

## ***Prologue***

### ***1861 - Outham, Lancashire***

On a cool Saturday afternoon in May, Edwin Blake lowered his newspaper and let it rest on his lap. He stared into space for a minute or two then looked across the room, his expression softening involuntarily at the sight of his four daughters. Eh, he was a lucky man to have been gifted with children such as these. No, not children now. His girls were all women grown and he didn't know whether to be sad or glad that none of them had married, that they still lived with him.

'Are you all right, Dad?' Cassandra asked.

He might have known she'd notice he was worried. As the eldest, she tried to look after them all, had done since she was fourteen and her mother died.

'I've been reading about this war in America.'

'It's good, isn't it, that they're trying to free the slaves?'

He nodded. 'Of course it is, only . . . if the North and South are busy fighting one another, what's going to happen about the cotton? Without slaves, who'll plant and harvest it?'

'They'll have to pay people to do it.'

'Where will they find the money for that? Wars cost a lot of money, my lass. Look at what happened in the Crimea only ten years ago.'

There was silence, then he shared his worst fears. 'And even if they do still produce cotton, how will they get it across the sea to us here in Lancashire? When there's a war, they set up blockades, then ships can't get through.'

‘We’ve been on short time before,’ Xanthe said. ‘We always manage.’

‘Short time is one thing. I’ve been trying to puzzle it out and to my mind, no cotton reaching Lancashire would mean no work at all.’

There was silence and he could see them thinking about what he’d said. Well, he’d always encouraged his lasses to think for themselves. Just because they were ordinary working folk didn’t mean they had to act like sheep and let other people shape their opinions.

‘Surely the war won’t last more than a few months?’ soft-hearted Maia asked. ‘It’s brother fighting brother. I can’t bear to think of that. Imagine if one of my sisters suddenly became an enemy.’ Her eyes filled with tears at the mere thought.

‘Brother’s been fighting brother since the world began,’ Edwin said. ‘Look at Cain and Abel in the Bible. And your uncle Joseph hasn’t spoken to me for over twenty years, didn’t even come to your mother’s funeral. He walks past me in the street now as if we’re strangers, as if we didn’t share a bed and play together when we were children. He said it was because I’d become a Methodist, but that seems a poor reason to me.’

‘I think it’s because of his wife,’ Cassandra said with a sigh. ‘She looks at us as if she hates us. I used to be frightened to walk past her in the street when I was little.’

‘I don’t like the woman either, but she’d never *harm* you.’

‘She looks as if she wants to.’

‘She and Joseph never had children, that’s why she resents you so much, I’m sure.’

‘Well, that’s not our fault, is it?’

He didn’t say anything. It was an old pain, his brother shunning him. Every now and then he had to speak about it, purge the bitterness a little. His sister-in-law was a mean-spirited woman, who had never lifted a finger to help them while his wife was ill. He’d tried to forgive her, because that was what they were taught at chapel, but he wanted nothing to do with her. He wasn’t usually fanciful, but something about her was—evil. It

was the only word he could think of to describe her.

'You don't need anyone else when you've got us.' Pandora leaned forward to lay one hand on his gnarled fingers.

He looked down at her smooth young skin. His hand was worn by life and hard work, his knuckles painful and stiff in the mornings, thickened with age. At twenty-two she had hands that were soft and pretty, even though they were reddened from work. 'I shouldn't still have you, though, not living with me, any road. You ought to be wed by now, all of you, with homes and families of your own.'

She got up abruptly and went to stir the stew, not turning round till she had herself under control. Edwin was annoyed with himself for causing Pandora pain with his thoughtless words. She was the only one of his four who'd found herself a fellow, a decent, lively lad. She'd have been wed now if poor Bill hadn't died suddenly of pneumonia last year.

But whether the subject was painful or not, he couldn't help finishing what he had to say as his eyes settled on his eldest daughter. 'You're twenty-eight now, Cassandra. Don't leave it too late to find a fellow, my dear girl. To grow old without children would be very sad. You four are the joy of my life.'

'How can I marry? I could never find a man half as clever as you,' she said lightly.

He frowned as he looked at her. 'Is that what you think of first in a husband? Being clever?'

She nodded. 'That and being kind, like you. I couldn't live with a stupid or boring man. I tried once when Tom Dorrington wanted to court me, because he was so kind. But it was no good. He talked of nothing but work and the neighbours.'

Edwin managed a smile, but it was yet another thing to worry him. His girls were all clever, but Cassandra had the quickest mind of them all. It was the one thing that had made him wish he was rich, to give them better chances to use their brains. He'd made

sure they got as much schooling as he could afford, so that after they started work they could read well enough to continue their education on their own, as he had.

The whole family now borrowed books regularly from the public library to feed their minds. Eh, that library was a wonderful thing! He wished it'd been there when he was younger. It had opened in 1852, but the law said the ratepayers had to be polled and two-thirds had to be in favour before the money could be spent. It had been a near thing whether Outham would have one, but they'd got enough votes, thank goodness.

But perhaps, being girls, his lasses should have hidden their cleverness, just a little. Most men didn't want their womenfolk to be quicker thinkers than they were.

No, Cassandra was right to hold out for a man whose mind could match hers. He didn't want his girls chained to dull men, who hadn't a thought in their heads beyond where the next meal was coming from and whether their jobs were safe.

'The food's ready. Shall we eat now?' Pandora asked.

Edwin led the way to the table but after a few mouthfuls put down his knife and fork, bringing up the other subject which was weighing on his mind. 'I must stop taking Greek lessons.'

'But you love learning Greek!' Cassandra protested.

'I can puzzle on by myself for a while.'

'Why stop?'

'Because of this war. I think we should all start watching our pennies carefully, making every farthing do the work of two and saving as much as we can. Hard times are coming, harder than we've ever known.'

There. He'd said all that was on his mind now. He broke off a piece of bread, picked up his spoon and began to eat his stew slowly.

The girls were quiet after that, thinking over what he'd said, and he didn't try to force conversation. If bad times were coming, best they all faced that fact, thought about it,

planned for it.

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In early November Cassandra lost her job when the small mill where she worked closed down. She'd missed a few years' work while the other girls were young, running the house and caring for them all after her mother died, so was one of the first at her mill to be turned off. Her sisters had been working half-time for a while and their father was the only one in full-time work now

To be without work at all made her feel deeply ashamed. 'I'll take over the housework and shopping, and you can be sure I'll make every penny count,' she told her sisters. 'It's no use me looking for other work. There's none to be had in the whole town.'

The following morning she kept a smile on her face as she saw everyone off, but when she was alone she couldn't hold back the tears, allowing herself a few moments' weakness. Then she wiped her eyes and decided to clean the house from top to bottom. She had some warm water left from breakfast but wouldn't waste coal on heating more. Water was free, so you could stay clean even if you couldn't afford to heat it.

Just as she'd filled the bucket, there was a tap on the back door and she opened it to see the little boy from two doors away.

'I'm hungry, missus,' Timmy said.

She fought a battle with herself and lost, giving him the crust of bread intended for her own dinner. He was a child born of disgrace and although the mother's husband had taken on her bastard child as well, everyone knew the poor lad was unloved and wasn't

as well cared for as the other children.

Cassandra sighed as she closed the door on him. You could see Timmy's unhappiness graven deeply in his face. His three younger half-brothers were bigger and plumper than he was. How could anyone treat one child in the family so badly?

She went back to work, scrubbing the flagstones on the kitchen floor but stopping often to think. Her father had been right all those months ago. The war had indeed stopped most cotton shipments getting through and times were hard now in their small town. People said things would get worse before they got better, which was a terrifying thought.

Some families were already on relief from the Poorhouse Board, others were selling their furniture and spare clothing piece by piece, doing anything rather than accept charity. You lost your independence once you were on relief, because the Board's officers poked their noses into every corner of your house, making you sell nearly everything you owned before they'd give you any money.

She and her family were managing—thanks to their father's foresight. There was still money in the tin box in his wardrobe. But it was dwindling more quickly than it should, because Edwin couldn't help giving to neighbours with tiny children crying for lack of food. It was one thing to see adults clemming, but he couldn't bear to see children going hungry. And even though he only gave a few pence each time, that was emptying the pot more quickly.

And she'd just given what she'd meant to have for dinner to the neighbour's child. She'd go hungry today. But Timmy wouldn't, poor little thing.

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When Edwin came home from work a few nights later, he felt sad and weary.

'The millowner told me this morning he has only enough cotton for three more months,' he said over tea, which was a meagre meal these days, mainly bread or

potatoes with a little butter. 'And to last even that long, he must turn off more operatives.' He looked at the twins. 'You'll be losing your jobs from next week, Xanthe and Maia. Mr Darston's trying to keep one person from each family in work, as far as he can, and for us, that'll be me. He's a good man, doing his best to spread what work there is fairly.'

'What will people do if this war goes on and on, and there's no work at all?' Maia asked. 'Already some folk look half-starved. I feel guilty that we still have something to eat every day.'

'The Queen won't let Lancashire folk starve to death,' Edwin said stoutly. 'When she realises how bad it is, she'll tell the government to help us, I'm sure.' He had great faith in Her Majesty, who lived a good life with her husband and children and cared about her subjects.

Xanthe clutched her twin's hand. 'I don't ever want to ask for relief. What if they force us to go into the poorhouse? I'd starve first. It makes me shiver even to walk past that place.'

Edwin could understand her feelings. The Vicar of the parish church, who was responsible for the management of the union poorhouse which served their own and the five neighbouring parishes, was a hard man, who treated the poor as if they'd committed a crime. Any charity offered under his auspices was grudging in the extreme.

The law said conditions inside had to be worse than anything outside, and while most poorhouses in the north refused to implement this rule strictly, the one in Outham kept to the letter of the law. The inmates were kept on a starvation diet while the vicar went home to stuff his own belly till it looked as if it was going to burst out of his trousers. He also made sure they separated man from wife 'to prevent fornication', even the elderly who were beyond that sort of thing.

Edwin didn't regard this Vicar as a true man of God, which was why he'd become a

Methodist in the first place.

‘Going into that place will be the last resort for any of us, the very last,’ he said gently. ‘We can hold out for a good while yet. But if it’s go into the workhouse or die, I hope you’ll choose life, Xanthe love. I certainly would.’

Cassandra came to link her arm in his. ‘I heard today that they’re going to set up a soup kitchen in the parish church for those who’ve no work at all. It doesn’t matter if you’re a member of the congregation or not. It’s to be held there three times a week, Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. We can get a meal there on those days and that’ll be a big help.’

Edwin wasn’t sure whether it was a good thing to do this in the parish church. He’d been hoping the minister of their own chapel, a more compassionate man, would organise something. But the Town Council in its wisdom had decided that all charity efforts were to be combined because help would go further that way. And since the parish church had the biggest hall by far, the soup kitchen was to be held there.

What was the world coming to when his lasses had to go out and eat the meagre bread of charity?

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Maia still had two days’ work a week, so on the first Monday the soup kitchen was open, the other three sisters went to get tickets for it. People waited patiently in the long queue outside the church hall, not saying much. It was shaming to depend on charity and they felt the humiliation keenly.

Cotton workers might be used to tightening their belts when there was a downturn in trade, but they weren’t used to this almost total lack of work. Some had already left the town, seeking jobs in the woollen industry of nearby Yorkshire. Others had braved the south, where people spoke differently and the land was softer. It was said there was still work to be found there.

Those men who found it too hard to leave spent their days wandering round Outham like lost souls, not knowing how to fill their time. It was easier on the women, who at least had their homes to keep tidy, their children to care for.

When they got to the front of the queue, Cassandra and her sisters had to answer questions about their circumstances before they could be given anything.

The man from the committee, who was a member of the parish church, questioned them in a sharp, impatient voice, then said curtly, 'I hope you'll thank your Maker on your knees for this generosity.' He waved one hand in a dismissive gesture. 'Go to the next table for your meal tickets.'

There a lady asked yet again, 'Name?'

'Cassandra Blake.' She saw the lady write down Cass Blake. 'That's not my name.' Her father had always refused to have their names shortened, saying he'd chosen them because they were beautiful names, belonging to the Greek goddesses he'd read about in the books the minister had lent him.

The lady stared at her in outrage then turned to the person sitting next to her. 'The impudence of this creature! She comes here to beg for food then corrects what I write.'

The vicar came across. 'Is there a problem, my dear Mrs Greaves?'

'There certainly is. This young madam has actually dared to correct what I've written.'

'But you asked for my name, then wrote something else down,' Cassandra protested.

He bent over the long book in which the names were being inscribed. 'Cass Blake.'

'My name is Cassandra. I've never been called Cass in my life.'

'My dear young woman, you should be grateful that this lady is generously giving her time to help you and not fuss about such unimportant details.' He looked down his nose at her. 'In any case, Cassandra is a most unsuitable name for a person of your station. I don't know where your parents got that from but I wouldn't have allowed them to christen you by such a name in *my* church. Now, take your tickets and move along

quickly or I shall have you removed from the hall. The food is over there. One ticket for each day, remember.'

He spoke as if she hadn't the wit to understand that. She hesitated, feeling outraged. But she'd eaten virtually nothing for more than a day, having slipped most of her portion to her father and Maia the previous night, because they still had to go out to work and because he'd been looking so tired lately.

When she went across to where they were serving the soup, she found herself facing her uncle Joseph's wife on the other side of the table.

Without a flicker of acknowledgement, her aunt said, 'Give me your ticket and take a bowl!'

The next lady ladled some soup into the bowl and a third lady passed Cassandra a piece of stale bread and a battered old spoon. 'Here you are. Don't forget to take the bowl and spoon to the table over there when you've finished.'

Cassandra forced a 'Thank you,' then escaped to a trestle table as far away from her aunt's glare as possible. She set down her food with fingers that trembled, shaken by the encounter. Such hatred!

A short time later she was joined by Pandora, whose cheeks bore red patches and whose eyes were sparkling with anger. 'That woman put down my name as Dora. *Dora!* And the vicar scolded me when I tried to correct her.'

Xanthe followed her, setting the bowl down and splashing soup on to the table. 'She put *me* down as Susan.'

A young man came across to join them. 'I heard what that woman said to you. I think it's shameful. Absolutely shameful. What right have they to change your names?'

Cassandra watched Pandora smile at him, saw how he blinked. Yet another male was entranced by her youngest sister, who didn't even seem to notice the effect she had on men. She was definitely the beauty of the family, with hair so dark it was almost blue-

black and eyes of a vivid blue.

‘Do you mind if I join you?’ he asked. ‘I’m on my own and I don’t know anyone else here.’

‘You’re welcome to sit with us,’ Cassandra said.

They began to eat. The bread was so stale and hard, they had to dunk it in the soup to soften it, which wasn’t good manners and drew scornful looks from the Vicar as he passed. But you couldn’t waste food.

The hall was soon full. The soup was unappetising, made mainly from cabbage, potatoes and bones, but no one left a drop.

‘Poor thin stuff this is!’ Pandora muttered. ‘I could make better myself. And the bread is days old.’

‘At least it’s not mouldy. And it’s free.’ Xanthe sighed. ‘I can see why Father stopped coming to this church, if that’s how they treat you. Do they think poorer people have no feelings?’

When they went outside, they parted company from the young man and strolled home slowly. People used to walk briskly, Cassandra thought as she saw others sauntering along. Now there were so many long hours to fill, no one hurried.

She looked up to see only a few thin trails of smoke instead of a sky criss-crossed with thick plumes of dark smoke from mill chimneys. It looked wrong, as if this wasn’t their town any more, only a ghost of Outham.

It wasn’t till they were nearly home that Pandora said what they’d all been thinking, ‘Our aunt looked as if she hated us, didn’t she?’

‘Yes. Don’t tell father we saw her. It’ll only upset him.’

Pandora was silent for the length of the street, then said thoughtfully, ‘She always has such a strange look in her eyes.’

‘Never mind her,’ Xanthe said. ‘I want to go and change my library books. At least

we'll be able to do that any time we want now.'

'I think we're going to be very grateful for that library,' Cassandra said. 'At least reading costs us nothing.'

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Joseph Blake closed his grocery store at nine o'clock that night as usual, saw his employees off the premises and locked up. He walked reluctantly up the stairs to the comfortable rooms where he and his wife had lived ever since her parents died. He'd eaten a meal with Isabel at six o'clock, seen what a foul mood she was in and claimed an urgent need to finish some accounts in the shop. There, as he supervised his employees and attended to the more important customers himself, he'd tried to work out what she could be so angry about this time.

She was often in a bad mood these days, it seemed. Their poor little maidservant was regularly reduced to tears, but Dot needed the work, because her family had no other source of income, so had to put up with it. If Joseph had tried to intervene, Isabel would have been even harder on the girl, so he bit his tongue and contented himself with slipping Dot the occasional treat from the shop, a broken biscuit or the untidy scraps of ham. He knew Isabel kept an eye on how much their maid ate and wasn't generous.

Perhaps his wife had seen his nieces while she was out. That always put her in a bad mood. There were fine-looking girls and the youngest one was truly beautiful. He was sorry he didn't know them, but Isabel had made it very clear before they married that if he wanted her, he had to sever all connection with his brother, and he'd given her his word, thinking he'd persuade her to change her mind later. But she never had. She came from high church stock and was proud of that, wanted no truck with those she called 'canting Methodists'.

Only it seemed to him that she was the one doing the canting, mouthing meaningless religious phrases and living in exactly the opposite way to what the Bible taught. She'd

been extremely jealous of his brother Edwin's wife, Catherine, who hadn't been exactly beautiful but whose smiling face and kindly ways made friends for her everywhere.

Isabel had few friends and her plain face was made even plainer by her sour expression.

It might have been different if they'd been able to have children. When they were first married, Isabel had carried one for seven months, seeming to soften and grow kinder with each month. But then she'd lost the baby, nearly dying herself in the process. She'd been too narrow and the birth had torn her inside, the doctor said. He'd added that she'd not be able to carry any more children to term so should avoid getting with child again.

She'd been ill for so long they'd moved in here with her parents, where her mother could look after her. And they'd not shared a bed from that day onwards. Which was a relief.

He'd soon learned to spend as much time as he could in the shop, had quickly understood why his father-in-law also did this. You could always find something to do there, checking the shelves, making sure the boy took out the deliveries promptly, seeing the salesmen from the various firms from whom they bought stock, or just sitting quietly after the shop closed, ostensibly checking the account books but in reality reading a newspaper or book.

When his parents-in-law died, he changed the shop's name to Blake's Emporium, which angered his wife but for once he'd stood up to her. He'd carried on running it in much the same way as before, however, because his father-in-law had been a good businessman.

Since the war in America things had changed. There was no need to order as much stock these days, because the Cotton Famine had affected people at every social level. The more affluent folk were unlikely to stop buying the basic necessities and wouldn't starve like their poorer neighbours, which meant he would continue to make a living.

But nearly everyone in the town had had to cut back their expenses, so his profits had gone down.

No putting it off any longer. He made sure the flaring gas lights were all safely extinguished and climbed the stairs to their living quarters.

Isabel was sitting waiting for him in her armchair near the fire, back stiffly upright, mouth tightly pursed, hands clasped in her lap. 'How did business go today?'

'Takings are down, but we're still making a decent enough living.'

'You should dismiss the youngest lad to keep the profits up.'

'There are no other jobs in town and he's the sole support of his family, so I'll keep him on for as long as I'm able.'

'My father would have dismissed him long before this.'

'I'm not your father.'

She made an angry growling sound in her throat, but he didn't care because she had no power to change anything. The shop had been left to him not her, thank goodness, because Mr Horton hadn't believed women were able to understand business.

'I'll ring for our cocoa and biscuits,' she said abruptly.

It wasn't till they were sitting in front of the fire that she revealed the cause of her bad mood. 'I saw *those girls* today. Three of them, anyway, I don't know where the other one was. They came to the soup kitchen.' Her narrow chest heaved with indignation as she added, '*Like beggars!* I was so mortified I didn't know where to look. I didn't acknowledge them, of course.'

He was surprised. 'Are they that short of money? I'd have thought Edwin would still be earning something.'

'They must be out of work or they'd not have been given tickets. I dread to think what people will be saying behind our backs, knowing we have relatives seeking charity like that.'

‘A lot of folk in the town need help now. It’s not my nieces’ fault there’s no work for them.’

‘Trust you to take their side. I’m sure those lazy young trollops don’t want to work.’

He didn’t argue, just sipped his cocoa and kept his expression calm as she went on and on. There was no doing anything but endure when Isabel got into this sort of mood, imagining insults where there were none and maligning his nieces, who were decent lasses.

He’d known she wouldn’t be an easy wife, but he hadn’t realised how bad living with her would be. He’d wanted the shop that came with her, the shop where he’d worked hard for ten years, so when it was clear that no other man was likely to marry her, he’d risked asking his employer’s permission to court his thirty-year-old spinster daughter.

His brother Edwin had hungered for learning but Joseph had hungered for money and comfort. Most of all, for a shop of his own.

He’d thought having children would soften Isabel. Now he knew nothing would ever soften her. Her mind was so warped with spite and temper, he sometimes questioned her very sanity.

But he would keep his promise to her father: he would always look after her, however difficult she was, in return for being given the shop.