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August 1921

Eva stared out at the Pennine foothills as the new motor bus chugged slowly towards Heyshaw. It had been wonderful to see all the family at her sister Polly's wedding, but she had come away envious of her two sisters' happiness. She was angry with herself for that, not wanting to be mean-spirited, but could not help wishing she too had a husband to love, children tugging at her skirts and calling, "Mam, Mam!" in that insistent way you could not ignore.

She smiled at the thought of children, then sighed. Why would any man fall in love with shy, prim Eva Kershaw, former schoolmistress, who was neither beautiful nor remarkable in any way? She was twenty-four now, had never attracted a suitor and wasn't likely to, either, now that so many young men of her generation had been killed in the war.

Oh, heavens, she was getting maudlin! Pull yourself together, my girl, she scolded, and sat very upright, relieved to be nearly home—and yet fearing what she would find there.

She got off the bus in the centre of Heyshaw, a place not large enough to be called a town or to have its own railway but still larger than most villages. She enjoyed living here, loved the rolling sweep of the moors just above the village and even loved the magnificent lowering skies that brought rain sweeping in.

She was anxious now to get back to Alice, who had been more of a mother to her over the past ten years than her own ever had and who was slowly dying. Eva blinked away the tears that would well in

her eyes every time she thought of that, hoping none of the other passengers had noticed. She had given up teaching the previous year to care for her friend—willingly—and although Alice had lived for longer than the doctors had predicted, they both knew it could only be a matter of weeks now.

What Eva didn't know was how she would cope afterwards without Alice's wise guidance and motherly affection.

Picking up her suitcase, she set off to walk up the rise to the outlying district known as North Hey, glad of a chance to stretch her legs after the morning's journey from the Fylde Coast.

But as she passed an alley something caught her eye and, hearing children's cries, she stopped automatically to peer along the narrow space between two rows of houses. At the far end three girls had a smaller one trapped. She was cowering against the wall, tears pouring down her face, and they were clearly threatening her.

As Eva watched, the tallest girl darted forward to punch the victim in the arm, taunting, "Dummy! Dummy!"

If there was one thing Eva hated it was bullying! She had been bullied as a child herself for being cleverer than the others and could never pass by when someone was suffering the same treatment. Without thinking she began to run down the alley, shouting, "Hoy! Stop that at once!" as if she were still a teacher.

The trio turned towards her, glanced at one another, then started to run. The largest girl pushed past, nearly knocking Eva over, and while she was struggling to regain her balance, the others followed. By the time she'd turned round, all three were clattering out of the street end of the alley.

She didn't try to chase them, though she'd recognised two of them from her days as a teacher. The large one was called Christine and was the leader of a rough group of girls who were always in trouble about something or other.

Their victim slid to the ground and buried her face in her hands. The whole of the child's body was shaking with her weeping and yet she was making no noise. Automatically Eva knelt to put an arms round the child's shoulders, whispering, "It's all right. They've gone now."

Gradually the flow of tears stopped and she wiped her face on her sleeve, hiccuping as she did so.

"Here." Eva took out her own handkerchief and offered it. "What's your name?"

The reply was only a whisper. "Molly."

The child must be new at school since Eva had taught there, because she didn't recognise her. She was poorly dressed, with a hole in one sock and a tear in her skirt, and she was staring at the neatly pressed and folded handkerchief as if she had never seen such a thing. Taking it gingerly, she looked at Eva for permission to use it.

"I don't mind if you dirty it, dear. That's what handkerchiefs are for." She watched the little girl mop her face and blow her nose vigorously, then offer the handkerchief back. "No, you keep it. I have plenty of others at home."

The child said nothing, but clutched it tightly and began to chew one corner of it.

"Where do you live?"

There was a shout from the end of the alley and a bigger girl came pounding down it. "I've been looking for you all over, our Molly. Why didn't you wait for me outside the shop?" Then she recognised Eva and gasped. "Miss Kershaw!"

"Hello, Gracie. Is this your little sister? I found her being bullied." She named two of the girls responsible and asked, "Why would they do that? They were so much bigger than Molly they can't even be in the same class."

Gracie shrugged and grabbed her sister's hand. "I don't know, but thanks for helping her, Miss."

Knowing Gracie's brusqueness of old, Eva didn't try to question her further, though she could tell the girl did know something. She picked up her suitcase and handbag. "Come on. I'll walk with you to the end of your lane. They may be waiting for you down the street."

Gracie scowled at her. "There's no need. They won't dare attack her when I'm here, because I can beat them lot any day."

"It's on my way, so we may as well stay together."

Gracie grunted something and Molly gave Eva a shy smile.

Ten minutes' brisk walking brought them to North Hey, which was mostly inhabited by the better class of people, who lived in large detached houses set back from the road. It always made Eva smile when she thought of that, because although she lived here now, she had grown up in the mill terraces of Overdale and her family had been desperately short of money after her father was killed. The smile faded as she tried to remember his face and failed. She had been only eleven when he died, about the same age as Gracie now. It all seemed so long ago.

Just before they got to Eva's house she stopped to say goodbye and watch the girls turn down the lane leading to Linney's Farm, where their father was a labourer. A little way along Molly stopped and gave Eva another tentative smile, but her sister jerked the hand she was holding so that Molly had to do a little half-run to catch up with her.

Eva watched them go with a sigh of regret. She really missed teaching, loved being with children. She walked slowly back towards Rose Villa, which had once belonged to Alice's uncle and would, her friend said, belong to Eva one day. As if she cared about that! She wished Alice could live for ever. But she did love Rose Villa, which stood in two acres of well-tended gardens, surrounded by high stone walls. The house was square, built of creamy millstone grit, with a grey slate roof. Alice always joked

that it was a back-to-front sort of place, with the main gardens at the rear looking out towards the moors and sheltered by a wall, just as the main rooms were on that side as well.

When she went through the gates Eva stopped for a moment in shock at the sight of a car parked in front of the house, a gleaming black Riley tourer with its hood down. Surely Jenny hadn't had to call in the doctor again? No, this wasn't the doctor's. Whose was it, then? You didn't see many cars in Heyshaw, or visiting strangers, either. Had something happened to Alice? If her friend had died with only their maid to keep her company, Eva would never be able to forgive herself.

She broke into a run but before she got to the front door, Jenny opened it. "I saw you coming from the kitchen, Eva love. Don't worry. Miss Blake's all right." She lowered her voice, casting a quick glance over her shoulder. "I wanted to warn you. There's a fellow turned up two days ago, said he was Miss Blake's nephew—well, he may be, I don't deny that—but from the way he was eyeing the house before he rang the bell, you'd think he'd come to sell it. And she asked him to stay. If he had any thought for other folk, he'd not put an extra burden on us at a time like this. I've given him the big room in the attic." She winked. That room had the most uncomfortable bed and was next to the plumbing pipes, which gurgled and moaned at times.

Eva stared at her in surprise. It wasn't like Jenny to take a dislike to someone. She'd been with them for several years now and was only a few years older than Eva herself, more a friend to her than a maid.

A door opened at the rear of the hall and a man came out, smiling. "Ah, you must be Eva. I'm Gus Blake, Alice's nephew."

She could not help staring at him. He was tall, about six foot, and quite good-looking though rather lanky, with dark eyes and brown hair parted near the middle and kept in place with hair cream. He had a couple of bad scars on his forehead, but a fresh complexion otherwise. She had never liked moustaches, though, especially thin ones like his. Was he really the son of Alice's step-brother? And if

so, why was he visiting? Her friend had always said that all the relatives she liked were dead and she didn't care if she never saw the others again.

He moved forward with one hand extended and when Eva shook it, he held hers for longer than she liked, clasping it with his other hand and staring down at her. This made her feel a little uncomfortable and she tugged her hand away, taking a hasty step backwards. She was not used to holding hands with strangers. Well, she didn't meet many new people because they led a very quiet life here. Mr Blake was still blocking her way, however, and she didn't like to push past him.

Behind her Jenny cleared her throat. "I'll take your suitcase upstairs for you, miss, shall I? Excuse me, sir, but Miss Kershaw needs to get past."

Only then did he move. The glance he threw towards the maid was not at all friendly but when he turned back to Eva his smile reappeared. "Cousin Alice is waiting for you."

He waved her along the hallway as if she were the visitor and he the one who lived there. He seemed too big and masculine in their feminine household. Even the dainty sprigged wallpaper looked wishy-washy beside him and his tread made the polished floorboards creak in protest.

As he opened the door for her, Eva paused in the doorway of Alice's cosy sitting room with its sweeping views over the moors. It looked different, somehow. The chair she always thought of as hers was pulled over beside Alice's daybed and two of the small tables had been shoved back so carelessly that the china figurines and enamelled boxes were askew, one of them dangerously near the edge.

Alice, who was lying on the sofa, turned a glowing face towards her. "Eva, darling, look who's come to see us—my half-brother Simon's son all the way from London. I thought Gus had been lost in France, but it seems he was just missing for a while."

Eva hurried across to hug her friend and study her anxiously, worried at how tired Alice looked—or had she been this bad before? It was hard to tell when you lived with someone day in, day out, but after

three days away Eva felt as if she were seeing everything with fresh eyes. “Are you all right? You mustn’t overtire yourself, dear.”

“Oh, I shan’t. It was so mild Gus carried me out into the garden yesterday, right down to the far end so that I could see the stream on the other side of the wall. I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed it. There were a couple of trout, only as big as my hand, lying behind a rock, just moving slightly, the way they do. We’re going to go outside again tomorrow after I’ve had my rest.”

“That’s lovely for you.” Eva smiled at Gus, grateful for anything that made Alice’s life more enjoyable.

“Now, sit down and tell us all about the wedding. Did the sun shine? What did your sister wear? How is her poor little son?”

So Eva launched into a description of her sister Polly’s wedding to Captain Richard Mercer, late of the North Fylde Rifles. Her eyes grew misty as she spoke of the love that was so visible between them and the beauty of the summer’s day in the little village church, with her two brothers and other sister all gathered for the occasion.

“I wish I could have gone.” Alice sighed. “It’s lovely to think that Lizzie and Polly are both happily married now.” Her eyes rested on Eva thoughtfully. “It’ll be your turn next, dear.”

She didn’t like Alice saying such things in front of a stranger, so said brusquely, “You know I’ve no intention of marrying. I’m quite content as I am.” Her friend was looking so exhausted she added gently, “And I think you need a nap now.”

Alice sighed again, but nodded.

Gus Blake left the room at once, but was waiting in the hall, blocking Eva’s way again.

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr Blake, I’d like to go up and unpack.”

“Oh, do call me Gus. We’re almost related, after all. And I’d like to ask you about my aunt. Let’s go into the small sitting room.” He pointed to the right near the front door.

“We’ll use the garden room, if you don’t mind, Mr B—Gus, I mean. That sitting room is my own private domain.”

He stood back with a flourish of one arm to let her lead the way. “Certainly. Sorry to have intruded. I didn’t realise it was yours.”

Alice’s uncle had had built the garden room at the side of the house. It had windows along two sides and there were several ferns in pots, not flourishing now that Alice was no longer able to care for them. Eva did her best, but knew she didn’t have green fingers.

“What is it we need to discuss?” she asked, impatient to get on with her unpacking.

“What does the doctor say about my aunt? She won’t talk about it, but she looks—well, as if she hasn’t got long to live.”

Eva could not prevent tears from welling in her eyes, too many to blink away so she fumbled for her handkerchief, only to remember that she’d given it to the child.

“Here, take mine.” He thrust a crumpled piece of white cotton into her hand.

Eva wiped her eyes and handed it back to him. “Thank you. Alice has a growth in the stomach, I’m afraid, and she’s already lived for much longer than the doctor expected, so we just—take each day as it comes.”

He stared down at the handkerchief, which he was still holding. “I wish I’d known earlier. Aunt Alice is the only close relative I have left now. I lost my parents a while ago. I can sympathise with what you’re going through.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been very sad for you.”

He nodded, taking a deep, shaky breath before continuing, “It was. Which is why I thought I’d get in touch with my aunt. Only I’m just in time to say goodbye, it seems.”

Eva gave him a moment to pull himself together, bending to nip some dead leaves off the plant next to her.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to unload my troubles on you. You must have a sympathetic face.” He looked at her with a wry half-smile.

She knew she didn’t have that gift. It was one of her personal regrets that she could not overcome her innate shyness, except with children—but she didn’t challenge his remark. She realised he was waiting for her to say something and searched desperately for words. “It was a long war and a lot of people suffered, not just the soldiers. Alice and I were quite lucky, really. We had larger classes to teach and there were food shortages, but we were glad to do our bit. She’s not one to complain, so it wasn’t until after the war that I realised that it wasn’t just indigestion that ailed her.” She paused for a moment, then decided to ask him bluntly, “Might I ask how long you’re intending to stay?”

“Oh, I’m not in a hurry to rush off. I’ve been helping a couple of chaps out with this and that since the war, but that’s finished now. I’ll probably start up some sort of business of my own eventually.”

Eva tried to hide her dismay. That sounded as though he were planning a long stay in Heyshaw and she didn’t want to share Alice’s last days with anyone except Jenny. This man might be a relative but he wasn’t really close to Alice, who hadn’t seen him since he was a child. “Well, that’s very kind of you, Mr Blake, but I think a couple of days’ visit will be more than enough for your aunt at the moment. She gets very tired, as you’ve no doubt noticed.”

“I keep asking you to call me Gus. And yes, of course. I’ll leave whenever you say. I don’t want to outstay my welcome.” He stood up. “I think I’ll take a stroll down into the village and get a breath of fresh air, leave you to unpack.”

She nodded and went into her own sitting room to watch him stride off down the drive, trilby perched jauntily on his head. What was a man like him doing in Heyshaw? He was so different from the locals he made her nervous. And she hadn't expected Alice's nephew to have such a pronounced London accent because he'd only gone to live there when he was nine.

With a sigh she sat down at her desk, still feeling unsettled. The mail lay to the right, as always, a letter from an old teaching friend who had married and moved to Bristol. She reached automatically for the paper knife then frowned as she realised it wasn't there. It took her a moment or two to find it under a pile of papers. The papers were in their usual place, so how had the knife got under them? She was certain she hadn't left it there. Alice often teased her about being incurably neat, but when you were a teacher you had to set standards and keep track of many bits and pieces.

She slit open her letter and skimmed through it. Not bad news, thank goodness. She'd read it properly later after she'd unpacked, but first she'd better confer with Jenny about meals.

"He eats like a horse, that one does," Jenny said gloomily, leaning back against the kitchen dresser and folding her arms. "I've done a potato pie for tonight. Nice and filling, and the butcher had a piece of lovely suet to make the crust with. Miss Blake sat up for dinner with him yesterday, but perhaps you can persuade her not to do that tonight. She's worn out by teatime these days."

But as Eva went up to her room to unpack, it occurred to her that this would leave her to dine alone with Gus Blake—and the thought of that made her feel even more nervous. It was ridiculous, really. She didn't know the man and he'd been nothing but polite to her so why did she feel like this?

Alice enjoyed another brief chat with Gus and Eva over a cup of tea, but afterwards admitted she didn't really feel up to joining them for dinner, so Gus carried her upstairs. His being able to do that certainly

made things easier, Eva thought as she helped her friend undress. Alice was very weak now and needed help moving even a few paces.

“It was lovely to sit outside today,” she said wistfully. “I do hope the good weather will continue, so that we can do it again.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. Shall I give you your medicine, now?”

“I suppose so. I hate feeling woozy, though.” Alice made herself comfortable then asked suddenly, “Do you like Gus?”

“I don’t know him.”

“His father used to tease me unmercifully when we were children but Simon could be fun, too. He and his wife came to visit us once or twice before I went to live in Overdale, but I didn’t see them again, though we exchanged letters and Christmas cards, of course, until they died.” She smiled reminiscently. “Gus was a lively lad, always in trouble, but I did enjoy their visits. He’s grown into a fine young man, hasn’t he?”

As her friend yawned and drifted into sleep, Eva went into her bedroom next door and changed her crumpled travelling clothes ready for the evening meal. She wished she could eat in the kitchen with Jenny, as she usually did these days, wished most of all that Alice did not look so frail.

Jenny served the meal very formally, setting the table in the dining room and not attempting to chat as she brought the food in. She thought Eva was looking very stiff and correct tonight. Well she was always stiff with young men because she hadn’t known many. And actually Miss Blake had discouraged one or two fellows who’d taken a liking to Eva, which Jenny had thought unfair.

When the bell rang she went to clear away and was surprised at how little was left in the serving dishes.

Eva smiled at her. "Thank you, Jenny. That was lovely."

When their visitor said nothing, Jenny felt irritated. He had a hearty appetite but never bothered to say thank you or tell her he'd enjoyed something and she'd made a special effort since his arrival. She reckoned he was bone idle. When he wasn't with his aunt, he lounged around reading or strolled down the road to the local shop for cigarettes. If he'd had anything about him, he'd have gone out and tidied up the garden for them.

After she'd cleared up the kitchen, she walked across to her Grandad Gill's cottage opposite with the leftovers. She had been delighted to find a job so close to him after her grandmother died, because they were the only two Gills left now.

"I've got your tea here, Grandad," she called as she walked in, then realised Wilfred Horrocks was sitting with him. "Sorry. Didn't know you had visitors." Her grandad looked at her basket and opened his mouth. She frowned at him, hoping he wasn't going to offer to share. He'd give his last egg away if someone looked hungry, her grandad would.

"I'm just leaving," Wilf said abruptly.

She waited till he'd clumped off down the path to ask, "What's wrong with him today? He looks like he's lost a pound and found a farthing."

"He's out of work. His firm closed down a week or two ago and he can't find anything else. He's tried everywhere. Says there are long queues if there's so much as a sniff of a job." John Gill sighed. "And he's running out of money. Can't even afford the bus fares to seek work away from Heyshaw any more."

"Oh, no. Poor thing!" She knew Wilf was an upholsterer and had been working for a small furniture manufacturer in Rochdale. Like quite a few people, he had been on short time for a while, but unlike

most he had no family to fall back on. He was an outsider who'd come to live in lodgings in North Hey after the war. Everyone agreed he was a nice, polite fellow, though he never said much about himself.

He'd helped her grandfather one day when the old man had fallen over and since then had called in regularly, which she thought kind of him. And it wasn't out of pity, she'd seen that for herself, but because he genuinely enjoyed the old man's company.

"His landlady's told Wilf he can stay on for a week or two, but she can't feed him until he starts paying her again, so he's managing as best he can," Grandad said with a sigh. "He gets the odd night's work behind the bar in the Dog and Duck, but that's all. He was hungry today. I remember that look from when I was a lad."

Jenny looked down at the plate, feeling guilty. "Well, there isn't enough for two tonight. That nephew of Miss Blake's is a right greedy pig. I don't know how he stays so thin. I'll try and bring a bit more tomorrow, so tell Wilf to pop round in the evening."

"He's a bit touchy about taking charity."

"Then trick him into being here when I bring your tea across." She grinned at him. "And don't tell me you can't. You're a cunning old devil when you want something."

He opened his eyes wide. "Me? Eh, I never!"

While they chatted, Jenny cleared up the room quickly and efficiently. Grandad lived mainly in the kitchen since her grandma had died and recently he'd started sleeping in the front room because he found the stairs hard to manage. It was a good thing he owned this little cottage and had her to help out, because the old age pension didn't go very far. Those who had to pay rent as well as buy food found it impossible to manage on it without their families' help.

She sighed as she strolled back to Rose Villa. Grandad wasn't strong enough to do much work around his house now, though his spirit was undiminished and he was no one's fool. But he needed her

help on a daily basis and she was beginning to worry about what would happen to her after Miss Blake died. She'd heard her mistress say everything would go to Eva, and her friend had assured her nothing would change, but would there be enough money to keep the big rambling house going? Would Eva really want to stay there on her own?

If Jenny had to look for work further afield, however would her granddad manage?

When they heard the kitchen door close behind Jenny, Gus jumped up and hurried out into the hall, opening the front door a crack and peering out.

Eva, who had followed him, could not imagine what he was looking at. "Is something wrong?"

"That maid is taking advantage of my aunt, stealing food from her."

Eva stared at him in amazement. "*Jenny?*"

"Yes. I saw her last night slipping out with leftover food in a basin and she's doing it again tonight."

Anger nearly choked Eva. How dare he spy on them and jump to conclusions like this? "You're absolutely wrong. Jenny is as honest as they come. She takes food to her grandfather *every* evening, sometimes leftovers and sometimes stuff she buys 'specially, because he's old and on his own. Alice knows all about it and is glad to share with him because Jenny does the work of two and always has."

"Oh. Sorry. Just trying to keep an eye on things for my aunt."

"Well, you can leave that sort of thing to me, thank you very much," Eva snapped. "I've been managing this house for the past two years and Alice hasn't complained. Now, I've got things to do so I'll leave you. We go to bed early, as I'm sure you've realised."

He smiled, leaning against the wall, hands in pockets, not seeming in the least put out by the sharpness of her tone. "So I gathered from your maid's disapproving manner last night. But your aunt's

given me a front door key and I'm not at all tired, so I think I'll take a stroll down to the pub and sample the local brew. I'll try not to disturb you when I come back and you can trust me to lock up properly."

When she heard the front door close behind him, Eva breathed a sigh of relief and went into her sitting room. Taking out her account book, she began to do last month's totals, but kept making mistakes, and in the end she pushed it away, knowing she was too upset to concentrate. For a time she sat staring into space, seeing Alice's body, so painfully thin except for the lumpy stomach where the growth was eating her away.

She didn't hear Jenny return because suddenly it all overwhelmed her and she started weeping. Putting her head down on her arms, she gave way to the grief she felt for Alice.

She didn't hear the knock or even the door opening, but suddenly Jenny was there beside her, hugging her and making comforting noises.

"I'm s-sorry."

"Eh, Eva love, no one can be brave all the time and I bet you had to put a good face on things while you were away so as not to spoil your sister's wedding."

Eva nodded, her breath catching on another sob.

"Why don't you come into the kitchen—I've got a lovely fire going there—and we'll have a nice cup of cocoa." Jenny kept her arm round Eva's shoulders as they walked along the short passage, thinking that Miss Blake wasn't the only one who'd lost weight lately.

As she sat down in front of the kitchen fire, Eva gave a watery smile. "What would we both do without you, Jenny dear? You're like a member of the family. I'm sorry Gus Blake speaks to you so arrogantly."

“Eh, I don’t let that sort of thing bother me. There’s some as think you’re stupid and below them because you’re a maid. Well, they’re the stupid ones, not me.” As they sat there waiting for the milk to boil, she hesitated then said bluntly, “He’s trouble, that one is.”

“Why do you say that? He’s been very pleasant to me and Alice is delighted he’s come.”

Jenny scowled as she poured the hot milk into their cups and stirred the cocoa in vigorously.

“Because of the way he stares at everything, so calculating and sly.”

“Well, I suggested he stay only for a day or two, because of my aunt’s condition, so he’ll be leaving soon.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Jenny muttered. “He’s trying to worm his way in, if you ask me. Now, tell me more about the wedding . . .”

But although the chat with Jenny cheered her up, Eva felt her apprehension returning as she made her way upstairs. She looked in on Alice, who was sleeping soundly, thank goodness, then sought her own bed.

It was a while before she slept. She could not help wondering what Gus Blake wanted. It was one thing for a man like him to drop in and visit an elderly aunt, quite another for him to stay on for several days in a quiet village where nothing much ever happened. It just didn’t make sense.