

Part 1

1827

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September

Meg Staley hurried down Weavers Lane looking for her younger brother Shad, who was no doubt getting into mischief again. Her mother had gone wild when he hadn't come home on time and since her older brother Jack was still at his reading class, Meg had offered to go and find Shad. Anything was better than staying home when her mother was in a temper.

She tried to avoid the drunken men clustered round the doorway of the Black Swan, but one of them caught her by the arm.

"Let go of me!" she snapped, tugging away from him.

He laughed and his grip tightened. "Give us a kiss an' I will."

She kicked out at him, struggling to get away, but he didn't seem to feel her blows and his grip didn't slacken. With a sinking heart she realised he was so blind with booze that he didn't know what he was doing. "Will no one help me?" she yelled.

Another man lurched forward, also well gone in drink, and she winced, terrified he would grab her too. Then she recognised him. Well, she knew most people by sight in Northby, it was such a small town, and Ben Pearson had once lived in their street. Now he lived near the bottom end of Weavers Lane, the less respectable end.

To her relief he took his companion's arm and said, "You're frightening the lass, Ted. Let her go."

The drunken man blinked at him, then his grip on her slackened and he muttered, "Sorry".

"Thanks." Meg turned away but to her dismay Ben followed.

"You shouldn't be out on your own at this hour," he said, still in that slurred voice.

"I'm looking for my little brother."

"I'll help you."

"I don't want your help. Go back and lap up some more booze with your friends. You're all sots!"

"You're sharp-tongued tonight."

"I'm tired. An' I don't like tosspots."

He stayed with her, frowning now. "Is that what I am?"

"Everyone knows you spend all you earn on drink. An' I've seen you myself many a time staggering down the street."

He laid one hand on her arm. "Eh, I don't like to think of that, you being so scornful about me." After a pause during which he studied her face, he added softly, "I'd give up the drink for a lass like you."

"Don't be silly! Why should you do that for me?" She didn't pull away because somehow she didn't feel frightened when this man held her. In fact, she felt sorry for him. He'd been married once, then a couple of years ago his wife had died in childbirth, the baby too. It was after that he'd taken to the drink.

He smiled at her. "Why? Because you're special. If I give up the booze will you walk out with me, Meg Staley?"

She gaped at him. "*Walk out with you?* You hardly know me."

"I've known you since you were a little 'un."

Before Ben could speak again, she saw her brother and yelled across the street, "You come here, our Shad." When she pulled away from Ben he let her go, but she was conscious of his eyes

following her as she and Shad started walking back up the hill. Giving in to temptation she turned round, but he hadn't moved, was still watching her, smiling as if he liked what he saw.

She tossed her head and didn't look round again. Drunks would say anything. He'd have forgotten all about it in the morning. Anyway, she didn't want to walk out with him or anyone else. He was years older than she was—twenty-four to her sixteen—though he was a nice enough fellow and had treated his wife well.

She sighed as her home came into sight. The only thing she really wanted at the moment was a bit of peace from her Mam's nagging . . . and more to eat.

But she wasn't likely to get either of those.

A few days later, after her shift at the mill ended, Meg slipped along to the outer edge of the reservoir and sank wearily down on the low wall that separated it from the moors, letting the chill, clean air fill her lungs. This was as far away from other people as she could usually get and was one of her favourite places. The remaining lights inside the mill shone across the water, but where she sat was in shadow. She didn't want to go home yet, couldn't face her mother's carping. There was always something wrong when she got back from work. It'd be better to wait until her brother Jack went home. Mam was never as bad when he was around.

Meg sighed as she wrapped her shawl more tightly round her head and shoulders, wishing she had some warmer clothing. But her mother held the purse strings and always had some excuse for not buying her anything new.

As she looked across at the mill Meg scowled. She hated working there, and thought it unfair to be paid only a few shillings for her fourteen hours a day. She wouldn't get a woman's wages until she turned eighteen in just over a year's time. They pretended she worked under the supervision of Jen Foster. As if she needed supervision! She was as good as any of the other women, quick with her fingers to piece together any threads that broke so as to keep the machines

running all day—the weaving machines that made Mr Rishmore rich and young women like her so exhausted that by the end of the day all most of them wanted was to get home and sleep.

But where else was she to find work in a small town like Northby? She didn't know anything but working in the mill and if she didn't work, how would her family manage? Since her father's death, they were hard put to cope as it was.

She heard feet crunching on the frosty ground coming towards her, but didn't turn round. With a bit of luck, the person would walk straight past. When she heard the footsteps slow down and stop, she turned and glared at the man who had disturbed her peace. "What do *you* want, Ben Pearson?"

"To see you, lass."

She bounced to her feet. "I've already told you, I don't make friends with drunkards."

He put out a hand to stop her leaving. "I haven't touched a drop since last time we met."

She hesitated, finding this hard to believe.

"I'd do anything to make you think better of me, Meg."

"I don't know why."

He chuckled. "Eh, you're a blunt one."

She shrugged and folded her arms tightly round herself as she waited for him to answer. When he didn't, she asked again, "Why?"

"Because of the way your eyes sparkle when you're angry. Because I think you're pretty—"

"Hah! That's a lie for a start. We both know I'm not pretty." She looked down at herself scornfully. "I'm too thin an' my cheeks are hollow."

"Only because you work so hard an' don't get enough to eat."

His sympathy made her feel uncertain how to deal with him and she could hear her voice coming out more softly. "How do *you* know what I eat?"

"I know from what Jen's said the sort of thing you bring to work for your dinner. Poor

pickings, that. An' everyone knows what your mother's like. She thinks the sun shines out of your Jack's backside. I bet it all goes to him, the good food. Does *he* know how little she gives the rest of you?"

"It's none of your business. Leave me alone!" She pushed past him, afraid his sympathy would make her cry. She hated people to see her cry.

"I'll not be drinking tonight," he called after her. "An' I'll not let you alone till you start walking out with me."

She stopped dead on those words, then turned round and stared at him. "You're just making mock of me."

"I'm not. Never that."

His gaze was level and steady this time and his voice wasn't slurred today. He had a nice voice, gentle and light in tone.

"Will you?" he asked.

"I don't know. We'll see how long you can go without the booze. A few days is nowt to a drunkard."

"Hard words. I s'll prove you wrong, though."

She moved away, feeling a warmth run through her. He hadn't forgotten and if he did give up drinking, if he really did . . . Well, other lasses had fellows, so why not her?

Ben stood and watched her till her outline blurred into the darkness as the last lights inside the mill were turned off. He sat down right where she'd been sitting, feeling it linked him to her. He was living in lodgings, sharing a room, and had little privacy there, so he understood the need to seek places where you could have a quiet little think.

He sighed. It was hard giving up the drink, much harder than he'd expected. Yesterday he'd got as far as the door of the pub before he came to his senses. The lads he usually drank with were teasing him about it at work, but he'd set his mind to it, so he'd do it. He'd do anything for

Meg. He didn't know why he fancied her so much. He'd never felt this strongly about his wife, just married her when he found they'd made a child together. And she'd died so soon after he'd felt guilty, as if he'd killed her on purpose.

He smiled. There were other lasses much prettier than Meg, but somehow she made them seem like pale imitations. Her brown eyes glowed with such life when something made her angry, as it often did, that his breath caught in his throat to see it. And her eyes were nearly as dark as her hair, brown with golden glints. She must wash her hair more often than other lasses did, because it always looked nice. And that said something about her, because water had to be fetched by the bucket from the stand pipe at the end of each street to the tiny terraced houses Rishmore provided for his workers. It wasn't easy to keep clean. Ben had seen how hard it had been for his wife.

Jem Staley, Meg's father, had been killed in the machine breaking riots—eh, that must be two years ago now!—and the eldest son had been transported. The mother had gone to pieces, leaving Jack to hold the family together—a sixteen-year-old lad at the time—helped by young Mr Rishmore's charity. He was a great one for offering charity Mr Samuel was, but cold with it, so that you'd rather not trouble him unless you had to.

Ben shuddered at the memories. He'd been too ill to join the rioters that night and considered himself lucky. The incident had shaken everyone in town. Northby folk weren't the sort to riot, not usually. And it had made no difference to the damned machines. There the new ones were, clanking and clattering all day, tended by poor slaves like Meg while other slaves like him tended the mill's horses and drays.

A sudden longing for a deep draught of beer and the warmth of the pub weakened his resolve for a moment and he licked his lips, imagining the taste of it. His friends would be there by now, they'd smile a greeting and . . . He shook his head, mouthing the word no. He wasn't giving in to it. Not any more.

But it was going to be hard.

Meg caught up with her brother Jack as he was walking home from work. He looked as tired as she felt.

“Had a hard day?” she asked, slipping her arm through his.

“Aye.”

“Me, too.”

When they got near the house, she grimaced. “I hope she’s in a better mood than yesterday.”

He didn’t need to ask who *she* was. “You shouldn’t answer her back.”

“I’ve as much right to talk as she has—an’ I talk a lot more sense, too.” Meg shoved the door open with a muttered, “Here we go.”

It was Friday, one of their two meat days. Not that there was much meat in the stew, but enough to flavour it. When Netta Staley began to dole out the food a few minutes later, she made sure Jack got most of the meat.

He looked down at the plate. “What about the others, Mam? They’ve got no meat at all.”

“There’s not enough to go round today. They’ve got the gravy, haven’t they? There’s many childer don’t get even that.”

“I’ve told you before: we’ll all share what there is.” He placed a piece of the stringy meat on Meg’s plate, then gestured to Shad, Ginny and Joe to hold out their plates too.

“It’s the breadwinner as needs that,” Netta said shrilly, reaching out to stop him. “We can’t afford enough for everyone.”

As he carried on sharing his food, she burst into tears and left the table.

For once he didn’t follow. “Eat up, you lot. It’s a shame to let good food go cold.”

Meg cleared her plate quickly. It wasn’t good food, because her mother was an indifferent and careless cook, but she was ravenous so ate without complaint. Luckily for them it wasn’t one of

Jack's nights for going out or their mam would be hitting out at them after he'd left. She seemed to enjoy slapping them or hitting them with her wooden rolling pin. No wonder Shad stayed out whenever he could.

I wish I could leave here, Meg thought as she lay sleepless under the thin blanket, cuddled up against her sister Ginny. If I could, I'd go away tomorrow.

Phoebe Dixon watched her husband choke and gasp his life away. Three days it took from when Hal fell ill, just three days to destroy her life as well as his. She didn't love him, but he represented the only security she'd ever known and they'd rubbed along together all right.

After she'd laid him out, she found the pot where they kept their savings and counted its meagre contents, much depleted by his long period of ill health, not to mention his spendthrift ways. She had just enough left to pay for a simple funeral. It would leave little for her, but Hal wasn't going to have a pauper's funeral, she'd promised him that and she always tried to keep her promises. Mr Pickerling, the Curate, would hold the funeral service. Well, no one expected the Parson to come to a tiny hamlet like Calico, situated on the edge of the moors miles from anywhere—not for a mere alehouse keeper, or for any other reason if Parson could help it.

The burial took place on a chilly day, with dark clouds threatening rain and a wind whining fitfully across the moors, sometimes blowing hard so that Phoebe's dark skirts flapped like crows' wings and the men had to hold tight to their hats. Some thought it wrong for women to attend funerals. She'd have thought it wrong not to go with Hal on his last journey in Ross Bellvers' cart.

When the service was over the Curate waited for his fee at the gates of the walled burial ground which stood on a slight rise next to the church. For two centuries the dead of Calico and an occasional beggar or packman who'd died within the parish had been buried here.

Phoebe paid Mr Pickerling, who said apologetically that he was very sorry to trouble her for

this money. She smiled and shook her head. They all knew how poor he and his family were on a Curate's stipend. When he tipped his hat to her before walking off down the hill she stood watching till he was out of sight, not saying anything.

Even after he'd disappeared from view she couldn't move because now that she'd buried Hal, she didn't know what to do or where to go. At nearly fifty, with no children or living relatives, she could see nothing ahead of her but the poorhouse.

When Ross took her by the arm and led her back with them she went quietly, too tired to protest. The small group of men came with her into the inn she'd helped run for nearly twenty years. The Packhorse it was called, because once packmen had been its most numerous customers apart from the villagers. It stood on Calico Road itself, as most houses in the village did, and was a rambling old place.

The Curate said the rear part had been built even before Queen Elizabeth sat on the throne of England, built by monks to live in while tending their sheep. If he said so, Phoebe supposed it must be true. All she knew was she never felt comfortable in that part of the inn and avoided it as much as she could.

Back at the inn she found that the neighbouring women had brought in plates of food to hold a burial feast for Hal, which was kind of them. She smiled and nodded to show her appreciation, but couldn't eat, not a bite. All she could do was sit there and wait, though she wasn't sure what for.

The group fell quiet when they heard a horse's hooves. When a gentleman walked into the inn, all finely clad, someone whispered, "It's young Mr Greenhalgh—Mr Jethro," and Phoebe's heart began to thud in her chest. If he came from John Greenhalgh, the owner, he surely brought only bad news.

The newcomer looked round the public room, not appearing to like what he saw. "We heard that Dixon had died."

Heads nodded but no one spoke.

“Which of you is Mrs Dixon?”

Someone pushed Phoebe forward.

“We’re sorry to hear about your loss, Mrs Dixon. We’ll give you a week to move your things out.”

Tears came into her eyes. “Move out?” She’d half-expected this, but it still hurt.

He looked at her impatiently. “Didn’t I just say so?”

There were mutterings in the silence, not a word clear, but the tone angry like the distant buzzing of a fly against a window pane.

She found the courage to ask, “Can’t I stay on, sir? You’ll need someone to run the alehouse and I’ve been doing that for the past year while Hal’s been ill. I know the work. I’ve proved I can do it.”

“Your husband might have been ill, but he was still there. My father doesn’t believe in giving such responsibility to a woman. Besides, what would you do if someone was drunk and causing trouble? A woman on her own couldn’t manage.”

He had raised his voice, though the group was so quiet he needn’t have bothered, and when he stopped one man muttered, “Does he think we’re all deaf, then?” But luckily only the person next to him heard and dug in an elbow, making a shushing sound.

Jethro looked round. “Until we find someone to run the Packhorse for us, is there a man in the village who can take over? We’ll pay you, of course.” When no one spoke, he added, “Otherwise we’ll have to close the place down.”

There was silence. People looked questioningly at one another, shaking their heads very slightly as if to decline. But if the Greenhalghes closed this inn, where would folk go for a pot of beer? The Packhorse was the centre of village life, the only place they had to take their ease, because it was too long a walk down the hill to the next village.

As the visitor began to frown and tap his foot impatiently, one man took a sudden decision and stood up. "I'll do it, Mr Greenhalgh." He didn't address him as sir, a word he disliked, because he wasn't beholden to the Greenhalghes for anything, either his livelihood or his cottage, and glad of it, too.

"Who are you?"

"Ross Bellvers, smallholder."

Jethro studied him for a moment, then nodded. "Very well. See that you keep the place clean until we find a new man, and no drinking away the profits. My father will expect a full accounting." He turned back to the widow. "Mrs Dixon, a word with you in private."

Phoebe followed him into the living quarters at the rear, noting how his lips curled in disgust at the poverty of the furnishings and the untidiness. She wished then that she'd not let herself go to pieces after Hal died, knew she looked more like a beggar woman than an alehouse keeper's widow today, and was filled with shame.

He held out a small purse. "This is to help you on your way."

When she didn't reach out for it, he tossed it on the table, turning to leave then stopping as if on an afterthought to ask, "Did your husband ever say anything to you about why he was given the job here?"

She knew what to say to that one. "No, sir. Never." But of course she knew why Hal had been given this place. Even men as close-mouthed as him talked in their sleep or when they were ill, and wives slowly put the pieces of the puzzle together. She also knew better than to admit anything.

"And he didn't leave any papers?"

"No, sir."

"You're sure of that?"

"Oh yes, sir."

Without another word Greenhalgh walked out of the alehouse and mounted his horse.

Once the hoof beats had faded into the distance, Ross went into the back room and found Phoebe sitting weeping.

“To throw me out,” she sobbed. “He brought me in here to toss a purse at me. As if that’d make it all right! I’ve been here over twenty year now, Ross. It’s my *home!* I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

He patted her on the shoulder. “That’s a Greenhalgh for you. This is the only time one of them sods has visited Calico for years and . . .” He stopped, struck by that thought. “How’s he to know?”

“Know what?”

Ross grinned at her. “Whether you stay or go. You look a right old mess today, Phoebe love. When you’re back to your old self, he’ll not even recognise you. *If* he ever comes here again, which he likely won’t. We’ll change your name, though, just to make sure.”

She looked at him, hope dawning on her face. “What happens when they send someone to take over here?”

“Depends whether the fellow’s married or not. If he isn’t, you can ask him for a job. After all, you know the trade.”

“Dare we?” she whispered, as if afraid to speak out loud.

“Why not? You can run this place for *me* till the new man arrives, and if nothing else it’ll give you time to make plans. Nay, what are you weeping for, lass?”

“Because you’re so k-kind.”

“I’m not *kind!* I’m just being practical. For the sake of the village. What would we do if we didn’t have this place?”

From his tone she might have been accusing him of a crime by calling him kind, and she knew better than to repeat it. Folk in Calico kept their feelings to themselves. Let townfolk gabble on

about nothing, people up here knew better. You should only speak when you had summat worth saying—especially when there were strangers around.

And her Hal would have added: especially when the strangers were Greenhalghes. He'd been afraid of them, no doubt about that, afraid they'd kill him if he didn't keep his mouth shut.

Jethro rode slowly back down the hill to Backenshaw. He hadn't enjoyed telling the woman to leave but his father had insisted she must go. And no one dared argue with John Greenhalgh, least of all his son. Perhaps, given the circumstances, it was for the best, but she'd looked so shocked and unhappy when he'd told her.

One day, though, his father would die and then Jethro would make his own rules about how he dealt with his dependants and employees. He'd not treat them softly—he was too much John's son for that—but sometimes he felt his father was unnecessarily harsh.

With everyone.

His own son included.