



Soon they were strolling amongst the market stalls in Nuneaton town centre, enjoying the hustle and bustle. Kitty took Sunday’s hand and hauled her in the direction of the cattle market, followed by Tom and Maggie. She loved the atmosphere there and was fascinated by all the animals that were for sale. The little group wandered amongst the pens as red-faced farmers bartered noisily over chickens and cows and sheep.

Eventually Sunday told them: ‘It’s time to say goodbye to the animals, girls. I have a few things I need to get for Cook, then if you’re both very good I’ll take you to the tea rooms for an ice cream. How about that?’ Even Maggie looked momentarily happy at the prospect of such a treat and the four of them hurried on their way, their faces rosy with the cold.

However, people repeatedly stopped to tell Kitty what a pretty little girl she was. Ignoring Maggie, they commented on her lovely hair and her striking eyes or stared at her admiringly – and soon Maggie’s happy mood had soured. It didn’t matter where they went, it was always the same, and the attention that Kitty attracted only made the other girl feel all the more desperate for someone to love *her*, for deep inside she was feeling very vulnerable and alone. Even so, she enjoyed the shopping trip and the visit to the tea rooms and so she was in a slightly mellower frame of mind by the time they all returned to Treetops.

‘I do worry about the way Maggie seems to be so envious of Kitty,’ Sunday confided to Tom as they were getting ready for bed. She was sitting at her dressing table brushing out her long fair hair

as he lay in bed propped against the pillows watching her. Even though they had now been married for a good ten years he still couldn't get enough of her and adored the very ground she walked on.

'The problem is that even though they're both very young, Maggie has already realised that Kitty is prettier than her,' he answered, and Sunday nodded as she paused with the brush still in her hand. 'And,' he added cautiously, 'I know you don't mean to do it, my love, but you do rather tend to favour Kitty.'

'I'm afraid you're right,' she said, and her voice was rueful. 'I must try harder with Maggie but she makes it so difficult at times. And other times I think Kitty is just too pretty for her own good and it worries me. I fear that when she's older, men will be drawn to her like moths to a flame.'

'That's a long way in the future,' Tom said. 'We'll worry about that when we come to it, but for now . . . why don't you come to bed and get your old man warm?'

Sunday laid down the hairbrush and approached the bed, only too willing to do as she was asked.

Chapter Two

It was almost five years to the day since they had found Kitty on the doorstep when Em'ly tapped on the drawing-room door to tell Sunday, 'This was left outside, missus. I heard the sound of a motor car in the distance an' I peeked out, and that was when I saw it lyin' there.'

Sunday glanced at the large brown envelope and instantly guessed what it was. Each year in December, a similar envelope containing a sum of money had been left there. This year she had spent most of the month peeping out of the front windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever it was that had left it – but once again she had somehow missed them.

Tom looked at her and quipped, 'Seems they've evaded you again.' Then, taking the envelope from her, he opened it and let out a silent whistle at the banknotes enclosed inside. 'This is far too much for one child's keep,' he said. 'Perhaps we should start to put it away for Kitty for when she's older?'

Sunday had been thinking much the same thing herself, and was relieved to learn that Tom was of the same mind. 'I think that's an excellent idea, but I can't understand how I missed them *again*.' Her eyes strayed back to the window and she sighed with frustration.

'But you haven't been able to stand there every minute,' her husband pointed out. 'And I dare say whoever it is will make themselves known when the time is right.'

‘I suppose so,’ she agreed, but she couldn’t help but be curious. Whoever it was who was paying such a large sum of money for Kitty’s expenses must truly care about her. The trouble was, Sunday dreaded the day when they might well turn up and take Kitty back, because she had come to love the child as her own. Even so, now was not the time to fret about it, she decided. Christmas was racing towards them and there were the rest of the children to think about, so she left Tom to put the money away in the safe and went about her business.



‘Now calm down, you lot, else this tree is goin’ to be ruined. We can’t all get to it at once,’ Cissie scolded. Earlier in the day, Tom and George had taken the pony and trap into town and arrived home with the biggest Christmas tree any of them had ever seen. Now it stood in a large bucket of earth in the entrance hall and the children were keen to decorate it. The trouble was, they were attacking it from all sides, jostling each other, and Cissie was getting harassed. Thankfully, just then, Em’ly appeared to tell them, ‘Come on, all of you, dinner is served. Into the dinin’ room now afore it gets cold.’

There was a mad exodus as the children immediately discarded the ornaments they were holding and headed off as if they hadn’t eaten for a month.

‘Phew!’ Cissie sighed with relief and looked up at Sunday, who was balancing rather precariously on a stepladder in order to decorate the top of the tree. It was only inches from the high ceiling and like Cissie she was feeling a bit on edge. She just hoped no one let Barney the labrador out of the boot room where he’d been put to keep him from ‘helping’. The cats would no doubt come and investigate. One year, they had pulled the entire tree down.

‘Aren’t you going for your dinner, pet?’ Sunday asked Kitty as

she tentatively descended the ladder. The child was standing observing the tree with her thumb jammed in her mouth.

‘I wanted to wait for you,’ she said.

As Sunday’s feet landed on the ground the child took her hand and Sunday’s heart melted as she felt the warm tiny fingers in her own. She suffered all manner of guilt feelings about the love she felt about Kitty; after all, she had always promised herself that every child in her care should be treated equally – but try as she might, she couldn’t stop herself from having a soft spot for this little one. There was something about her that was just so appealing. True, she grew prettier with every month that passed, but it wasn’t just her looks that made her so lovable, it was her character too. The little girl rarely complained about anything, even Maggie’s sulks. This worried Sunday, for she was aware that she wouldn’t always be there to protect her, and Kitty’s passive nature meant that others might easily take advantage of her. She had often remarked on this to Tom, but he waved aside her concerns. ‘That’s a long way off,’ he would tell her – and she supposed he was right.

Now she and Cissie headed for the dining room with Kitty walking sedately between them and found themselves amidst noisy and less than organised chaos. A scrimmage, in fact. Kitty instantly skipped off to claim the seat at the side of Ben. Maggie had already positioned herself on the other side of him and she made a face at Kitty as Ben affectionately tousled Kitty’s shining dark hair. The children were all highly excited about the delivery of the tree and the fact that Christmas was almost upon them, and they were so noisy that the four adults could barely make themselves heard above the laughter and chatting.

‘Bloody ’ell, I reckon I can feel a headache comin’ on,’ Cissie groaned as she began to ladle vegetables from a large tureen onto the nearest children’s plates.

‘At least they’re happy.’ Sunday winked at her as she served the children at the other end of the table and eventually when their

plates were full, they quietened a little in order to wolf down their food. The way they saw it, the sooner the meal was over the sooner they could get back to decorating the tree – hence the food disappeared at an amazing rate.

‘So much fer tryin’ to teach ’em good table manners,’ Cissie remarked as she helped herself to a succulent piece of roast pork and crackling, and popped it into her mouth.

Sunday didn’t comment. As well as Christmas, she had other things on her mind. Exciting, wonderful things that she daren’t even think about too deeply. Her monthly course was now two weeks late and she was praying that at last she might be carrying the longed-for baby. She hadn’t mentioned it to Tom as yet. The way she saw it, there was no sense in raising his hopes until she was sure – but she had confided in Cissie, who was almost as excited as she was. The roast pork dinner was followed by Mrs Rose’s delicious jam roly-poly and jugs of thick creamy custard, which again disappeared at an alarming rate.

‘May we stay up to finish decorating the tree before we have our baths?’ one little boy asked Sunday’s mother hopefully and after glancing at her daughter, Lavinia Huntley smiled.

‘I should think so, just so long as you promise to go up as soon as it’s finished,’ she agreed.

The children were then excused from the table and they raced off for the boxes of baubles in the hall again, leaving the adults to enjoy their coffee in peace.

‘Em’ly, make sure none of them tries to climb the stepladder!’ Sunday shouted after her, as the girl shepherded the smaller children into the corridor. Em’ly nodded and closed the door as Cissie leaned back in her seat.

‘Eeh, they’ve fair worn me out today,’ she yawned. ‘If they’re this excited now, goodness knows what they’ll be like come Christmas morning!’

‘I thought I’d carry on with wrapping some more of the presents

this evening when they've all gone up to bed,' Lavinia said as she poured herself more coffee. 'Are there any volunteers to help?'

'Well, much as I'd like to, I can't. I have me own brood to get to bed,' Cissie said. 'George is lookin' after 'em at the moment, but they won't go to sleep without me bein' there.' Cissie, George and their brood lived happily in Primrose Cottage, which lay in the grounds of Treetops Manor.

Tom hastily made his excuses too but Sunday offered, 'I'll help. I quite like wrapping presents as it happens.'

'Huh! It's a complete waste o' time if yer ask me,' Cissie snorted. 'The first thing they do is rip 'em open.'

'Yes, but opening the present and not knowing what's inside is half the pleasure,' Sunday argued. Then, 'Are we going to let them open them first thing Christmas morning or when we get back from church?'

'Well, seeing as their stockings are going to be hanging on the end of their beds I think you'll have a bit of a job on to try and make them wait,' Lavinia chuckled. 'Although I dare say you could put them all under the tree and hand them out when we get back from church. That way, they'd have no choice but to wait.'

A heated debate then took place about what they should do. Lavinia and Tom thought it best for the children to open their stockings in their rooms. Sunday was keen to see them all open their presents downstairs, but eventually she was outvoted and it was decided that the children should hang their stockings on the ends of their beds as they had on previous years.

'Makes sense to me,' Cissie muttered, spooning sugar into her coffee. 'It's allus worked that way before.'

Sunday shrugged, conceding that her old friend was right.

An hour later, the tree was finally finished and stood in all its somewhat haphazard splendour. The tiny candles clipped to the branches in their tin holders were twinkling. Zillah had lit them, but had warned the children in no uncertain terms that they must *never*

attempt to light them if there wasn't an adult present. Now the children gazed at the sight in awe and Sunday felt a lump rise in her throat as she watched their faces. At times like this she was more determined than ever to try and make their childhoods as happy as she could, unlike her own, with its terrifying memories. She only wished that she could take in even more orphans, but she knew that to do that would not be fair on the ones who already lived here.

'All right, children, it's really time for your baths now.' Sunday clapped her hands and tried to ignore the disappointed young faces. 'Don't worry,' she said kindly, 'the tree will still be here tomorrow.'

And so somewhat reluctantly, the children began to file up the stairs.



At 10 p.m. Sunday retired to use the bathroom and was devastated to find that once again, her hopes of having a child of her own had come to nothing. Her monthly course had started.

When she entered the bedroom, Tom immediately noticed her downcast face and guessed what had caused it. She reacted the same way every month.

'It'll happen in its own time, pet,' he assured her gently, taking her in his arms and planting a tender kiss on her sweet-smelling hair. 'And it's not as if we haven't already got a rook of children to pour our love onto, is it?'

'I know that.' Sunday sniffed to hold the tears at bay. 'But I so want to give you your very own child.'

'Do you know what? So long as I have you, I don't care.' He gave her a squeeze. 'A baby would be a bonus but it's you that matters the most to me.' And as she stared up into his expressive, deep brown eyes, she saw that he meant every single word he said.



On Christmas morning Treetops Children's Home was a hive of activity and excitement. When the children woke, whoops of delight echoed around the house as they opened the stockings they had hung at the end of their beds and which Santa Claus had filled, during the night while they slept.

'They sound happy enough.' Tom grinned as he buttoned his shirt in their bedroom. Barney had caught the excitement and was barking loudly.

'They certainly do.' Sunday fastened the last of the pins into her hair and patted it into place before suggesting, 'Should we go and be bombarded, then?'

'I can't think of anything nicer.' He held his arm out to his wife and after hooking hers through it they ventured out onto the landing.

'Sunday, Tom, look what Santa left for me! A wooden train. How did he know it was just what I wanted?' Little Zeke hurtled towards them clutching the precious gift to his chest as Tom winked and tapped the side of his nose.

'Ah well now, he must have got that letter you sent to him, and even if he didn't, he's magic, see? He knows just what every child wants.'

The little fellow nodded and toddled away hugging his treasure and almost colliding with Zillah as she came out of the nursery.

'I've had a job to get them dressed this morning,' she chuckled. 'I think we can safely say they're all happy with their presents. Even young Maggie has a smile on her face.'

'Hallelujah! Long may it last,' Tom said comically as Sunday playfully punched his arm.

'Come along you,' she scolded with a giggle. 'We have to get the children in to breakfast or we'll be late for church.' And on that happy note they set off for the dining room.

The rest of the day was almost magical, as Sunday remarked to her husband when they finally retired to their room that evening. The morning service conducted by the Reverend Lockett at Chilvers

Coton Church had been beautiful, and when it started to snow as they made their way home, the children were thrilled to bits.

‘Will we be allowed to get the sledges out?’ they cried. ‘Please, Tom!’

‘Yes, if the snow lies deep enough,’ he had agreed indulgently.

They arrived home to the appetising smell of roast goose and once seated at the enormous table they had all done justice to Cook’s wonderful meal. It began with a thin leek soup accompanied by fresh-baked crusty bread, and was followed by roast goose, Cook’s home-made sage and onion stuffing and crispy roast potatoes, along with a selection of vegetables. Finally, they were served with an enormous Christmas pudding, which to their delight was brought into the dining room with flames licking around it from the brandy which Tom had lit with a spill from the fire.

Once the Christmas dinner was over, the adults organised a number of games to keep the children happy. The boys continuously crossed to the window, delighted to see that the snow had indeed begun to settle and they all sat and planned where they would take the sledges the next day. Eventually they had all come flocking in for their Christmas tea and Sunday and Tom were shocked to see how the children tucked in again after what they had eaten at dinnertime.

‘I’m sure they all have hollow legs,’ Lavinia commented with a grin.

Because it was Christmas Day the children were allowed to stay up a little longer that evening, and when a band of carol singers walked down the drive and came to stand outside the front doors, singing the best-loved carols beneath the gently falling snow, the children were enchanted. The group were invited in for warm mince pies and a glass of Cook’s hot punch, and by the time they departed there were more than a few of the children yawning. Some had even fallen asleep on the chairs.

‘Come on, missie.’ Tom lifted Kitty, who was snoring softly, to

carry her to her room and for the first time that day, Maggie's face fell.

'Come on, sweetheart, I'll help you get ready for bed,' Sunday said, offering her hand, and Maggie reluctantly took it. 'I'll tell you what, just for this once, seeing as it's Christmas Day, I'll let you off having a wash this evening,' Sunday told the silent little girl. 'We'll just slip your nightdress on, tuck you in and I'll tell you a story, eh? How does that sound?'

Slightly mollified, Maggie nodded but she kept her eyes fixed on Tom who was cradling Kitty in his arms as he mounted the stairs as if she weighed no more than a feather. Maggie wished now that she had pretended to fall asleep and then perhaps Tom would have carried her up to bed too, but at least Sunday was holding her hand. They found Cissie and Zillah already in the children's rooms trying to bring some sort of order into bedtime, but today nobody minded and at last all the children were safely tucked in and fast asleep.

'I think we adults ought to go down now and treat ourselves to a glass of port,' Lavinia suggested, and they were all only too happy to agree. It would be the perfect end to a perfect day.