

PENNY THORPE

The
Quality
Street[®]
Girls

Three girls. One Factory.
A Christmas they'll never forget...



Penny Thorpe
The Quality Street Girls

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Inspired by the true story of the Quality Street factory and its loyal workers, this is a nostalgic and compelling novel and the perfect Christmas treat. At sixteen years old, Irene 'Reenie' Calder is leaving school with little in the way of qualifications. She is delighted to land a seasonal job at Mackintosh's Quality Street factory. Reenie feels like a kid let loose in a sweet shop, but trouble seems to follow her around and it isn't long before she falls foul of the strict rules. Diana Moore runs the Toffee Penny line and has worked hard to secure her position. Beautiful and smart, the other girls in the factory are in awe of her, but Diana has a dark secret which if exposed, could cost her not only her job at the factory but her reputation as well. When a terrible accident puts supply of Quality Street at risk, Reenie has a chance to prove herself. The shops are full of Quality Street lovers who have saved up all year for their must-have Christmas treat. Reenie and Diana know that everything rests on them, if they are to give everyone a Christmas to remember...

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The Quality Street Girls

PENNY THORPE



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Dedication

In loving memory of Mary Lowes Walker, who made even more friends than Reenie.

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Chapter One

It was late, and the Baxter's store on the corner at Stump Cross was closed, but the lights in the main window illuminated a sparkling display of Mackintosh's Quality Street; the latest success from the sprawling factory they called Toffee Town. As Reenie rode her nag closer she could see that someone had taken the coloured cellophane wrappers from the chocolates and taped them between black sugar paper to make little stained glass windows. Between the tins and tubs and cartons were homemade tree baubles; an ingenious mixture of ping-pong balls, cellophane wrappers, glue and thread.

While there were plenty of other confectionery assortments that Baxter's could have chosen to feature, Reenie couldn't imagine they'd have had much luck making a stained glass window out of O'Neil's wrappers. Besides, Quality Street was the best, everyone knew it; plenty of girls from Reenie's school had left to work in Sharpe's or O'Neil's factories, but it was the really lucky ones that went to work at Mackintosh's.

Reenie's enormous, ungainly old horse shuffled closer to try to nose the glass, the explosion of colour bursting forth from the opened tins on display had caught his eye and was drawing his curious nature to the window. Reenie didn't blame him; it was a beautiful sight and he deserved a treat when he was being so good about coming out after putting in a day's work in the top field. She had a great deal of affection for the old family horse, and she liked spoiling him when she got the chance, so she let him dawdle a while longer.

Reenie gazed at the window display, and dreamed of growing up to be the kind of fine lady that bought Quality Street, and had a gardener, and got driven around in an automobile. For the moment she would have to be content with being a farmer's daughter who had a vegetable patch and occasional use of her family's peculiarly ugly horse. Fortunately for Reenie, she found it easy to be content with her lot, she was an easily contented girl. As long as she didn't have to go into service she was happy.

'Come on, Ruffian. We've got a way to go yet.' Ruffian reluctantly allowed Reenie to steer him away from the bright lights, and continued up through the ever steeper streets of Halifax, over quiet cobbles she knew well. The night was cold for October, but she knew she had to ride out to get her father nonetheless.

Reenie didn't mind; Ruffian was technically her father's horse, and most fathers would not allow their daughter freedom of the valley with it, so she supposed she ought to feel pretty grateful. And it wasn't as though she had to come out to get her father very often, she thought to herself. He only got this blotto once a year when the Ale Taster's Society hired out the old oak room and had their 'do', apart from that she thought he was pretty good really. He was very probably the best dad.

Reenie's thoughts kept drifting back to the sandwich that was waiting in her pocket, wrapped in waxed paper and bound up with a piece of twine. The sandwich contained a slice of tinned tongue and some mustard-pickled-cauliflower that her mother made for Reenie to give to her father to eat on his way back. Reenie's stomach rumbled and she was tempted to take a bite out of it before she got to the pub, even though she'd had her tea. Her mother frequently told her that she was lucky to live on a farm where there was no shortage of food, but Reenie pointed out that there was no shortage of the same food: mutton, ewe's milk cheese, ewe's milk butter, ewe's milk curd tart, and ewe's milk. She rode in the dark past the Borough Market, there was a clamour outside The Old Cock and Oak. As she approached, Reenie didn't like the look of what she saw. Ahead of her, she could see brass buttons glinting in the old-fashioned gaslight from the pub, and the tell-tale contours of Salvation Army hats and cloaks. It was going to be another one of those nights.

Reenie knew before she'd even rounded the corner that this was not the regular Salvation Army, they would be off doing something useful somewhere involving soup and blankets. This was a Salvation Army splinter group, who the rest of the Salvation Army considered to be nothing but

trouble. Reenie tried to feel friendly towards them as she wasn't in a hurry, but she did wonder privately why they didn't just go to the cinema when they got time off like everyone else.

'Think of your wives! Think of your children!' Reenie couldn't tell where in the throng of ardent believers the call was coming from, but she knew that they wouldn't be popular with the pub regulars. There were several other pubs along Market Street, but the faithful had chosen to cram into the courtyard of The Old Cock and Oak to protest against the annual meeting of the Worshipful Company of Ale Tasters. Reenie couldn't see what they were so fussed about, but this wasn't anything new.

Reenie decided not to dismount this time and walked old Ruffian as close to the pub door as she could, keeping a loose, but expert grasp on the fraying rope that served as Ruffian's bridle. 'Comin' through, 'scuse me, if you'd let me pass, please.' As the ramshackle old horse nosed its way through the faithful, the crowd parted, some out of courtesy but others to avoid being stamped on by a mud-caked hoof, or bitten by an almost toothless mouth. Ruffian may not have had the aristocratic pedigree, but like his rider, he encouraged good etiquette in his own way. Reenie was close enough now to see a few faces she knew guarding the doorway; exasperated men waiting for the do-gooders to move on, their arms folded. 'Is me dad in there still?'

'Now then, Queenie Reenie, what's this you comin' in on a noble steed with your uniformed retinue.' Fred Rastrick gave her a wicked grin as they both ignored the small, rogue faction of the otherwise helpful Halifax branch of the Salvation Army.

'Don't be daft, Fred, you know full well they're nowt to do wi' me. Now fetch us me dad, would ya'? It's too cold for him to walk home, he'll end up dead in a ditch. Go tell him I'm here and I'm not stopping out half the night so he has to be quick.'

'Young lady! Young lady, how old are you?' Reenie recognised the castigating voice of Gwendoline Vance, self-appointed leader of this band of Salvation Army members who'd taken it upon themselves to object to most things that went on in Halifax, including the Ale Tasters annual 'do'. Reenie could have mistaken the woman's face in the dark, even this close up, but there was no mistaking the way she was harping on.

'What's it to you?' Reenie was not in a mood to be cross-examined by strangers, especially those in thrall to teetotalism.

'Shouldn't you be at school?'

'Well, not just now as it's half past ten at night.'

'Well I meant in the morning, shouldn't you be at home in bed by now so that you can go to school in the morning?'

'No, and I'll tell you for why. Firstly, I'm fifteen and I finished school at Easter; secondly, some of us would rather be spending our time helping our families than wasting it on enterprises that won't get anyone anywhere; and thirdly (and forgive me if I think this is the most important), because today is a Friday, and when I were at school they taught me that the day that comes after Friday is Saturday, and that, madam, is when the school is closed. Now if you've quite finished, I want me' dad. Fred!' Reenie had to call out because Fred had disappeared further inside the pub. The Salvation Army devotee blanched and choked on her words. Reenie ignored her and turned her eyes to the doorway of The Old Cock and Oak.

'He's here, Reenie,' Fred reappeared, 'but he can't walk.'

'Well then tell him he doesn't have to. I'm waiting with the 'orse.'

'No, I mean he can't walk. He's blotto; out cold.'

'Oh, good grief. Well, can someone drag him to the door, I don't want to have to get off the horse or I'll be here 'til Monday.'

'I'll have a go.' Fred turned to go back inside. 'But he's not as light as he used to be.'

'Reenee,' the do-gooder emphasised the Halifax pronunciation, ree-knee, and tried to assume an expression that was both patronising and penitent for her earlier mistake, 'may I call you Reenie?'

'No, you may not. Unless you're gonna help with m' dad.'

‘We’d be very, very glad to help with your father; it must be terribly hard on you and your family. Do you think you could bring him with you on Sunday to—’

‘No, I meant help lift him on the ’orse. Good grief, woman, are you daft? Fred! How’s he looking?’

‘Nearly there,’ Fred called out through gritted teeth as he attempted to pull the dead weight of Mr Calder out to his horse and daughter, then turned to a fellow drinker ‘Bert, can you give me an ‘and throwin’ him over Ruffian?’

Bert held up a hand and said, before darting back into the pub, ‘You wait right there; I think I know just the lad for this.’ Bert brought out a bemused-looking young man who Reenie didn’t recognise, slapping him on the shoulder with friendly camaraderie and pushing him in the direction of the horse. He didn’t have the slicked hair with razored back and sides that the other lads round here had. His hair wasn’t darkened by Brylcreem; instead, he had fine, golden toffee coloured hair that fell over his left eye and gave him away as a toff. Straight teeth, straight hair, straight nose, and a smarter suit of clothes than anyone else there; to Reenie, he looked hopelessly out of place among the factory workers and farm hands. It made her like him instantly for joining in with people who weren’t like him. She might not have a lot in common with this posh-looking lad, but there was one thing; he looked like the type who would make friends with anyone.

‘Reenie, Peter; Peter, Reenie.’ Bert skimmed over the necessary introductions. ‘We need to get Reenie’s dad here over the ’orse.’

Peter smiled and nodded, and with what seemed like almost no effort at all, he gathered Reenie’s father up and launched him in front of where Reenie sat, with his arms and legs dangling over the horse’s withers on either side. The landing must have been a rough one for Mr Calder because, though unconscious, he still managed to vomit onto the military-style black boots of the nearest Moral League man.

The sudden eruption caused a shriek from the group’s ringleader who turned to Reenie, ‘Oh you poor child. You shouldn’t have to see such things at your tender age.’

‘Oh gerr’over yourself, woman. Everyone’s dad drinks.’ Reenie bent over to check on her father because although she was confident that he’d be alright, she thought it was as well to make sure. Her shoulder-length red hair dangled down the horse’s side as she dropped her head level with her father’s, reassured by his loud snore; *silly old thing, what was he like? Her mother would laugh at him come the morning.* Reenie looked up to thank the young man, but to her disappointment, he’d already gone. She had wanted to tell him that her father wasn’t usually like this, and not to mind the Sally Army crowd because they weren’t bad as all that if you weren’t in a hurry to get anywhere. She had wanted to say so many things to him, but she supposed it was better she get a move on and take her father home to his bed. It didn’t occur to her that the young man had gone indoors to fetch his coat and hat so he could offer to walk her home like a gentleman.

Reenie pulled on Ruffian’s make-shift bridle and began to lead the horse away, then thought better of it and stopped to call over her shoulder ‘and my friend Betsy Newman’s in the Salvation Army and she says you six are pariahs! Go and help ‘em with the cleaning rota like they’ve told ya’, and stop botherin’ folks who’ve had an ‘arder week at work than you’ve ever known!’

Ruffian snorted, as if in agreement, and guided his mistress home.

Diana waited for Mary on the street outside; her father’s thick old coat wrapped tightly around her, and the wide collar turned up against the autumnal night. ‘She’s definitely not with him this time,’ Mary said, leaning one hand on the door frame of her mother’s soot-blackened one-up-one-down terrace as she hurriedly pulled on a well-worn shoe with the other hand ‘she’s promised she won’t see him anymore.’

Diana didn’t respond; it was a waste of effort, and she was bone tired. She had spent all day at work in the factory, then had come home to find her stepbrother hadn’t paid the rent and had taken off with Mary’s sister Bess. Not that this came as a surprise; nothing came as a surprise to Diana any

more. Mary's sister was in thrall to her no good stepbrother, as only a silly sixteen-year-old can be. Diana had been a silly sixteen-year-old herself once, although it felt like a lifetime ago and not the mere ten years that separated her from that other person she had once been. Diana had been in thrall to someone equally unsuitable, and she knew that there was nothing to be done for Bess now.

'She realises now that he's no good for her.' Mary was following behind Diana and kicking at her shoe to move back the loose insole that had shifted when she'd pulled on her winter shoes over bare feet. 'I don't know where she's gone tonight, but I'm certain she's not with him.'

Diana didn't ask why Mary was following her if she believed all of her sister's promises; she didn't need to. Diana was the oldest girl on their production line, and younger ones like Mary fell into line with whatever she said.

'I mean,' Mary went on as they turned the corner of Mary's street and past the midnight blue billboard that announced that Rowntree's Cocoa would nourish them all, 'how do you know that it was definitely them?'

Diana stopped suddenly. She disliked walking while talking; she disliked talking at all, and she thought that if she didn't stop to say what she had to say then Mary would carry on kicking at her shoe rather than ask her to wait while she fixed it. Stopping killed two birds with one stone. 'I saw someone who told me that your sister and my stepbrother were in The Old Cock and Oak in town and that if I didn't hurry he'd have all my rent money spent.'

'But could they have been mistaken? I mean, what were their exact words?' Mary hopped on one foot as she tried to arrange her shoe without letting her bare foot touch the ice-cold cobbles of the dirty street.

Diana sighed 'He said "You want to get down to The Old Cock and Oak, Diana, before that no-good stepbrother of yours spends all your money. "The Blade" as he likes to call himself is in there with the Good Queen, and he's buying everyone a drink." There's no mistake; your sister is there with him.'

'What does he mean "Good Queen"? Who's "Good Queen" when she's at home?' Mary looked genuinely confused.

There was a long silence as Diana tried to decide whether or not to tell Mary what people called her; it might help her to do something about it, but then again it might not. Behind their backs Mary and Bess were known as the Tudor Queens; the porters on their production line had started calling Mary 'Bad Queen Mary' because she had a short fuse and no one had ever been able to get her to crack a smile. Her younger sister Bess was her polar opposite; she was cheerful to a fault. She had no concept of the consequences of her actions as she floated along in a happy bubble, and Diana had been forced to speak to her about it on the production line on a number of occasions, to no avail. Bess was all smiles and affection, and they called her 'Good Queen Bess'.

It seemed odd to Diana that two people could look so different while looking so alike. They had the same large, upturned eyes, but where Bess's looked pretty, Mary's glasses made hers appear bug-like. They had the same porcelain-white skin, but where Bess's looked delicate, Mary's looked ghostly. They both had a strawberry mark on their left cheek, but where Bess's looked like a cherubic kiss, Mary's looked like she was crying tears of blood. They were their own worst enemies, Diana had told them so often enough; Mary had a short fuse because she tied herself up in knots with worry, while Bess was as useless as a chocolate teapot in the factory because she was too happy-go-lucky. Diana wondered if Bess would ever realise her job was to make toffees, not gaze dreamily into the middle distance. Diana could see why they'd ended up the way they had; Mary had to do the worrying for both of them, and Bess didn't need to worry with a sister like Mary. If they could trade places for a day, it might do them the power of good.

'Have you fixed that shoe yet?' Diana didn't want to wait in the road much longer, her stepbrother liked to flash money around when he had it, and he'd be on to another pub before closing time if she didn't catch up with him first.

‘It keeps moving around.’ Mary huffed with annoyance and crouched down to unlace her shoe and fix it properly, fumbling as though she were worried that she was taking up too much of Diana’s valuable time.

Mary looked pitiful under the streetlamp. Her frizzy black hair was pulled tight back and twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck. All the other girls at the factory had their hair curled like the girls in the magazines, but not Mary; there were dark circles around her eyes and in the winter of 1936, Mary didn’t even have a warm coat. *Poor kid*, Diana thought to herself, *she needs someone to look after her for a change.*

‘Alright, I’m ready.’ Mary stood up and shook her foot in her shoe one last time. ‘I still don’t think it’s him.’

‘My stepbrother could hardly be mistaken for anyone else. Apart from the fact that he’s the only person in Halifax to dress like some American mobster from the pictures, he also looks like a cross between a rat and a frog, so his face is hardly going to blend into a crowd, is it?’ Diana started walking again. The trouble with Mary Norcliffe, she thought to herself, was that she couldn’t just walk in silence.

Mary followed Diana with her arms folded around herself and her shoulders hunched forward; her eyes were on the tram rails that stretched out down the road ahead of them, but then she looked up to Diana and said, ‘Thank you for calling on me though.’ There was an anxious pause as though Mary feared that every sentence was saying too much or too little. ‘I know she’s a nuisance, but she has promised she’ll change. Honestly she has.’

Diana knew that Good Queen Bess would never be capable of seeing the consequences of her actions, and her sister Mary would always be looking after her. It was none of Diana’s business, and so she said nothing. She helped them in her own way, but she wasn’t going to try to change them. ‘There’s something I want to talk to you about.’ Diana looked up to see that Mary was already panicking. ‘I’ve arranged for you and your sister to work beside me on the new line. We move floors tomorrow.’

‘But, if we—’

Diana didn’t let her finish, ‘Everyone knows that you’ve been helping your sister to get her work done, but we can’t let the other girls cover up for you anymore. You’ll have to move up beside me where I’ll be the only person covering for you, and then if you’re caught helping Bess, the only people that will be in any trouble will be the three of us. No more risking the other girls’ positions, do you understand?’

Mary swallowed and nodded.

‘I know you’ll still have to help your sister for a while yet, but you do it in my section and no one else’s. If Mrs Roth catches you, it’s best I deal with her.’

Diana was eventually rewarded with her longed-for silence, but she couldn’t enjoy it because she knew that Mary was wrestling with all kinds of questions that she wanted to ask, but didn’t dare voice.

They turned the corner onto Market Street where the rainbow of shops had closed their shutters for the night, like spring blooms closing their petals each evening. The street was by no means sleeping, it was alive with factory workers who were out for a payday drink. It was hard to imagine what Diana had heard this morning about the men in Barnsley on their way down to Westminster on a hunger march. The people of Halifax had seen lean times, but on this Friday there was merriment.

As they passed The Boar, the girls were met with catcalls from the drinkers who had spilled out into the street outside the various pubs that filled the centre of town. Diana supposed the catcalls were not unfriendly, but they irked her none the less. There had been a time when Diana had painted the town red; when she’d been bright-eyed and infamous in Halifax. Back then she’d been the queen of all she surveyed; and then six years ago all that had changed. Her carefree day in the sun had ended, and she would never go back to being that Diana.

‘Ignore them.’ Diana was saying it as much to herself as Mary, and they walked on. Six years was a long time, but no one could forget Diana. She might be wrapped up in her late father’s old

black coat, her shoes might be down at heel, but she still looked like she'd stepped down from a Hollywood movie poster.

'Look at the state of that!' A buck-toothed drinker in the doorway of The Boar called out. Diana cast a glance in his direction and realised that he was pointing at Mary, who was taking the abuse quietly, as though she thought she deserved it.

'What did you say?' Diana mouthed the words at him almost inaudibly, barely a whisper. She didn't need to raise her voice; when she spoke the scattering of flat-capped drinkers who had spilled out of the pub fell silent. The old light was back in her eyes, and her iron-ringed irises were locked on the insolent young man.

He laughed awkwardly, looking around to his friends for them to join in. It was near closing time, and the lamp-lit street was busier with friends and acquaintances than it had been an hour ago. The young man had assumed that they would all make fun of the plain-faced girl that followed the beautiful one, but he was mistaken. His friends quietly shuffled backwards; some could sense what was coming, and others knew from experience that to cross Diana Moore was a mistake you only made once.

'What,' Diana remarked as she stalked toward the young man like a predator slowly closing in on its prey 'did you say?'

'Well ...' he laughed nervously, throwing his arm up to indicate Mary but with less conviction now. 'Have you seen the state of her?'

'What about her?' Diana was close to him now, and without so much as a wrinkle of her celestial nose, she conveyed a menace more potent than this young man was ever likely to encounter again.

He faltered and then said, 'Well ... she doesn't have a coat, does she?' He'd have said more; he'd have said that she was plain or ugly, or skinny, or that her skin was sallow and her hair unattractive, but he felt a cold fear at the beautiful and unmoving face that was so close to his.

Diana leant forward slowly; with the elegance and poise of a dancer, her lips were so close to his that for a heart-stopping moment he thought that she was going to kiss him. He lifted his chin a little in hope, but her mouth moved past his without touching it, and then her mouth was at his ear, her breath warming his skin with a tingle, and in a whisper that was all at the same time tender as a lover, and unforgiving as death she said, 'Then give her yours.'

In the silence that had fallen over the drinkers, everyone heard her words.

Diana gently stepped back and the young man looked around helplessly at his friends, his mouth falling open in hesitation, confusion, and fear. He didn't know how to respond, so he laughed nervously again and waited for his friends to join in. All he wished was for the moment to pass so they could all continue with their Friday night drinking in peace. But his friends didn't come to his rescue; they didn't do any of the things that he expected them to do, they looked at him in silence and nodded in the direction of the girl he'd been mocking; they nodded as though to tell him to hand over his coat.

When they arrived at The Old Cock and Oak Diana appeared to be in a slightly better mood as she had shocked Mary into another brief silence.

'I can't keep this.' Mary was wearing the coat that Diana had thrown around her shoulders as she'd led her away from The Boar, and she looked worried; she always looked worried. 'I can't take his coat off him.'

'So leave it at the pub tomorrow, and they can give it back to him.' Diana pushed open the door of The Old Cock and Oak, holding it open for Mary to follow her into the tap room, 'But I forbid you to give it back to him tonight. He doesn't deserve it.'

The crowded saloon, and higgledy-piggledy layout of the pub made it difficult to see all the drinkers. A thick fug of tobacco smoke caught Mary square in the chest as they entered and she began coughing uncontrollably; Diana was used to it and immediately began looking for her stepbrother. She briefly looked around the corner into the Savile room, but realised that her stepbrother wouldn't

be there; that part of the pub was mostly occupied by older folks who still smoked their tobacco in clay pipes to save money on cigarette papers and Tommo wouldn't deign to be seen with the likes of them.

Diana ducked her head under the minstrel gallery that spanned one side of the pub. It was a strange old place, like something from a fairy story. It was all carved oak mermaids and crazy staircases; Tommo tended to frequent billiard halls, or places where he could be a big fish in a small pond, this was not his sort of place at all, which meant that he was up to something. The pub was full, but the clientele were divided evenly into two groups: the first were the Worshipful Company of Ale Tasters who had come in for their annual ale tasting evening in the private room on the next floor up. The second group of drinkers were the relatively sober regulars who had stopped by for a small glass of bitter after a day at work and were trying to suppress their amusement at the ale tasters who were all stumbling down the 16th-century staircase in an attempt to make their various ways home. Diana overheard the barman telling another drinker that they'd had an incorrectly labelled ale submitted for their tasting that year and it was rather stronger than they had anticipated. She suspected there would be a lot of sore heads in the morning and was glad that she wasn't one of them.

Over in the snug, she found Bess with a group of engineers that she recognised from the factory. Bess was under five feet tall, so when she saw her sister coming to get her she had no trouble darting behind one of the engineers to hide. Bess seemed to think it was all a game because she was giggling happily; the look of desperate exhaustion on her sister Mary's face didn't seem to register with her.

Diana approached the group, 'Bess, your sister's been worried sick.'

'Don't worry about her,' Bess whispered conspiratorially, evidently still thinking that if she stayed out of the way her elder sister might not find her to make her go home. 'Mary's always angry about summut', it won't be 'owt serious, let her go and cool off.'

It was too late, Mary had caught sight of her sister in their midst and had come round to forcefully grasp hold of her wrist and drag her out of the bar, calling out, 'Landlady! My sister is under-age to drink, don't serve her in future!'

Mrs Parish the landlady came out from behind the bar, 'And when the bloody hell did you sneak in, young lady?' She looked at Bess with a mixture of annoyance, amazement and confusion; Mrs Parish was a third generation licensee, and you had to get up very early in the morning to catch her out. If anyone got into her pub without her knowing it would have to be by some witchcraft.

Bess giggled, 'I was hiding inside my friend's coat when we all came in, and then I ran round into the snug. Didn't you see us? We looked like a pantomime horse. Everyone laughed!'

The landlady's shoulders sagged in exasperation. 'I'll remember your face, young lady. You're barred.' Mrs Parish narrowed her eyes at Mary. 'And how old are you?'

Mary appeared to be mildly affronted by the question. 'I only came in to get her. I'm going now. I wouldn't come into a pub unless I had a good reason.' Mary hustled her sister from the premises.

'Oh, Mary,' Bess's contented, innocent expression hadn't changed even though she was being hauled out of the pub, her bouncing, honey-blond curls falling over her eyes prettily, 'I was only coming out for a bit o' fun with the engineers, there's no harm in it. You should come out sometimes too; now you're old enough.'

'You'll be fit for nothing at work tomorrow, and then where will we be?'

Diana followed the bickering sisters out into the courtyard, 'Bess, have you seen my stepbrother? I need to know where he's gone.'

'Have you tried at home?' Bess meant well, but it obviously didn't occur to her that Diana would already have looked there; common sense was not Bess's strong point.

'He's not at his mother's house. Where did he say he would be? Where did you last see him this evening?'

'I didn't see him tonight. But maybe you could see him at the factory tomorrow? He wants to come and look round the factory in the morning.' Bess said it as though she were imparting a nice piece of news that would please her sister and their colleague Diana.

‘What does he want to do that for?’ Diana was suspicious.

‘Well,’ Bess looked around and then leant forward conspiratorially, ‘I think he wants to get a job at the factory. I think he wants to get settled somewhere nice.’ She smiled; she genuinely believed the best of the young man who called himself Tommo ‘The Blade’ Cartwright.

‘Trust me, Bess, my brother is not trying to get a job in the factory. If he asks you to get him inside the gates you tell me about it straight away, you understand?’

‘Do you think we could get him an overlooker’s job on our line?’ Bess’s voice squeaked with cheerful optimism.

Mary and Diana sighed with exasperation. This was the last thing they needed.

Reenie rode home through the heather, and by the light of the moon. When there was moon enough she’d allow herself this luxury of travelling back over Shibden Mill fields instead of the road. There was good solid ground underfoot for Ruffian, and if the night was clear enough she could see out across the rooftops of half of Halifax (if she didn’t mind being unladylike and sitting backwards in her saddle and letting Ruffian take them both home).

Her father was no trouble as he slept, helpless as a babe, over the front of their horse. She realised, to her delight, that she could eat that tinned tongue sandwich in her pocket. Her father wouldn’t remember in the morning if she’d had it; she took the waxed paper package from her pocket, pulled away the twine and took a bite of the soft, fluffy bread. It was heavenly, and Ruffian plodded on while she tucked in. Reenie was just near enough to the lane that bordered her part of the field that she could make out the silhouette of a lone policeman on a bicycle, effortlessly freewheeling down the hill.

Reenie was in such good spirits that she decided to ride nearer to the fence and wish him a good evening.

With a mouth full of tinned tongue sandwich she called out, ‘Nah then! ‘Ow’s thi’ doin’?’

The officer pulled on his brakes and skidded the bicycle into a sideways halt just yards away from Ruffian. He didn’t speak immediately, but narrowed his eyes and assessed the teenaged girl who grinned at him naively in the moonlight; the almost-lifeless bundle of clothes that appeared to be a man; and the knock-kneed, run-down old horse that couldn’t have more than a year or two of life left in him. Finally, he asked, ‘Is this yours?’

‘What, the horse or the old man? The sandwich is mine, but you can have some if you’ve not had any tea.’

‘No, the land; is that your *land*?’ Sergeant Metcalfe became frustrated when he saw that the girl who was trespassing still didn’t understand. ‘You’re on private land, lass. Look at the signs and the fences. Can you not read the signs?’

‘Can you not go on it if you’re just using it to go home?’

‘No, you cannot trespass if you’re trespassing to go home. Trespassing’s a crime; you could be up before the magistrate.’

Reenie smiled amiably. ‘But I always go home this way.’

The policeman pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, ‘Do you know what it means when someone says that you’re not doing yourself any favours?’

‘I don’t understand; am I in trouble? Is it because I haven’t got him on a saddle? Because he’s never had a saddle. We just use him for turning over the field and fetching dad and the like.’

The policeman sighed in frustration and thought about how late he’d have to stay at the station if he arrested a minor, and all the extra trouble of taking an unconscious man and an unsaddled horse into custody. Sergeant Metcalfe looked up into the happy, well-meaning face of Reenie Calder and decided that this was a battle he’d never win. ‘You know what,’ the policeman took a deep, exasperated breath, ‘No one died so just go home and don’t tell anyone I saw you or I’ll get it in the neck for not doing ‘owt about it. Don’t kick up the grass, don’t wander about, don’t let anyone else catch you, and don’t do it again.’

Reenie looked earnest, as though she was doing her best to help him, 'Don't do what again, exactly? Is it the horse, or is it me dad?'

Metcalf threw up his hands. 'Right, that's it, I'm going home. You win. You will be the death of someone one day, but not me and not tonight. Get thi' to bed and don't let me see you here again.' He knocked the kickstand back up off his bicycle ready to wend his way to the station to sign off duty for the night as quickly as he possibly could, but he stopped, thought, and asked: 'You're not Reenie Calder, are you?'

Reenie Calder looked him innocently in the eye. 'No. Why?'

He held her gaze, debating once again whether or not to risk the ridicule of the station by taking in a girl, a drunk, and their horse into custody ... No, it wasn't worth the risk; and quietly, he went on his way.

'Oh, well have a nice night, won't you.' Reenie shrugged to no one but herself. Reenie loved a bit of trespassing. She wasn't sure if it was because she liked the thrill of naughtiness from this minor infringement of the land laws, or whether she liked the idea that she was taking a stand against all them rich folks that would seek to prevent a Yorkshireman from being taken home the quickest route in his own county. 'Well Ruffian, it's just me and thee. It's a nice night for it. Now would you look at that sky?'

Reenie drank in the night air, the beauty of the stars, the joy of being on her way home with Ruffian, and the delight of having made a monkey of two adults in one night; and dismounted from her horse. She knew Ruffian only too well, and she knew that although he would put on a brave face, he was too old now to carry two people home. He was becoming more and more useless as a workhorse, and more and more precious as a friend. As she walked alongside him, wishing he could live for ever, her heart broke a little.

Chapter Two

Bess sauntered along behind her sister Mary who was moving at a quick pace, eager to get home to bed. Mary walked awkwardly in the stranger's grey wool coat; she was glad of the warmth, but not the circumstances in which she'd acquired it, and the almost inaudible rustling of the fabric lining felt deafeningly loud to her.

Bess didn't seem to notice the cold, she lost her balance every so often in her silver, t-strap Louis heels, but then with a click against the cobbles, she'd right herself again, scattering some of the ha'penny bag of chip shop scraps in her wake. Chip shop scraps were all they seemed to eat for their tea these days, and on this occasion, Bess was lucky that they'd been passing a chippy that was still open so that Mary could get her something hot on their way home.

Bess offered some to her sister as she trotted faster to try to keep with her. 'Don't you want any? They're lovely and tasty; I love the smell of hot vinegar when it gets into the paper and goes all tangy.'

'You eat them. Mother's not got us anything in for breakfast so that'll have to do you until dinner time at work.'

'I don't mind. I don't get hungry in the morning.'

Mary's wandering mind was interrupted by a call from the house opposite to their own:

'You found her then?'

'Yes, thank you Mrs Grimshaw.' Mary tried to shove her sister unceremoniously through the soot-blackened front door. Leaping at the chance to start a cheery conversation with the neighbour, Bess called over Mary's shoulder:

'Goodnight, Mrs Grimshaw! Thank you for the lovely bread you left—'

'Don't start that, just get inside.' Mary whispered to her sister, 'You'll wake the whole street.'

'You're alright.' The neighbour sucked casually on her old white clay pipe as she stood on her doorstep, placidly waiting for Mary knew-not-what.

She always did that, Mary thought to herself, she was always standing on her front step in her slippers and housecoat smoking on a pipe waiting for nothing in particular when they got back late. It was an unfortunate coincidence that Mrs Grimshaw always seemed to go out for a pipe when Bess was out late, and Mary had gone to fetch her. What must the woman think of the pair of us? Then Mary realised that if Mrs Grimshaw thought her younger sister was a dirty stop out, then she was, in fact, correct. However, Mary preferred to think that her sister was somehow a special case and that it wasn't as bad as it looked. Then she remembered what Bess had told her the preceding week and realised that it was worse.

'I don't know why you won't let me pass the time of day with Mrs Grimshaw.' Bess tottered into the front parlour that opened straight onto the street. She clattered over the bare boards on silver high heeled shoes as silly as herself while her sister lit a slim, farthing candle from the table beside the front door.

'Take your shoes off; you'll wake Mother.' Mary didn't need to look over to the corner of the parlour to know that their mother was asleep under grandad's old army coat in her chair beside the dying embers of the range. As far as Mary could remember their mother had never stayed awake to see that they came home safely because, like Bess, her mother took it for granted that they always would. The reason she slept in the parlour was no late-night vigil for her only children, but the practical solution to the problem of space; since their father died they had been forced to make do with a one-up-one-down. Mary and Bess shared a bed upstairs in the only bedroom. At a squeeze, Mrs Norcliffe might have been able to fit into it with her daughters, but she had moved down to the parlour years ago.

Bess unfastened the dainty t-straps of her shoes and carried them with her up the creaking stairs to their bedroom. She didn't lower her voice because her mother was deaf as a post and wouldn't

hear them, but they were both careful to tread softly, and in stockinged feet, to avoid shaking the floor and waking her that way.

‘I like her ever so much.’ Bess dropped the shoes onto the floor beside the dresser and hung up her coat on the open door of their wardrobe. ‘I think she wishes you’d talk to her more because I know that she’s very fond of you.’

‘Mrs Grimshaw does not like me.’ Mary said it as though it were a fact that she had come to terms with long ago and only shared in passing as she folded the stranger’s coat neatly and laid it in the corner furthest away from her as though it were a dangerous animal that might attack.

‘Oh, but she does!’ Bess’s large, blue baby-doll eyes were wide with concern and love, and she reached out to rub her sister’s shoulder reassuringly, ‘You worry too much, and if you’d just talk to people and let them get to know you—’

‘You’re too trusting.’ Unlike her sister, Mary didn’t have to remove cheap costume jewellery and climbed into their lumpy, old, but nonetheless welcome bed. ‘You’re used to everyone liking you, so you don’t see when you’re getting yourself into trouble.’

Bess had pulled on her nightdress and thrown her silk stockings carelessly over the top of her messily heaped shoes. ‘Your trouble,’ she threw her arms around her sister’s neck to give her a goodnight hug, ‘is that you’re too hard on yourself!’ Bess giggled, kissed her sister on the cheek and then wriggled down beneath the coverlet to sleep.

Mary was sitting up in bed, about to lean over and blow out the candle beside her, but in her exhaustion her mind caught up with what she had seen. Her sister had just taken off a pair of fancy-looking stockings, so Mary picked the candle up to cast the weak light a little higher. ‘Bess?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Are those *silk* stockings?’

‘Mmm.’ Bess hummed the affirmative contentedly into her pillow ‘They’re lovely.’

‘Where did you get them from?’

‘Tommo, he gave them to me as a present at lunchtime when I saw him at the factory gates.’

Mary turned to look down at her younger sister who had already closed her pretty, long-lashed eyes, and put her head on her faded-grey pillow. The candle wax melted down Mary’s knuckles but she ignored it. ‘I cannot believe you sometimes! I thought I told you that you weren’t to see him anymore. If he thinks that he can just—’

Bess pulled herself up in bed for a moment, leant over, and blew out her sister’s candle, plunging them both into darkness. Mary could feel Bess plonking her head back on her pillow and settling down to sleep. She sat up for a moment longer, debating whether or not to waste a match re-lighting it and trying to pursue the subject, but she knew better than to try. Her sister would never see reason, Mary would have to take matters into her own hands.

Diana could hear a church clock striking four o’clock in the morning somewhere down near Queen’s Road. She was standing in the dark, galley kitchen waiting for Tommo to return; she had waited all night. To pass the time Diana had attempted to clean up some of the usual detritus that littered her stepmother’s kitchen. An empty Oxo tin was lying on the flagstones, the crumbs trodden into the floor along with innumerable other ills. Diana had cleaned what she could without waking little Gracie and her stepmother. She had swept up crumbling shards of plaster that had fallen from the damp, mould-blackened walls; she had reset the rusted mouse trap and returned it to its place under the stove that badly needed blacking, and she had folded up the dirty sheets of newspaper that her stepmother had laid out on the kitchen table. None of them ever read much of the pages from the papers these days; the sheets were there to eat their bread and dripping off instead of crockery, and they were always a few days out of date.

As she had folded up the dirty sheets of the *West Yorkshire Gazette*, she’d cast her eye over stories about Italy, Spain, and Germany and fascists. The stories all seemed to weave into one another; the Spanish were fighting their fascist leader, the Germans were bombing the Spanish to stop them

fighting the fascists, the Italians were with the Germans, and Londoners in the East End rioted. They'd shouted, 'They shall not pass' in Spanish when the British Union of Fascists had tried to march through Whitechapel. Fascism was spreading across Europe like the plague, and carefully constructed treaties were toppling all over the world like a flimsy house of cards.

A photograph in one of the newspapers caught Diana's eye; it showed a razor-necked Oswald Mosley in his black, military-style uniform. He wore a black peaked cap like a police sergeant but his was emblazoned with the lightning bolt of the BUF, and the shiny peak was tilted rakishly over his right eye to disguise a slight squint. His uniform had echoes of Great War army officers, and an official status that he clearly longed for, but did not possess. Diana spat on his face before screwing up the damp-softened news sheets and cramming them into the empty grate of the stove. She didn't like leaving anything about Mosley and his lot lying around if she could help it. Her stepbrother had a weakness for joining with the biggest bullies he could find, and she worried that it was only a matter of time before he realised there were even bigger fish than the criminals in Leeds that he so idolised.

Diana laid out fresh newspaper and saw a happier headline: Essie Ackland was singing at the Crystal Palace. Diana's father had loved Essie Ackland, and she still had his wind-up gramophone in the parlour with his collection of records. She was feeling melancholy, and decided to put on one of her father's favourites very quietly in the parlour so that the family upstairs wouldn't hear. She crept through to the room at the front of the house and the cheap and dirty pine shelves that were built into the alcoves either side of the fireplace. In the right-hand alcove, a row of yellowing paper record sleeves stood as a lone reminder of happier times in a better place. Diana gently ran her fingertips along the record jackets that were so familiar to her now that she could tell them by their worn corners without reading their labels. She picked out Essie's recording of 'Goodbye'. It was an old favourite, and as she lowered the needle to the shining black disc, she felt she even remembered the pattern of crackles that preceded that haunting opening bar.

Diana lowered herself into the horsehair armchair that had seen better days, and closed her eyes, imagining she was in the Crystal Palace with her late father.

Her moment was rudely interrupted as she heard Tommo fighting with the lock of their front door. She pulled herself up out of her chair, lovingly returned the record to its sleeve, and its sleeve to its shelf, and returned to the darkness of the kitchen before he'd even managed to get his latchkey into the door. She waited with arms folded.

The house they shared with Tommo's mother was only a two-up-two-down which meant that from where Diana leant against the kitchen sink she could see straight into the hallway. As Tommo entered the house, he could see her in the shadows.

'Wharra you lookin' at?' Tommo was even more disgusting to her than usual. A cigarette butt clung to the wet bottom lip of his wide and ugly mouth. As he sneered at her, he revealed dirty, crooked teeth. It was times like these that she pitied Bess; the girl could do immeasurably better than Tommo Cartwright.

'You didn't pay the rent.' Diana walked through to the parlour but didn't get very close before the fumes of beer and gin on her brother's stinking breath hit her.

'You pay it for a change. What do you think I am? Yer bleeding ...' Tommo waved a skinny wrist around '... money machine.'

'I buy the food. Where's the rent money.'

'I spent it.'

Diana knew that he wouldn't be short of money. It might not be his, but he always had some. 'Are you telling me you've got nothing? Are you telling me you're no better than anyone else on this street?' She knew that would rile him and if he had any money it would soon show itself just to prove his superiority; Diana had been pressing her stepbrother's buttons for years and it was second nature now, undignified though it might be.

Tommo pulled himself up an inch or two taller and with drunken slur said, 'I'm never penniless.' He reached into his various pockets and pulled out a crumpled, damp pound note and a collection of coins and detritus, all of which he threw onto the floor disdainfully.

Their rent was ten shillings, and Diana had no intention of taking any more or less than that. She bent down and picked it up coin by coin in silence and with as much dignity as she could muster. 'What's this?' she said, unfurling a slip of paper.

Tommo sniffed and snatched it out of her outstretched hand. 'That's me being clever, that is.'

Diana had seen what it was; a betting slip from an illegal bookmakers that had been written out by hand. They'd been taking bets on whether or not the coronation of the new King was still going to happen in a few months' time, and Tommo had put on five shillings against. 'How is that you being clever?'

'I saw it in the paper, didn't I? Everyone's saying it won't happen. He'll off himself before then. That's how them toffs get out of a jam; no brains.'

Diana didn't say anything. There was no point telling him that he was disgusting for laying bets that another human being would take his own life; king or not. Diana turned to walk up the stairs. 'Keep your voice down,' she told him, 'I don't want you waking the house.'

Diana returned upstairs to the room she shared with little Gracie. All the houses in their street were two-up-two-down, but being the middle house in Vickerman Street, they had one small extra attic room that jutted out of the row of rooftops; to Diana, it was a lifesaver. When her stepmother had offered it to Diana, she had been apologetic about the damp, the smallness, the drafts and the mice, but Diana had been too relieved to care. Diana was still glad not to have to share a room with her stepmother; her stepmother was a kind woman, but she snored like a drain.

Diana went to her single small window that looked out over the town; it wouldn't be light for hours. The street lamps picked out the undulations of the valley, the warren of tightly packed tiny rooftops, silhouettes of enormous factory chimneys rose up like an industrial forest of brick-built trees giving life and death to the town simultaneously, with their jobs and their smoke.

Diana couldn't go back to bed now; she was too wide awake, and she didn't want to wake Gracie. Now that she had money to pay the rent, that was one battle over, but as soon as she won one battle there was always another. Life was a never-ending series of battlegrounds, and she had no one to fight by her side. She missed her father so much it hurt; he had been her sole champion, and he had never taken any of Tommo's nonsense. Diana remembered the first time Tommo had talked about getting himself involved with the Leeds gangs, and her father had locked him in the coal shed until he had agreed not to go looking for trouble. What would her father say if he could see her now? Living in Ethel's attic room, the house full of stolen goods that Tommo was fencing to his Leeds connections, and not a hope of ever escaping. Her father would have laughed Tommo to scorn for giving himself a ridiculous name like 'The Blade', and he'd have made sure that Diana didn't have to live in a house with stolen goods inside. Diana wished her dad was there; she wished he'd been there to help her save Gracie from the dirt, the damp and the life they were having to live.

It was the tenth of October, and when Reenie woke up she remembered that it was Saturday and today was her birthday. Her little brother's present to her was to muck out Ruffian's shed, so she didn't have to and her sister had promised to bake the bread. They had both got up early to do her jobs and had given her the bed to herself, and she was delighted.

As she lay, like a starfish, across the lumpy mattress that she had shared with Katherine since as long as they could remember, she planned her day. Reenie liked to plan her day so that she could get the absolute most out of it she possibly could. Today she thought she'd bring forward wash day; nothing gave her a feeling of achievement quite like the sight of sheets being bleached by the sun on a dry day. All those girls she'd known at school who had gone off to get fancy jobs in shops, and tea houses, and the coveted piece-work places at the sweet factories, they couldn't possibly know the true satisfaction of a successfully completed wash day. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

She was better off at home; those stuck up girls could keep their stinking jobs, she had enough to do. And as for going into service; she didn't even want to think about that.

Reenie couldn't help dwelling on the words of the Salvation Army lady that she had met the night before; it was too late for Reenie to go back to school now that she was sixteen, but her mother was always nagging her about secretarial classes, or teaching herself shorthand. 'If you don't do something with your life you'll end up living from week to week in the pawnbrokers like your Uncle Mal,' her mum was always saying. Reenie had just never been any good at school work or anything like that; she would always prefer to be useful at home than useless in a classroom. She didn't necessarily like all of the jobs that she did at home (the ones she particularly disliked she had farmed out to her siblings that day), but working at home gave her a sense of purpose, and that was what she wanted. Reenie did have a dream, but she tried not to think about it; better to be useful.

'Reenie!' Her mother called from the kitchen, 'Reenie, are you up yet?'

'It's my birthday! I don't have to do 'owt!'

'You've got a present!'

'I know, and I'm making the most of it!'

'You've got to come down here and open it!'

Reenie sat up. Open her present? She never had presents that you opened; there'd sometimes be something for one of the younger ones, but she was sixteen now and past all that stuff. Reenie threw off the thick, warm layers of blankets that she'd been hiding in like a cocoon, and fumbled for her father's old slippers and her coat to put on over her nightshirt so that she didn't freeze on her way down to the kitchen. Even though it was only October, it was still Halifax in October. She ran a comb through her shoulder-length, bright auburn hair and tied it back hastily hoping that if she did it herself, her mother wouldn't pounce on her with a brush while she tried to eat her breakfast. She turned and neatened the bedclothes, disappointed that she was having to leave her warm cocoon so early, and then made her way down the stairs that she'd swept only the day before.

'There you are! I thought you'd never get up. Sit down and open this.'

Reenie looked down at the scrubbed kitchen table where an ominous-looking parcel was waiting for her, wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. Reenie sidled into the middle of the bench underneath it and looked up at her family, trying to conceal her confusion. She lifted the parcel gingerly, the crisply ironed newspaper still warm against her fingertips; she could tell immediately what it was. She wondered what precious object they had sold or pawned to raise the money to buy her something so unnecessary, and how long it would take them to buy it back. She hoped they hadn't pawned the kettle because she wanted her tea.

Reenie turned over the parcel in her hands and made a show for her family of being excited and surprised, but out of the corner of her eye, she was scanning the kitchen to see what was missing. The ramshackle, low-ceilinged, worn-out old farmhouse kitchen looked unchanged: the freshly blackened range was hot enough to be boiling the kettle (which was a minute or two off singing); the pink china that her mother saved for best was drying on the wooden rack beside the sink that was big enough to bathe in. The old pine table and benches, discoloured with age and use and her daily scrubbing, were all where they should be. Out of the windows, she could see Ruffian chewing up the paddock, and wondered how much longer he could last with no money for the vet.

'Are you checking on Ruffian!' Her brother had caught her furtive glance out of the window and was outraged. 'I told you I'd see to him, and I will, I just—'

'All right, that's enough you two, don't start.' Reenie's mother went to see to the kettle. 'Reenie's got to hurry up this morning. Reenie, open your present, love.'

'Why have I got to hurry up?'

'Just open your present, love, there's a good lass.'

Reenie tentatively pulled at the string of the parcel. She was almost certain she knew what it was before she opened it, but as the inky paper fell away, she furrowed her brow in puzzlement. There,

as she had expected, was a ½ lb tin of toffees that they couldn't afford, but what she hadn't expected was the envelope stuck to the top of the tin with her name typed on a typewriter; they didn't know anyone with a typewriter. These weren't cheap toffees either, these were Mackintosh's Celebrated Toffees. Even the tin, decorated with dancing carnival figures, and a lid edged in red and gold, was alive with magic.

'Go on, keep going, open that too.'

Reenie was stunned into silence, and she was about to open the lid of the tin when her younger sister said: 'No, silly, open the envelope.' Reenie could see that Katherine was even more excited than her, and that her mother must have let her in on the surprise.

John looked around in annoyance as he realised he'd been kept out of their circle, but his mother shushed him.

'Is this what I think it is?' Reenie, usually so loud and confident was quiet and nervous now. She turned the white, business-like envelope over in her work-worn fingers and took a deep breath.

'Only one way to find out, love. But best hurry, eh?' Her mother passed a clean table knife towards her daughter, and Reenie picked it up and slid it along the gummed seal.

There was a long silence as Reenie held her breath not daring to look at the page, and then she read aloud the first official letter addressed to her in her short life. 'Dear Miss Calder, We are pleased to offer you the position of Seasonal Production Line Assistant in our Halifax factory ...' Reenie gasped in surprise and delight. 'Oh, Mum! I've got a job! I've got a job! I'm going to Mackintosh's! I'm going to Toffee Town! They've given me a job!'

'I know, love; I wrote to them. They got a reference from Miss Dukes at your school, and a reference from the vicar, and we had such a time keeping it a secret in case it didn't come off, and then they wrote and said they wanted you to start right away.'

'Right away? Well, when right away?'

'Today! So go and wash your neck and get a wiggle on. Your birthday present from me is a job.'

'Don't I have to have an interview?'

'What sort of job do you think it is? Chief Accountant? You're not going into the offices; you're packing cartons, and every day's your interview. Be faster than everyone else, and they'll keep you until Christmas.'

'If I'm faster than anyone they've ever had do you think they might keep me longer than—'

'Now don't go getting attached; you know what you're like. Just be glad that you've got until Christmas and enjoy it. It's not everyone that gets into Mack's.'

'But if I were really, really fast and they'd had loads of girls leave at Christmas for Christmas weddings—'

'Christmas weddings? How many droves of girls are you expecting to leave for Christmas weddings?'

'Well, just say if there were a lot, do you think there's a chance that I might not have to go into service?'

Mrs Calder dried her hands on her apron and sat down at the edge of the table. 'Now listen, you three, I know you all talk like goin' into service is the worst thing in the world, and I know I used to tell you some terrible stories of what it was like in my day. Being in service now isn't like it used to be; you hardly ever have to live-in, and they all send their laundry out. Look, what I'm saying is: if any of you do have to go into service I think you'll have a wonderful time.' Reenie's mother tried to appeal to Reenie's imagination, 'Reenie, what if you went into service in a little place, and then a fine lady visited and spotted you, and you got to go to work in a big house and make friends with all the quality? Can you imagine?'

Reenie's tight-lipped smile gave her away; she was trying to agree with her mother, but in her heart of hearts Reenie desperately didn't want to. Reenie had hope now, and it was a letter from Mackintosh's.

The overlooker who was showing the new girls their place marched them through the corridor of the factory walking two-by-two in what she called a 'crocodile'. As far as Reenie could tell the overlookers were to the factories what the teachers were to her old school, and Reenie was immediately in awe of them. The overlookers decided where the girls went, which jobs they worked at, and how long for. Everyone wanted to stay in the overlookers good books.

'No talkin' at the back! Listen wi' your ears, not wi' your mouths! You are going to walk through here every day for the next several years if you're lucky, but no one is going to show you where to go after today, so remember where you're goin.'

Reenie followed dutifully, memorising the plan of the building in her head: up through the old Albion Mill, along a wide corridor where she could see the railway line running parallel, down three flights of stairs and up another two. By Reenie's reckoning this older girl, who'd collected them at the gates, seemed to be doubling back on herself to make them go a longer route. 'Excuse me!' Reenie was a third of the way down the crocodile of obedient new girls, but she was near enough to the front to shout naive, well-meant questions. 'Why did you take us down two flights of stairs and then up another two? Is there not some—'

'No questions, you're here to go where you're told.'

'Are you lost, though,' Reenie tried to sound kind because she couldn't imagine that this girl enjoyed being lost, 'because if you're lost, we could just stop someone and ask them for directions. Excuse me!' Reenie called out to two gentlemen who were passing them in the echoing, whitewashed corridor. 'Sorry to bother you,' she paused for a happy moment as she realised that she recognised one of them, 'but we're on our way to the—'

'We are not stopping! Follow me, please.' The older girl tried to hurry the girls along, but the older of the two gentlemen raised his hand politely to indicate that they should all stay.

'Good morning, ladies.' He made a slight bow of his head in a style that was almost Victorian. He was an older man, perhaps getting close to retirement; thick silver hair, bold silver moustache, dark blue neatly cut suit. 'I am Major Fergusson, and this is my colleague Peter McKenzie. Is this your first day at Mack's?'

A chorus of 'Yes, sir' rang through the corridor and the crocodile line of girls all fixed their eyes on the young man beside Major Fergusson.

'Well, isn't that nice. And what is your name?'

'Reenie Calder, sir.' Reenie tried to look at him as she spoke, but her eyes darted to Peter to see if he would recognise her. She willed him to recognise her.

'And where are you going to, Reenie?'

'Don't answer him!' The girl in charge was determined to get them away, 'They're the Time and Motion men, and you don't talk to the Time and Motion men without your Union present.'

In the face of such obvious rudeness, Major Fergusson and Peter remained pleasant and calm; this was a sign, Reenie thought, of what her mother called 'Good Breeding'.

'We are here to help everyone find a way of doing their jobs more easily,' the Major said to Reenie, 'sometimes we conduct tests on the way the line works and in those circumstances, we have to work with the Unions to make sure that we are all helping each other. You can all talk to us any time, there's no need to be shy, or to ask permission of your Union.'

'I think that's quite enough—' their guide was silenced with another polite bow of the Major's hand. He clearly out-ranked her but didn't enjoy showing it. The Major smiled at Reenie and permitted her to speak:

'Can we ask you for directions?' Reenie didn't like to contradict her guide, but she suspected that the other girl needed some help. Reenie, in her naivety, believed she'd be doing the girl a kindness if she did the asking for her. 'It's just an overlooker is taking us to our new workstations, and we've been told to memorise the route that we're going along because we'll need to go this way every day, but I don't think it's right.'

‘What makes you think that?’ The Major was either ignorant of the girls gazing wistfully into Peter’s smoke-grey eyes, or he was used to it.

Reenie didn’t need time to think, ‘Well, we came in by green painted double doors at the end of the old mill. We passed the timekeeping office where there were three commissionaires having their breakfast butties; then we went under a staircase where some fella in shiny shoes was smokin’ and chattin’ up a lass. Then we went out a single door – which was right small for all of us – into a yard where there was some men unloading sacks of sugar off a waggon. At the other end of the yard there was a sign that said *no waiting*, and we went past that into a new block where we went up three flights of stairs, then down a big corridor with a pine floor and big window frame that smelled of new paint. From there we walked down two flights of stairs just back there through that door which you can see from the window is loopin’ us back to Albion Mills, so why can’t we just stay in Albion Mills in the first place? Are we lost?’

The Major gave Peter another knowing, amused look; he supposed that this rigmarole the guide was putting them through was more imaginative than sending them for ‘a long stand’.

‘You remembered all of that?’ the Major seemed to admire Reenie for it, and the other girls were intensely jealous of the beautiful, wide-eyed smile that Peter gave her.

‘Well, it has only just happened. I’m not a total doyle.’

‘Young lady,’ the Major was addressing Reenie again, but eyeing her guide with suspicion, ‘you mentioned that you had already met your overlooker. Where did she go after you met her?’

‘Well this is her, this is our overlooker.’

The guide gulped the air like a fish and stammered out defensively, ‘I’m the overlooker of the new girls on their first day when they go through to their new places. It’s very easy for them to wander about and get lost and someone needs to give them a firm—’

The Major ignored her and spoke directly to Reenie. ‘overlookers all have coloured collars on their white overalls. They are either red, blue, yellow, or green. If you see someone with a white overall, you know that they are the same rank and file as you.’ He didn’t point out that their guide’s collar was white, or that she’d been deliberately taking them a longer route so that they would be lost for the whole of their first week at Mack’s; he didn’t need to. ‘Now, let’s see if we can’t get you all on to your first day on the double. Peter, we’ve got time for a detour this morning, haven’t we?’

Peter nodded brusquely.

‘I think I can guess where you’re all going to. Quality Street line, by any chance?’ the Major asked Reenie.

‘Yes, how did you know that?’

‘It’s all hands on deck at Quality Street, my dear. Christmas is coming!’

Reenie and the girls followed the Major to their new line, and although Reenie caught Peter’s eye, he didn’t speak to her. He smiled, and then he smiled again, but he didn’t speak.

When Diana arrived at the toffee factory gates that Saturday morning, tired from very little sleep the night before, she was disgruntled to be stopped by the watchman. Diana tended to go in by one of the lesser-used entrances on the Bailey Hall road to avoid the undignified crush at the start and end of each shift. It added a few minutes to her journey, but Diana didn’t care; dignity was more important to her than an inconvenience. The morning was crisp but not cold; the Indian summer of 1936, but she still wore her father’s coat and her plain work shoes. A light wave of her ashes and caramel-coloured hair fell over tired eyes, and she slipped through the factory gate with her head down, her collar up, and her hands in her pockets like any other working day.

‘Diana Moore?’ The factory watchman had stepped out of his gatehouse cabin with a note in his hand.

‘You know I am.’ She said with an exasperated sigh.

‘Message for you.’ He handed over an internal memo envelope and went back to his business; answering queries from men who’d turned up on spec looking for work.

Diana moved out of the stream of other workers and found a quiet recess in a soot-blackened brick wall where she could stand apart and read the message. The note was evidently from someone who knew which gate she always used, or they'd left a note at every gate; either way she felt a slight discomfort about it. Diana was well known, but she didn't like to be *that* well known.

Mackintosh's Women's Employment Department

October 10th, 1936

Dear Diana,

Please present yourself at the office of Mrs Wilke's on your arrival today.

Yours sincerely,

Miss Watson

Secretary to the Women's Employment Manager

Diana realised that Mrs Wilkes of the Women's Employment Department was waiting for her. This was unusual, but it didn't worry her; she knew that her job was not at risk. Diana knew that the factory couldn't run half the lines without her. This wasn't arrogance on her part; arrogance would mean that she enjoyed her position. In reality, Diana simply didn't care anymore. There had been a time, years ago when she had relished ruling the roost, but now the daily pettiness was exhausting, and keeping the younger girls in line was just one more battle for her.

Diana assumed that she was going to be asked to use her influence, unofficially, with some wayward girl or other; perhaps put down a group of troublemakers before they could put their own jobs at risk. It happened often enough. The senior management of the Mackintosh's business had realised long ago that it was more efficient to allow the girls to manage themselves, and Diana would occasionally be invited to the grand old directors' floor of the Art Deco office block to be unofficially asked to 'Have a word.' She never met the directors themselves; they were all down in Norwich at the newly acquired Caley factory. Rumour had it that they thought Norwich was more refined and they were moving there *en masse* to run the business remotely. It didn't make any difference to Diana, they sometimes came down to the factory floor to talk to one another while pointing out different machines, but they didn't speak to her or any of the other girls.

She folded the note and slipped it into the inside pocket of her old coat and began weaving her way in and out of the workers, wagons, and factory outhouses to the opulent main office building, and her interview with Mrs Wilkes.

Diana knew her way to Mrs Wilkes' office; she'd had to go there nearly six years previously when a different Women's Employment Manager had been in place. Diana had gone there to make her case for an extended leave of absence to care for a sick relative in the country, and whether the manager at that time had believed her or not, she'd argued persuasively and they'd let her go. Diana went in through the deco door decorated with M's, and up the six flights of winding white stairs with crisscrossed iron bannisters like giant strings of cat's cradle. The upper landing opened onto a hexagonal hallway, lined with the doors to the director's offices. She didn't want to linger long, her objective was to get in and out and back to work as quickly as possible.

In the centre of the hallway was a large antique hexagonal table, decorated with an intricate pattern of walnut veneer. High above, there was a sparkling, domed ceiling in every colour of glass, as though the hallway were a tin of cellophane-wrapped toffees bursting into the Halifax sky. Diana marvelled at the extravagance of it.

Following the narrow corridor at the other end of the hexagon, Diana found the door of Mrs Wilke's office. It looked like it would be less out of place in a stately home, oak-panels were decorated alternately with an acorn, oak leaf or the letter 'M'. The Mackintosh family were proud of the acorn from which their great oak of a business had grown.

Diana knocked three sharp raps and then waited.

'Come!'

Diana realised that although she knew Mrs Wilkes name well enough, she didn't think she had ever seen her and was surprised by what waited for her on the other side of the door. A straight-backed woman in a cream silk blouse looked up from paperwork on her grand desk, but she was not an ogre like her overlooker Frances Roth; she had the potential to be far less easy to manipulate. Diana made immediate assumptions about this Mrs Wilkes: grammar school girl, father a doctor, comfortable upbringing but not so comfortable that she didn't have to work hard at school, turned down an offer or two of marriage from an earnest young man because they didn't have enough money. Probably thinks all the factory girls are no more than beasts of burden, or wayward children.

Mrs Wilkes was undoubtedly a woman who had always possessed good looks; she was perhaps ten or fifteen years older than Diana. She still had a trim figure, and her neat, glossy hair framed her face in a way that enhanced its symmetry.

Diana thought that she could respect Mrs Wilkes, but she didn't know if she could really trust her. Mrs Wilkes didn't mix with the factory floor workforce; she was strictly an office manager and rarely ventured out of the smart Art Deco tower. Diana was more accustomed to life in the old mill buildings where her co-workers made the chocolate and toffee. Diana didn't know Mrs Wilkes' first name; she knew that the woman wasn't married because married women weren't permitted to keep their jobs at Mackintosh's Toffee Factory. But then again, married women weren't allowed to keep their jobs anywhere after they married, unless there was another war.

'Mrs' was a courtesy title afforded to women of an overlooker's grade or above, although Diana sometimes had girls on her own line try to call her 'Mrs' as a show of respect for her unofficial position of authority. Each time she refused the title and instead was known by the number of her position on the line: Number Four.

Mrs Wilkes unnerved Diana, as she politely gestured to the seat in front of her desk, 'Miss Moore?'

Diana nodded; waiting for more as she lowered herself into the fancy wooden chair. To be called 'Miss' by a superior rather than by her Christian name unsettled her; it was unexpectedly respectful.

'I'll come straight to the point as I'm sure we both have plenty of other people's work to be getting on with: we would like to offer you the position of overlooker on the new Toffee Penny line.'

Diana gave a wry smile; so this was what they wanted her for. Although it was a surprise to be called all the way up to the Employment Manager's office, it wasn't a surprise to be offered the promotion. She asked, with seeming politeness, 'Is it that time of year again?'

'Excuse me?' Mrs Wilkes shifted the balance of her delicately rimmed glasses, as though the very slight bite of sarcasm she'd detected had been a trick of her eyesight and not her hearing.

Diana regretted being flippant; it lost her her dignity. She explained, with a slightly apologetic tone this time, 'I'm offered an overlooker's job about once a year. You'll have read my employment file, I'm sure.'

'Yes; that's why I asked to see you personally this time. I hoped that we could help you to overcome any obstacles that might be preventing you from taking the position.' She paused. Diana suddenly had a horrible feeling that this woman knew her secret and that this was a trap, but she gave nothing away. 'The line that you presently work on is making, wrapping, and packing the new Quality Street sweets by hand, but you know as well as I do that hand-making is only ever intended to be temporary in a factory; by Christmas the Engineers and the Time and Motion Department will have the new, mechanised line ready and you'll be able to do your job with the help of a machine, but it will be a very different job. There will be other hand-making positions that we can move you to, but those will be temporary too. Wouldn't this be an ideal time to think about your future? Wouldn't you like to take a step up?'

'As you'll have seen from my records, I always turn down any offer of promotion.'

‘I understand in the past you’ve had family circumstances that have made you unable to accept the position, but it has not gone unnoticed that you have been performing several of the duties of overlooker without formal recognition and if your family circumstances have now changed—’

‘My family circumstances have not changed.’ Diana took in a deep breath and tried to disguise her weariness as she repeated the same words she’d recited for the last six years, ‘Although I’m grateful for the compliment you’re paying me by offering me promotion I must on this occasion decline. I have a young halfsister who I care for in the evenings, and if I took an overlooker’s job I’d have to spend my evenings in Union meetings, or employment department reviews, or typing up reports and shift patterns.’

Mrs Wilkes removed her fashionable, tortoiseshell-framed spectacles as though to indicate that she were now talking to Diana woman-to-woman, and not in a professional capacity, ‘But Diana, you have to think of your own advancement and your own prospects. Think of the extra money you’d be earning if you became an overlooker. You’d more than be able to pay for someone to care for your halfsister in the evenings.’

‘I prefer to care for her myself, thank you.’

‘Then think of the things that you could buy for her with the extra money, wouldn’t you like to earn more to help your family?’

Diana thought about the money that her stepbrother had thrown onto the floor that morning as though it were nothing to him and that she had picked up so she could pay the landlord’s man. Money was a problem, but it wasn’t her biggest problem. ‘I’m very fast, and when I’m working with girls who are as fast as me, I can make good piece rates, and that’s enough for my family.’

‘You said ‘when’. Is there a problem?’

It was Diana’s turn to be confused. ‘I don’t understand you.’

‘You said that *when* you’re working with girls who are fast, you can make good rates.’ Mrs Wilkes was determined not to let Diana get on with her job; she was determined to dig in. ‘Are you saying that the girls that you are with now are too slow? Can changes be made on the line—’

Diana suddenly wondered what she was getting at. *Perhaps she’s seen something in me that she can use to build her own status?* ‘No, they are very good, but we’re on a temporary hand making line which not everyone can do fast. When we move to our next line, we’ll be faster.’

There was a silence, and Diana wanted to leave, but she could sense that Mrs Wilkes wasn’t finished with her.

Mrs Wilkes tried a different tack, ‘There are several very senior managers at the firm who think that you could become a manager yourself one day and that taking the position as overlooker would be the first step. Major Fergusson has watched your progress through all the years since you joined us and he feels that you are more than ready for advancement.’

‘I have a great deal of respect for the Major; he’s a kind man and he tries to make time for the Halifax factory floor workers. But you know as well as I do that everyone calls him Major Misfits, and if he takes anyone under his wing, it’s because they’re a strange bird. I don’t like the idea that the managers here think I’m a misfit.’

‘No one thinks you’re a misfit, Miss Moore.’ The Employment Manager said, ‘You’re an educated young woman, I can tell that—’

Diana snapped, ‘No. No, I’m not.’ She pulled up her chin imperiously; the Employment Manager had touched a nerve. ‘I left school as fast as I could. And for the record, telling girls that they’re clever and that they’re not living up to their cleverness doesn’t help them, it just tells them that there’s one more thing they’ve got to feel rotten about. I’m exhausted, and the last thing I need is some woman in shiny brogues telling me that on top of everything else I’ve got to do I’ve got to live up to my cleverness as well. All the girls on my line are clever; it’s just that people with posh accents think talking Yorkshire means you’re daft.’ Diana got up to leave, and as she pushed the chair back into its original position, Mrs Wilkes said quietly:

‘I heard you discussing European politics with one of the other girls.’

This took Diana by surprise. She couldn’t imagine this woman deigning to come down to the factory floor long enough to overhear anything, but Diana had an answer for her. ‘My father was a Union man. You’ll find a lot of the girls around here are very learned thanks to the Union. They have free public lectures and a library. Will that be all?’

Mrs Wilkes rose from her desk to calmly show Diana out of her office. ‘And what would your father say if he knew that you were turning down the opportunity for advancement; to better yourself?’

‘He would understand.’ Diana said, biting her tongue. ‘And he would tell me that the job doesn’t better me; I better the job.’ With that Diana left, stalking down the corridor in a foul mood and with her head held high, not stopping to think why one of the Mackintosh’s brass nobs should be taking such an interest in her and her conversations with the other girls.

Reenie had taken her mother’s words to heart, and while the other new girls were concentrating on what their supervisor was telling them, Reenie was watching the woman’s hands and learning far more about how to work fast. It was a school day like no other; Reenie and her new factory classmates were in a room as vast as a cathedral, noisy as a day at the races, and as exciting as anywhere that Reenie had ever been. A conveyor belt ran down the centre of the room, flanked on either side by girls who were older than her and who, Reenie felt, were so much more sophisticated. They scooped up sweets with uncanny speed and somehow, beneath their hands they magically covered them in sparkling foil and then red and green cellophane and then dropped them into a box ready to move on. Hovering on nimble, rubber plimsolled feet by the wrapping girls’ sides were white-aproned girls of Reenie’s age who were waiting to take the filled boxes and place them onto the next part of the production line.

‘Your job, girls,’ their supervisor called over the din of the workroom. ‘is to keep the wrapping girls supplied with everything they need to wrap the chocolates, and move the chocolates on when their tubs are full; and you have to be as fast as you can be.’ As if to emphasise the point the supervisor stressed the next words one at a time. ‘If you are too slow you will slow down the production line and people won’t get their sweets when they go to the shops. Do you understand?’

A chorus of ‘Yes, Miss’ rose up into the chocolate and strawberry scented air, and Reenie scanned the room for the fastest workers. There, at the back of the room, was her new role model. A girl a year or two older than her and a foot taller was supplying two wrappers at the same time by picking up multiple boxes with her fingers. Reenie had seen the landlady at The Old Cock and Oak do the same thing with empty pint glasses, and Reenie made a mental note to practice with flowerpots as soon as she got home. If she could build up the strength in her fingers, she could do the same thing. But as Reenie was watching, the taller girl caught her eye and shook her head. A second girl, like a prettified miniature copy of the first, appeared from the door at the far corner of the workroom and scurried to her place beside her older sister; she picked up where the other had left off, but not half as quickly, and they both looked round furtively to check if their switchover had been seen. The taller girl was no longer carrying multiple boxes at once, but she was looking daggers at Reenie.

Reenie realised that she had seen something that she wasn’t meant to see, and her eyes snapped back to the supervisor. ‘You go to the cages and fetch a box of the foils and put them on her right. Then you go back to the cages and fetch a box of cellophanes and put that behind the foils, before you pick up the tub on her left that she has filled and add it to the pile on the pallet nearest you at the edge of the room.’ The young supervisor was about to use that trick again of stressing every word with a pause in between, Reenie could tell. ‘When you place that tub on the pallet you must pull up the flaps at the side of the tub,’ the supervisor picked up a tub and demonstrated in a manner as exaggerated as her voice. ‘You must fold them over, like so, and then you must make sure that they overlap, like so. Does anyone not understand?’

‘No, Miss.’ All the new girls sang together.

Reenie dared to raise her hand, ‘Please, Miss?’

‘What don’t you understand?’ The young supervisor was abrupt, but not unkind as she frowned on Reenie.

‘Why don’t the girls pick up two boxes at a time to go faster?’ Reenie mimed the action that she had seen with her fingers.

The young supervisor couldn’t suppress a laugh, ‘Well you’ll go far. What’s your name, love?’

‘Reenie Calder.’ Reenie wasn’t quite sure what she’d said to amuse, but she thought she regretted saying it.

‘Well, Reenie Calder, if you can carry more than one box at a time, and keep it up for a whole shift, and do it every shift for two weeks, I’ll double your wages. For every day that you can do the work of two girls, I’ll give you the pay of two girls. But don’t get your hopes up, love, you’ll have your work enough cut out for you keeping up with one job, let alone two.’

One or two of Reenie’s classmates had looked excited at the promise of double pay, but most of the girls had smirked at Reenie’s mistake. These were girls whose brothers and sisters and fathers already worked in the factory and who knew how hard it was to keep up the speed of everyone else, let alone double it. Reenie was a little embarrassed, but she was also privately sceptical; if she could manage her father and a horse at the same time, and if she got in enough practice to strengthen her hands, she thought she stood a fair chance at making good speed. Little did Reenie realise then that her speed would get her into more trouble than she could handle on her own.

Chapter Three

‘Mother!’ Reenie threw down her old canvas shoulder bag as she banged open the back door and bounded into their farmhouse kitchen. ‘It’s wonderful! I love it! It’s brilliant!’

Reenie’s mother was slicing up a freshly baked loaf at their kitchen table, and the house was filled with the welcoming aromas of warm bread, spicy sausage stew, and herb dumplings. ‘Alright, calm down, no need to worry the livestock.’ Reenie’s mother was amused by her daughter’s enthusiasm, she put down the bread knife and dusted the flour from her hands. ‘There are sheep in the far field that can hear you all the way from here, and they’re taking fright.’

‘Oh mother, you should have seen it.’ Reenie was in raptures as she hung her coat up on the aged brass hook inside the door. ‘It’s like something from a film or a novel. The girls are so glamorous, and—’

‘Glamorous? Factory girls?’ Mrs Calder moved to close the kitchen door that Reenie had left open, but her daughter darted out again and started looking through the dead summer plants that were drooping, brown and dry under the kitchen window in their boxes. Reenie carried on talking happily and enthusiastically to her mother in the open doorway all the while as though there were nothing out of the ordinary in her search of their little kitchen garden in the corner of the farmyard.

‘No, they were, they were glamorous. They’ve all got lovely manners, and they tie their turbans up in this fancy way at the front, so it makes them look all haughty, like. And I’m going to be in the strawberry cream room at the end where they wrap the sweets by hand and you should see them, Mother, they move like lightning. I’m going to be the fastest, but I need to practice with flowerpots,’ Reenie parted some out-of-season honeysuckle vines and called back to her mother. ‘Can you spare any?’

‘Spare any what?’ Mrs Calder was used to her daughter’s mildly eccentric schemes and took it all in her stride, leaning against the kitchen doorframe with her arms folded and her hair tied up in a knot on top of her head.

‘Flowerpots! I need flowerpots! It’s essential to my plan. I’m doing what Donna, the landlady does at The Old Cock and Oak.’

Reenie’s mother started to understand why her daughter was poking about among last spring’s bulbs beside the kitchen door. ‘Is this what the other girls do? Have they told you something about flowerpots? Because it might be a wind-up, you know. I warned you about the overlookers sending you for a ‘long stand’, you remember?’

‘No, it’s my idea,’ Reenie had picked up a couple of larger terracotta pots and tested them for weight, covering her hands in soil and slimy green moss in the process, before discarding them and reaching for another. ‘I’ve been watching everyone on the line, and I can see how I can get to be the fastest, it was my idea.’

‘Well I’m glad you want to be fast, but I don’t think you need to be the fastest. At least, not while you’re new. You might put a lot of people’s noses out of joint.’

‘But why?’ Reenie was waving their small stone gnome around as though the answers might fall out of it if she shook it hard enough. ‘They said that if I work fast, then the girl I work beside gets better piece rates, so I thought that if I was the fastest, then—’

‘Come and sit in here,’ Mrs Calder beckoned her into the warm kitchen. ‘Come on. Leave those plant pots alone, they’re hibernating. Sit at the table while I put the kettle on.’ Without saying anything, Mrs Calder took a wet cloth to her daughter’s hands while steering her in the direction of the rough old kitchen table.

Reenie didn’t try to resist but did complain. ‘Mother!’

Her mother ignored her objection and carried on settling her down into a chair, closing the kitchen door, putting the kettle on and taking out a teacup for each of them. ‘Now, I think you’re

right; they will be glad you're quick, but if you try to do things differently, then you might get their backs up. Do you remember what I'm always telling you about the difference between speaking up and being outspoken?'

Reenie turned on the dining chair, making it creak. 'But this isn't even speaking, this is working without talking.'

'The day you work without talking is the day the King gives the crown to your dad. I know you, you'll be a non-stop chatterer.' Mrs Calder put the teacups down on the table and reached up to the top shelf of the dresser to bring down Reenie's birthday tin of toffees. She thought that her daughter might like one with her cup of tea. 'Now listen, love, it's the same thing. When you're here on the farm with your father you're used to being praised for speaking up if you see a way of doing something quicker or better; that pulley you and him put up outside the barn has saved a deal of work, and that was a great idea of yours. But in the factory, there are bound to be a lot of people who want to keep things the same way that they've always been, even if there's a better way of doing things. You need to be just a tiny bit better than average to start with, and then, when you've got used to the place and when they've got used to you there'll be time enough to start improving things little by little so's no one notices.'

Reenie's eyes lit up when she saw the brightly coloured toffee tin sitting beside their blue and brown teapot. She was not in a bad mood, she thought to herself, she was just puzzled. 'But *why* wouldn't someone want things done better? If they're going to make more piece rates—'

Reenie's mother sat down beside her daughter and squeezed her hand affectionately. She didn't like the way places worked any more than Reenie did, but she thought her daughter would fare better if she went in with her eyes open to what they were like. 'It's because everyone has their own little area. It's the same in department stores, big houses, and in the Union. There are always folk who like to be a big fish in a small pond. You might think to yourself that everyone's like you, and everyone wants to be helpful and kind and friendly and do their best, but you don't realise yet how rare you are. Some people just want to be in charge of their own little kingdom, even if it's only the linen cupboard of Shibden Hall!' Mrs Calder poured out a delicious, steaming hot cup of Indian tea for Reenie, black enough to tar a fence and handed it to her saying, conspiratorially, 'I knew a girl who was in service there, the Housekeeper was very territorial over her linen cupboard.'

'Why would she be territorial over a linen cupboard?'

'Because she was in charge of it, it was something that was hers to control. Sometimes when people feel like they haven't got much control over their lives, they'll try to exert it over their little territory at work. It might be the tool shed in the People's Park if you're the head gardener; or it might be the telegram machine in the Post Office if you're the Post Mistress, or on your production line there might be a shift manager who prefers to have all the ideas and doesn't like them coming from other people.'

'But what if they don't have any ideas?' Reenie's marmalade cat crouched by her side, indicating that it wanted to jump into her lap, so she pushed her chair backwards an inch to give it room. 'Or what if I have an idea that's really good, but it's not the same as the idea they've had?'

'Then you still have to try and keep it to yourself, love.' Reenie's mother was sad to say it, but she knew that her daughter's happiness depended on keeping herself wise to her workplace. 'If you want to stay you have to keep those ideas to yourself. There are a lot of people who won't like to see a girl being outspoken; it's just not how the world works.'

Reenie thought about the girl who had called herself their overlooker but had turned out to be leading them a merry dance. She realised that all the other girls who'd been walking alongside her must have thought that she was wrong to speak up. They would all have rather been made a fool of than challenge someone of equal standing, let alone a superior. It went against the grain for Reenie, and the golden toffee that her mother offered her in consolation didn't shut out the thought.

It was not the Monday morning that Diana had hoped for. Diana had wanted to slip into her high chair on the strawberry cream production line and to wrap her sweets in perfect, dignified silence while the fresh smell of strawberries got into her clothes and made her feel serene. She'd worked nearly all of the lines in her ten years at Mac's, and she could pick up any production line job in her sleep; whether it be hand-wrapping toffees, hand-piping chocolates, or decorating their tops with a dainty wire wand. Diana had a wealth of experience on the lines and it was one of the reasons why she had been chosen for the team of girls that would hand-wrap the sweets on temporary lines until the Engineers Office and the Time and Motion men could set up a permanent mechanised line and replace her with a machine.

Quality Street had only been launched in May, and no one had anticipated that it would be as popular as it had been. The Mackintosh's old rivals over in York had launched their 'affordable' chocolate boxes in the shape of Black Magic and All Gold, but they were only affordable for the likes of the managers and the office workers. Mackintosh's wanted to make a tin of chocolate toffees that was inexpensive for everyone; they wanted to make something to share, and to celebrate with, and to get excited about; something that exploded with colour and helped make treasured memories. They'd invented Quality Street in a hurry, and demand was now outstripping supply. Scratch lines were set up to hand make it in larger quantities while new machines were brought in and set up to start in the new year.

When Diana arrived at her post on the production line, her overlooker Frances Roth was waiting for her.

'I'm sorry that I'm a little late, Mrs Roth,' Diana said it without a hint of apology in her voice, 'the Head of Women's Employment wanted to offer me a job.'

'And did you take it? Am I to be left to find someone else to fill your position at a time when I can barely keep the line running with the girls I have?' Mrs Roth said it with bitterness, melodrama and accusation. Diana knew that Mrs Roth was exaggerating. Mrs Roth's particular talent was that she could run two lines simultaneously. It wasn't merely a case of watching two places at once, but also of managing the shift rota and paperwork that accompanied it. It wasn't because she was unmarried, but her private life was run with a military precision around the Salvation Army. She relished time spent on departmental paperwork and delighted in petty bitterness.

'I turned the position down, Mrs Roth. I didn't feel worthy of it.' The other factory girls watched in awe as Diana managed to tread the fine line between false sycophancy and out-and-out sarcastic rudeness with the overlooker that they all loved to despise.

Diana and Mrs Roth had an old antipathy to one another; everyone knew that. They were usually kept apart because Mrs Roth seemed to want to teach Diana a lesson and put her in her place, and Diana outsmarted her every time.

Mrs Roth seemed to have an unhealthy fixation with Diana and what time she wanted to leave the factory. If Diana left early to look after her sister there was always an insinuation that Diana was neglecting her work at the factory, and if she didn't leave early, Mrs Roth would insinuate that she was neglecting her younger sister. With Frances Roth, Diana could never win, and this was one of the many reasons why it was so frustrating to the factory management that she wouldn't accept her promotion

'You're wanted in the overlookers' office, Number Four.' Mrs Roth snapped, calling Diana by her position number on the line to emphasise her inferiority.

'But I'm not an overlooker.' Diana did not sound surprised; she was simply riling Mrs Roth.

'Major Fergusson from Time and Motion wants to conduct a study on your line today, but the Union shop steward is unavailable to approve it. I said that you could represent the girls as you're in the Union.'

This smelt fishy to Diana and she followed Mrs Roth into the overlookers room in suspicious silence.

Major Fergusson was waiting in the overlookers room hoping that his new protégé wasn't about to see another classic display of Frances versus Diana. The Major had tried to mentor both young women over the years, but the experiment hadn't worked, and Mrs Roth was now worse than ever.

'Ah, Ladies, so pleased to see you both on the same line for a change.' The Major beamed and was very plausible; no one would have thought putting them together was a disaster. 'Diana, I hear that you will be acting as Union representative for the girls this morning?'

The Major had known Diana's father in passing. He had been a Union man and had often been the only thing to keep Diana on the straight and narrow back in those days. Her father had got Diana her first job at the factory when she was sixteen. Diana had been a bit of a bully and a troublemaker those first few years, and the Major kept a close eye on her. She ruled the roost, but she had been a different person then. When her father had left the factory, Diana had become more troublesome than ever, and for a moment it had looked as though she would have to be dismissed. But then her father had died suddenly, and just as suddenly she changed beyond recognition. Diana had gone away for nearly a year claiming she needed to care for a sick relative in the country, but the Major suspected that she was caring for her halfsister who was born about that time. Her father hadn't married her stepmother, but there had been a baby, little Grace. Diana's father had died before he'd seen the child, but Diana and Ethel had stuck together all the same.

Diana had gone from living in a comfortable flat above a rented shop in a shabbily respectable part of town, to living in the attic room of a woman that she called her stepmother. The transformation had been as unexpected as it had been remarkable; Diana was still the 'it girl' of Mackintosh's factory and she still commanded a following among the girls, but these days she used her influence sparingly to secure herself a quiet life. Six years before she had a nasty habit of using her power to torment and tease. The old Diana liked power and adulation; the new Diana was a woman wise to injustice.

Now Frances sensed her chance for revenge and took every opportunity to use her power over Diana. The pair were usually kept apart, but Quality Street production was ramping up faster than planned and their unique skills were needed on the same line.

'I can't let you run a study on my line,' Diana said boldly. She was aware that Mary was doing the work of her sister and she had to make sure that they were not discovered at any cost. 'You need the Union's approval, and you can't have it this time.'

'But really,' the Major was affable as always, 'this is just a simple one, just something to show the new lad how we run a study. What if we agree not to record our findings? It will be a dummy run. Nothing will come of it.' It wasn't an unreasonable request; the Time and Motion men didn't expect the girls to do anything out of the ordinary, they just watched them at their work while recording their speed with a stopwatch and making notes of their movements on a clipboard. Their purpose was to see if they could find a way to make the work more efficient, perhaps by giving the girls a higher chair, or speeding up the conveyor if it was slowing them down and keeping them waiting. The problem came when the girls thought that the Time and Motion managers were expecting them to work faster than they thought was possible; that was why the Union insisted on approving any study on the line.

'Major,' Diana hesitated, as though about to broach a delicate matter, 'if I could perhaps speak to you about it alone?'

'No, she can't!' Frances burst out, 'She is being consulted as though she's an overlooker! I want to lodge a formal complaint.'

The Major forced a tolerant smile and said, 'Of course, Mrs Roth, of course. Although perhaps we might wait until all your other outstanding complaints against Diana have been dealt with? For the sake of an orderly office.'

Diana tried a different tack and turned on the charm for her arch nemesis, 'I only wanted to protect your reputation, Mrs Roth.' She simpered and spoke conspiratorially to the woman. 'I've met this new lad, and I'm afraid to say that some of the girls on our line are very distracted by him. I'm concerned that if he conducts a study on one of your lines, the girls will perform worse than usual

because he's there, and it will reflect badly on you, Mrs Roth. You don't deserve that; you work so hard to run an orderly line. Perhaps we could run the study without the new Time and Motion lad?

'But I'm afraid the whole point of the study is to show Peter how they are run; without him, it would be futile.' The Major knew that Diana realised this and was deliberately trying to avoid a study. He doubted that it was out of dishonesty, but he still wanted to know why.

'What about the four new girls?' Diana asked, 'They haven't been trained yet so it wouldn't matter if you took them to work on one of the dummy lines, or even if you took them to one of the new mechanised lines that you're starting up so that they can learn the new machines?' Diana gave the Major a look that told him there was more to this situation, and so he acquiesced.

'An excellent idea.' He said, 'Oh, but Mrs Roth, can you spare them? I would be so very grateful to you if you could do me this personal favour.' The old military man, with his Savile Row suits and his Sandhurst manners, knew that the battle with Frances Roth was usually won with flattery.

'Well, I don't know Major Fergusson. I haven't had a chance to vet these girls myself—'

'And it's a credit to you that you take the time to do it. I know very few overlookers that take the time that you do over your girls.' The Major wondered if he'd taken it too far, but Diana – the expert in these matters – chipped in with:

'She's very good, Major. The other overlookers try to copy her where they can. I expect they'll all be wanting to send their new girls to you to work on dummy lines now; it will bring them up to speed faster. It's really a very good idea.'

Brought around to the notion that it had been her idea from the start, Frances Roth agreed and told Diana to take the four new girls and walk them to the dummy line with the Major, and to come straight back.

'What was all that about?' the Major whispered to Diana as they made their way down the corridor to the dummy line, well out of earshot of Frances Roth.

'There's a problem on my line.' Diana had dropped the simpering charm. 'Nothing I can't handle, but I'd be grateful if you'd hold off any studies.'

'For how long?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

'Anything I can do to help?'

'Possibly. I'll let you know.'

'I heard that you didn't take the overlookers position; you're clearly up to the mark, so I don't understand why you don't take it.'

'It's the hours. It's the time away from home.'

'I'm Reenie Calder.' Reenie caught up with the Time and Motion lad as they walked down the corridor behind Diana and the Major. Reenie put out her hand to shake his, 'You won't remember me, but we met the other night. I went to fetch m'father from the pub, and you were very kind and hoisted him onto m'horse.' Peter shook her hand with a friendly nod, but when he didn't say anything, Reenie carried on. 'He's not always like that, it was just the once.' Reenie found herself embarrassed; she'd plucked up the courage to talk to the lad that all the girls had been making eyes at, presuming on their earlier acquaintance, thinking that they had made a connection and that she would pick up where they left off, but there was silence. She didn't know whether she was more embarrassed or crestfallen. She'd really hoped that she could talk to him again.

'I, um ...' Peter hesitated, looking for the right words. 'I've never seen a girl ride bareback up to a public-house before.' He seemed to think it was amusing. 'In fact, that was the first time I've seen a girl ride bareback at all. I hope you managed to get his saddle fixed.' Reenie pleasantly surprised by his accent, he pronounced 'was' as 'wuz' and to her it sounded cultured and refined.

'Oh, he doesn't have a saddle. He's never had one.' Reenie seemed to be working something out and then asked, 'Have you lived in Halifax long?'

'No, I'm from Norwich.'

‘Ah,’ She said, as though that explained everything.

‘It’s my first week in Halifax.’

‘Well, that explains why you’ve never seen a girl ride bareback. Nearly all the farmer’s daughters round here ride bareback if they can get the loan of a horse.’ Reenie thought about what it would be like to be from Peter’s world. ‘I expect girls in Norwich have to stay at home and embroider the Coleman’s mustard cow onto prayer cushions, while reciting all the kings and queens of England in Latin.’

Peter tried not to smirk and said coolly, ‘Actually it’s an ox, not a cow. But you’re spot on about the kings and queens.’ He seemed quietly pleased with himself for cracking a joke, even though he’d had to be helped into it. ‘Have you been here long? At the factory, I mean?’

‘It’s my first week.’ They shared a comradely smile. They would have to be friends now.

Peter realised it was his turn to speak, and with great effort came up with, ‘Do you think you’ll like it?’

‘I love it. I love it so much. I want to be the quickest girl on the line.’

‘Well, we’ve got something in common. I want to help you to be the quickest girl on the line.’

The dummy line was a foil wrapping machine. It wrapped squares of soft pastel green around triangles of hazelnut praline at a breathtaking speed. The machine didn’t interest Diana – very little did – but what did catch her attention was a girl who had picked up two cartons in one hand and was about to demonstrate to the Time and Motion lad how she thought she could make the line faster. She’d obviously seen Mary Norcliffe use that same trick when she thought no one was looking and was picking up the slack for her sister. These young ones were exasperating.

Diana dived in before Reenie could utter a word to the new lad and steered her over to a quiet corner away from the others. ‘Were you about to tell those gents that you’d had a bright idea?’

Reenie was startled, she hadn’t expected the older girl to notice her and was glad of a chance to share her idea with this girl too. ‘How did you know? It wasn’t really my idea, I got the idea from something I saw, and I thought—’

‘Well don’t. Don’t try any fancy footwork, don’t try to share any bright ideas or do anything differently. Just work slowly and carefully. Don’t talk about what you’ve seen or heard, just stick to a simple job.’ Diana softened her tone when she saw that she’d been too short with Reenie. ‘Look, I want you to do well and be happy, but round here you can get in trouble for thinking. Just don’t rock the boat. And if you’ve got any ideas you tell me and not the overlookers. I’ll tell you when you’re allowed to have a bright idea and you’ll do alright.’ Diana received no response from the startled girl. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes, I think so. Although I think that the lad who I was going to show my idea to is different from the others because—’

‘No.’ Diana stopped Reenie short. ‘Don’t go getting ideas about the management lads. That one is no different from the others. I’ve heard all about him; he’s from some fancy family in Norwich and he’s a friend of one of Lord Mackintosh’s sons, or nephews or summat. He’ll be here five minutes and then they’ll give him a job running one of the factories abroad. Mark my words, he’s no different. If he asks you to walk out with him say a polite no, because his type is not for the likes of you; you can do better. He’ll show you a good time and then he’ll be gone. You deserve better; look to the engineers, or one of the factory fitters, but don’t make eyes at the management lads even if they make eyes at you. In fact, especially if they make eyes at you.’

Reenie nodded and looked crestfallen; she seemed to take the advice on board.

‘Just remember,’ Diana told her as kindly as she could, ‘all these management types are friends of the Mackintosh family; they might seem down-to-earth, but on Sunday afternoons they’re eating cucumber sandwiches in Lady Mackintosh’s drawing room, so don’t go thinking you can make friends with them. It’s them and us.’

Reenie nodded again. She'd had the wind knocked out of her sails, but it was what she needed. Some of these new girls were so green.

For a split second, Diana didn't recognise the two men walking towards her with their hands in their pockets. Perhaps it was seeing them in an unexpected environment, or the worn blue overalls that she'd never seen them in before, but for a moment she took them for normal factory craftsmen, on their way to a repair job. And when one of them looked her full in the face and gave her a nasty grin she felt a jolt of discomfort and walked past them for several paces before her mind caught up with itself. It was her stepbrother and his friend – her former beau, Stewart, though it pained her to remember it. They were clearly up to no good.

Diana froze for a second in confusion, then spun around and caught up with the trespassers. 'What are you two doing here,' she hissed to her stepbrother, 'and who gave you those overalls?'

'What's wrong with our overalls? I think they're very fetching.' Tommo mimed a pantomime twirl like Fred Astaire in a song and dance picture on the polished floor of the deserted factory corridor. He was smirking; he obviously wasn't worried in the slightest about being caught by his stepsister.

'You know bloody well.' Diana looked around to make sure they were alone. It wasn't unusual to see craftsmen like electricians, or fitters, or joiners, walking through the corridors on their way to or from a job mid-shift. There were so many thousands of employees at Mackintosh's that no one could be expected to know every employee. If anyone else had seen them, they'd have assumed they were on their way to a line needing a repair, but Diana knew better.

'Maybe we felt like getting jobs at Mac's.' Stewart ran his hand through his soft, floppy hair in a habit that had been honed over the years by his innate vanity. The same vanity that had prevented him from holding down any regular job for more than a week. He provided a stark contrast with his friend Tommo. Tommo was scrawny for a grown man; he had thinning black hair that was combed back with thick Brylcreem. His wide, frog-like mouth made Diana feel sick to look at it, and his beady, rat-like eyes always made her think that he was up to something. He usually was up to something. Stewart on the other hand was tall, muscular, sandy-haired, and with a complexion that was like rich Devon cream. His long, light brown eyelashes framed azure blue eyes that looked uncomplicated and innocent to anyone who didn't know him; and vacant to the few who did. Today Stewart's summer suntan was all but faded, along with any feelings Diana once had for him. She'd liked him when they were kids because he'd been the best-looking boy around and she enjoyed lording it over the other girls, but she was a different person now. The trouble was that Stewart was ignorant, and stupid enough to follow Tommo around. One day Tommo would get them both into trouble, and Diana thought it would serve them right.

Stewart huffed in a petulant pretence at being hurt by what Diana had said. 'You're always banging on about how important it is to get a job, and now that I've got one you're rude to me.'

Diana wasn't fooled by Stewart or his overalls. 'I know full well you haven't got a job here. These are craftsmen's overalls; you haven't passed an apprenticeship overnight, so these aren't yours. I'll ask you one last time before I call for the Watchman: what are you doing here?'

Tommo rolled on his heels with his hands in his pockets. His smug expression had not left his frog-like mouth. 'And what are you doing here, sis?' He lowered his voice and moved closer to her, even though they were completely alone in the echoey factory corridor. 'Haven't they found out your little secret yet?'

So, that's how it is, is it? Diana thought to herself. *If I shop you, you'll shop me.* She knew that Tommo didn't care if she lost her wage and her last taste of independence and self-determination; the only reason he hadn't exposed her until now was because he enjoyed tormenting her with the idea that he would. They stared at one another in silence, both as determined as the other not to give an inch. Tommo stood, smirking with mischief, Diana fuming with rage. And then Stewart yawned.

‘Are we going, or what?’ Stewart sounded bored. ‘We’ve only got half an hour to put that bet on, and it’ll take us best part of a quarter hour to walk to the bookies. If I miss this one, so help me—’

‘Alright, alright.’ Tommo had evidently been trumped by Stewart, who hadn’t cared two hoots about the spat between his former girl and his best friend. Tommo rubbed his eyebrows with his bony, nicotine-stained fingers as though this demanding day had taxed his great intellect. ‘This tip better be worth it, Stewie.’

‘He’s doping the horse hisself. It’s a cert.’ Stewart looked at his wristwatch. It narked at Diana that he could afford a wristwatch but worked less than she did.

Diana could tell that Tommo wanted to save face. He thought for a second or two and then allowed a smile to stretch over his horrible lips. ‘Don’t say I never do anything for you, sis. We’re leaving you in peace.’ And then he added theatrically, ‘For now.’

Stewart and Tommo began strolling unconcernedly towards the concrete stairwell, but even though they were leaving the factory, Diana made sure that she stuck to them like glue. If she knew Tommo he had planned this so that he could steal something to order for his gangland cronies in Leeds; he wasn’t an opportunist thief.

Tommo had taken the boldest route through the basin, right under the view of the office block windows, the Albion Mills factory windows, the railway station platforms above, and the main entrance gate cabin. Diana resolved to say nothing while he was within earshot and then to tell the commissionaires what he’d been up to as soon as he rounded the corner. Diana thought she could always get the commissionaires a photograph of Tommo from home if they didn’t catch a good enough look at him, but when she got to the gatehouse cabin she saw, for the first time in all her years at Mac’s, that it was empty. Tommo must have paid someone to create a diversion so that he could stroll in and out unimpeded. There was no one for Diana to tell. She stood there, helpless, angry. She watched their retreating silhouettes in their stolen blue overalls and hated them. What a change, she thought, from when she’d first walked through those gates; how her heart would have leapt to see Stewart walk around the corridor all those years ago. She’d have boasted to all the other girls that she had a young man and that he’d come to work to see her. Now, ten years later, she felt nothing but dread. Stewart had found his way into the place where she felt safe, and she didn’t like it.

Diana looked around, hopeful that one of the commissionaires or the watchmen would come back, but the basin, as they called the deep space between the railway bank and the Albion Mills building, was deserted. As she turned to walk back to her line, out of the corner of her eye she caught movement. She looked up toward the windows of the office building, there on the third floor, lowering a dainty teacup into a dainty saucer, was Mrs Wilkes; she had been watching Diana.

Chapter Four

Reenie's grandmother had always told her that she had a good heart, but she liked the smell of trouble too much. As far as Nanna Martin was concerned, Reenie was a lost cause, and they would all just have to do their best to keep her on the straight and narrow and keep her in work until she could be safely wed.

Reenie didn't think her family were fair on her. It was true that she found herself in the stew quite a lot, but she didn't deliberately go out of her way to *find* trouble; it just found her. It was just this kind of situation that Reenie was walking into at the Mackintosh's factory known as Toffee Town.

'Do you know those two girls up at the far end? The one's that work behind the pillar?' Most of the girls sat in the same space that they had found themselves in on their first day at break time, and talked to the same handful of friends, never venturing out into the territory of other girls. Reenie, however, went round trying to make friends with everyone during her break. Impervious to any snubs she mostly won them over, but there were two exceptions: the two girls that she had watched on her first day, and who had given her a warning look. One of them was small, with a doll-like face; the other was plain with a red birthmark on her cheek like a blood-red tear. Today Reenie was passing the time of day with the boys who worked as porters on her floor and who filled the cages with the materials that the server girls needed to do their jobs. When the workforce wasn't segregated by order it seemed to naturally segregate itself; it was typical of Reenie that she would drift beyond the bounds of shop floor etiquette and mix with everyone.

'They call the younger one Good Queen Bess.'

'Why's that?'

'Because her older sister's called Mary, and she's a Bess, so it's like the queens who were sisters.'

'Oh, of course.' Reenie had no idea who the queens were that the boy porter referred to, but she thought it was wise to act as though she did.

'She's the lovely one so she's Good Queen Bess, but her sister's miserable so they call her Bad Queen Mary.'

'Not always.' One of the older porters put in matter-of-factly. 'Not to her face.'

'Aye, that's true. But mostly she's known as the Bad Queen.'

'Bess and Mary? Right-o. Thanks for that. I'll go and see if they want to make a new friend.'

'Good luck with that. Those two don't talk to anyone except Sarah who works in the dining hall.'

'That's a shame for them. You wait here while I go and find out why.'

The boys laughed and shook their heads. They liked Reenie, but she didn't know what was good for her.

'Everyone at home calls me Queenie Reenie.' She put out her hand to shake the other girl's. 'I hear they call you Good Queen Bess,' Reenie turned to smile at Mary too and hesitated, the words, '*and they call you Bad Queen Mary*' hanging in the air unspoken, but cracking like an electric storm. Her voice faltered as she said, '... and you're ... her sister, aren't you?'

Mary said nothing, but Bess laughed to break the ice and said, 'Two Queens! Oh no, Queenie Reenie, which of us will be Queen of Quality Street?'

Reenie tried to shake the other girl's hand, but as she touched it she felt the thin skin, the delicate bones, and worried that she would break it. Up close Bess seemed like a little bird, lighter than air and just as fragile; her huge blue eyes seemed all the sharper for the dark circles round them.

'What do they call you Queenie for? I've never heard of a Queen called Reenie.' Mary wasn't taking Reenie's hand to shake it, although Reenie did offer it.

'Well it just sort o' rhymes wi' Reenie. My real name is Reenie, but you know: Reenie, Queenie, they just sound ...' Reenie trailed off in the face of such obvious hostility.

'I think we need to get back to work. If we're going to work as fast as you we'll need to start early.' Mary said it bitterly, as though she resented Reenie's pace.

'Oh no, don't think of it like that, it's not a competition. Everyone works differently. I just like trying to be the fastest because then I can tell me' mam that I've done as she asked.'

'And does your mam know that the faster you go, the more likely the Time and Motion men are to see that it's possible to do our jobs faster, and then force us *all* to work faster so that we can never keep up with all the work that we have to do? And does your mam also know that that will mean we'll all earn less, *if* we manage to keep our jobs at all?' Bad Queen Mary was squaring up to Reenie now, hostile and cold.

'Mary, love, there's no need.' Her sister gently put a worryingly pale hand on her shoulder and tried to draw her back. 'Reenie doesn't mean any harm—'

'I don't care what she means and what she doesn't. This isn't how we do things here.'

Reenie hadn't realised when she came to work at the factory that everything would be so complicated. Instead of being paid a set amount of money for the time she spent working on the line, like she would if she'd worked in a shop, Reenie had been told they would all be paid for how many pieces of work they completed; depending on which department she worked in it might be how many cartons she filled with sweets, or how many tins she could make on the tin making machine. If she got through twenty boxes of sweets a minute she would earn the minimum rate for the day, if she got through ten percent more boxes she would earn ten percent more; twenty percent more boxes meant twenty percent more pay or 'piece rates'. However, there was a maximum, once you made your maximum piece rates you had to carry on working even though you knew that you weren't earning any extra money. Reenie didn't mind this at all, she just enjoyed working alongside so many other girls her age. 'Oh, but I can give you all some of my extra work if you like, you can keep the piece rates if you want to. I always reach my maximum and then after that I can't get paid for any more so I just do it for fun—'

'It's fun for you, but not fun for the rest of us who have to keep up with you. Did you ever think what you having fun does to everyone else?'

'But I'll give you my extra—'

'*That's* a piece rate racket. You *cannot* share your extra work with other girls or they'll sack all of us. Do you understand? If you try to do what you're suggesting then there will be no more work for any of us because we will *all* be tarred by the same brush and no one else will take us without a reference.'

'But *why?* I don't understand! I can't see why they wouldn't just want me to work as fast as I can so that they get more sweets at the end.'

'Because, you total doyle, if it is possible for a human being to work that fast. They will make us work even faster, and faster, and faster if we want to earn our basic rates for doing the minimum, and they will go on and on and on until we are all in our early graves. The Time and Motion men do not care about you or I, they care about the time it takes to do the work.'

'But I've seen you do your sister's work lots of times. Why don't they complain about that if they're so fussed?'

Bad Queen Mary's eyes widened with an icy rage and her words came out in a controlled hiss. 'You have never, ever seen us do anything of the sort. And don't even think about telling anyone else that poisonous lie.' Mary turned on her heel and left. There was a stunned silence from the other girls, and though Bess tried to offer Reenie a look of apology, she had to go after her sister, who was marching to her place on the production line.

Reenie was hurt and angry that anyone would treat her like that when she had clearly not meant any harm. She was particularly angry at being called a liar. If her grandmother had been there she'd have told Reenie to let it go, but in her absence Reenie began hatching a plan to make certain that Bad Queen Mary would never be cold with her again.

Chapter Five

Reenie worked a little more absentmindedly that afternoon, thinking about how she might get closer to Mary and Bess, the Quality Street factory's very own Tudor Queens. She watched them carefully from her side of the conveyor, and every time Mary caught Reenie's eye Mary would give her an icy, threatening look.

Reenie noticed several things, that Mary had to look at her work all of the time in order to follow what she was doing, and could only look over at Reenie occasionally. This was Mary's first mistake, the trick to speed was not to look, but to work by a instinct.

Reenie also noticed that Bess was markedly slower than everyone else on the line, as though she just didn't have the strength. She took work from her older sister almost constantly. If the overlooker could see them then Bess would keep going, but she'd struggle to keep up even with surreptitious help from her sister. The wrapping girls were clearly unhappy about the situation, but tolerating it grudgingly. There was an understanding with them, Reenie thought, but they were not allowing it to happen out of friendship. Here was Reenie's opportunity: she would target the wrapping girls.

'Do you want to earn the highest piece rates of anyone on our floor?' Reenie had not bothered with introductions; she just presented herself at dinner time beside the wrapping girls' table and stated her proposition.

The dinner hour was just as segregated as the workroom; the older girls who wrapped the sweets chose to sit on tables apart from the younger girls. While the younger ones gossiped animatedly and leant over one another's dinners, snatching at leftovers and sharing comics. The older wrapping girls looked as still and bored as the portraits of Hollywood starlets in *Vogue* magazine.

The dining hall was not so different from Reenie's kitchen at home; there were scrubbed wooden benches below scrubbed wooden tables, but the difference here was that there were six hundred benches, and a sea of women all dressed the same. It was like finding a needle in a haystack, but she found them, sitting in the warmth of the corner near the kitchen hatches that were serving everything with a rich, mouth-wateringly fragrant beef gravy.

'And who are you when you're at home?' Heather Rogers, a wrapping girl with long, platinum blonde hair looked up from her dinner, and down her nose at Reenie. This was exactly the reception that Reenie had anticipated; which was why she had chosen to skip introductions and start with what was in it for them.

'She's Reenie, my server. She's the fast one.' Reenie's wrapper (known to the overlooker as Number Twenty-Eight, because that was the conveyor position she occupied, but to the vicar who'd christened her, she was Victoria Scowen) didn't sound enthusiastic about it, but Reenie felt that this still wasn't going too badly.

'I want to move to your end of the conveyor. I want to be up top behind that pillar. If you help me move you'll get higher piece rates because I'll be your server instead of Bad Queen Mary who's always slow because she's naffin' about wi' her sister.'

'Hang on,' Victoria Scowen didn't like the sound of this. 'What about *my* piece rates? You're *my* server; what's in it for me if I let you go up to the far end and leave me with God-knows who?'

'You'll get the same as you've been getting wi' me.'

'And how do you figure that one ou—?' Victoria was about to ask about the logistics of the problem when Diana – who was Reenie's intended target since she was the girl who had already warned her that if she had any bright ideas she had to take them to her first, and who appeared to have sway over all the girls on their line – cut in with a more important question.

'What do you want to move up to my manor for? Are you planning a piece time racket? 'Cause it sounds to me like that's the only way you can be offering all three of us better rates. No one can be in three places at once so you've got to be talking a racket.'

Heather Rogers tried to move Reenie on by saying in a haughty Harrogate drawl, 'We've got enough trouble up at our end with the Tudor Queens; we don't need the aggro of some new kid who thinks they know all running a piece time racket right under Rabid Roth's nose, thank you very mu—'

'No, Heather, I've a mind to hear what the young 'un has to say.' Diana ostentatiously moved herself into a more comfortable position and then indicated that she was ready to listen. Reenie could see that what she'd heard about Diana Moore was right; if Quality Street had three queens, then this was their true empress; she really did command all the other girls, and Reenie realised she was in luck.

'Come in Number Four!' Mrs Roth didn't have an office of her own, but she marked her territory so firmly in the overlookers' break room that it felt as though they were being beckoned into her domain.

The room was not salubrious, but it was large enough for ten women to sit and glare at each other over a chipped mid-morning teapot. A row of three desks along the far wall with typewriters for processing sick notes, shift patterns and the like, seemed to be the only thing that marked the space out as a factory work room and not the windowless, dingy, cave-like lair of an old witch.

Diana slid through the doorway with the lithe confidence of a cat, followed behind by wrapping girls Victoria and Heather, who were reduced to cowering in the presence of Mrs Roth.

'Do you have something you wish to tell me?' Mrs Roth's words were sharp and threatening, and many a girl had turned and ran with their words left unspoken at that welcome, but Diana didn't so much as turn a hair:

'We've grown tired of covering up for Mary and Bess. We've come to tell you what's what so that we don't have to put up with them anymore.'

'Covering up?' Mrs Roth's snakelike eyes had met Diana's and were holding them unblinkingly.

'They do nothing but talk all day long, and it makes them slow. They're both perfectly capable of working faster, and I've seen Bess work like lightning when her sister's not with her, but they will talk.' Diana's casual, regal, drawl seemed to imply that she considered Mrs Roth to be an intimate equal, rather than her supervisor. 'It's all sneaky whispers when you're not looking, Mrs Roth. I can't imagine what they find to talk about, but you always have trouble when sister's sit together, don't you?' She held her gaze while she paused for effect. Reenie had been lucky indeed; Diana knew exactly how to play the woman she reported to. 'We'd like to help if we can.' She gestured casually to the two wrapping girls behind her, 'If you move Reenie Calder up to my place, and Mary down to the far end to Reenie's old place they'll be as far apart as they can be. We'll see how fast they work when they're not gassing. I didn't like to bother you with such a triviality, Mrs Roth, but when you've worked in production as long as you and I have, one knows that it's the small things that make a difference.'

Mrs Roth seemed to be looking for some trap or trick, and she snapped at Victoria, 'You! Why do you want to move Reenie Calder?'

This was what they had been afraid of; they didn't want her to notice the Reenie side of the plan, because the answers to those questions were awkward. Victoria panicked and looked at their ringleader for a hint but didn't get one, so just blurted out, 'She's doin' my head in Mrs Roth.'

And that was enough for the overlooker, the idea that Reenie would do anyone's head in was plausible. 'Alright, but I don't have time for this kind of thing. You'll have to work it out amongst yourselves. And if I think there's been *any*

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