

PROLOGUE

August 1890

Dinah Baillie got off the train in Overdale, so relieved to be back she could have wept. She hadn't told her grandparents she was coming home and didn't want to be recognised by any of her friends, so pulled her straw hat forward and bent her head to hide her face. Hurrying across to the ladies' waiting room—which was empty, thank goodness!—she closed the door and leaned against it for a minute, feeling shaky.

Taking up a position from which she could see out of the window but not be seen from the platform, she watched the crowd of passengers disperse. Only then did she leave the station.

As a child she'd played along all the back streets so knew exactly how to get to Stanley's house without being seen. But even so her nerves were jittery as she hurried along the alleys between the terraces of narrow dwellings, holding her skirt up to keep it away from the gutter. Luck was with her. Apart from a group of small girls playing skipping games, she met no one.

"Please let him be home," she muttered as she lifted the sneck on the back gate of the Kershaws' home. She'd timed her arrival to coincide with Stanley's return from work at two o'clock. The house was usually empty on a Saturday because his mother always visited her cousin and his father went to the nearest football match. She and Stanley had used that to their advantage many a time. Her lips curved into a half-smile as she remembered his big, strong body and dark curly hair. The only man she'd ever loved.

But today something was wrong. She could see through the window that the kitchen was full of people and with a muffled squeak of dismay she took two hasty steps sideways to hide behind the shed. What was happening?

As the back door banged open and someone came striding down towards the privy, she slipped inside the shed, determined not to leave Overdale until she'd seen Stanley and sorted their problems out! She didn't dare.

Through the tiny, smeary window she saw two men come out to stand on the back doorstep: his father and uncle, dressed in their Sunday best. Suddenly she heard them say something about "the bride" and realised what was happening. A wedding. Who was getting married? And why was everyone gathering here? Stanley was an only child.

They went inside again and she saw people begin to leave the kitchen, heard the sound of their cheerful farewells fading towards the front of the house and the words "See you at the church," repeated several times.

The back door opened and a man came out. She let out a low groan of relief. At last! As he passed by, she opened the shed door a few inches and hissed, "Stanley!" He turned, looking puzzled, and she opened the door wide enough to show herself.

"Dinah!" He mouthed the word, staring at her in shock.

"I need to see you," she whispered.

The back door of the house opened and someone called, "Hurry up, our Stanley! You don't want to be late."

"You go ahead, Mam. I'll catch up with you in a minute." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to scowl at Dinah. "What the *hell* are you doing here? And today of all days?"

"I need to see you."

"You said you never wanted to see me again! You said it very loudly. The whole street heard our final quarrel."

Tears filled her eyes. She cried so easily now. “I never meant it. You knew I didn’t.”

“I knew nothing of the sort,” he said flatly. “You went away and returned my letter unopened. What else was I to think?”

“Letter? What letter?”

He looked at her in puzzlement. “The one I sent the Wednesday after you left.”

“I never even saw it.” Dinah clapped one hand to her mouth. “Oh, no! My aunt must have sent it back. She was ill, frightened I’d leave her to cope on her own. She nearly died, so I couldn’t get away till now. When I didn’t hear from you I wrote and asked my grandmother to tell you I was waiting for a letter.”

“Well, she passed me in the street many a time, could easily have done that, but she never even tried to speak to me.”

Dinah put one hand to her mouth, feeling tears begin to trickle down her face. “Oh, Stanley, I didn’t know. They must have got together about this.” Her aunt and grandmother were strict teetotallers and had never liked her going out with someone who worked in a brewery.

He sighed and looked at her less angrily. “Any road, it’s too late now. I’m getting wed today.”

The words echoed in her head and she couldn’t believe she’d heard them correctly, could only stare at him in horror. “You can’t be!”

He glanced over his shoulder, then back at her. “I’m sorry, Dinah. That’s how it is.”

She grabbed his sleeve to stop him moving away. “Who to?”

“Meggie.”

“That scrawny bitch! Stanley, *no!*”

“She’s a nice lass and I love her.” A fond expression settled on his face. “She’s got such dainty manners and ways—and she doesn’t throw temper tantrums like you.”

“You said you were fond of *me* not so long ago.”

“I was—once.” He sighed and pulled his watch out, flipping open the cover and shaking his head at what he saw. “I have to go.”

“You can’t!” She took a deep breath and said it baldly. “Stanley, I’m expecting your child.”

He was so still she wasn’t sure he’d heard but as she opened her mouth to repeat the words, he swallowed audibly, then whispered, “You can’t be!”

“I can. It’s due in February.”

“Oh, hell!”

“So you’ll have to tell *her* you’ve changed your mind.”

He closed his eyes, then opened them again and looked at her with a pitying expression. “I can’t, Dinah. You see, *she*’s expecting my child, too. Only hers is due in March.”

One mew of pain escaped her, then anger began to scald through her. “You didn’t wait long, did you? You must have been with her almost as soon as I’d left.”

“Aye. When my letter was returned I did it out of anger at first, heaven help me. But *she* did it out of love. And Dinah—she’s a damn sight easier to get on with than you, and now . . . well, I love her. She *depends* on me and I’m not letting her down.”

Suddenly Dinah’s fury overflowed in a red tide, as it did sometimes, and she began beating at his chest, trying to scratch his face. They’d loved passionately, her and Stanley, but they’d fought fiercely too.

He held her off, then as she continued to struggle, gave her a hard shake. “Stop it!”

She fell against his chest, sobbing now, feeling helpless and afraid. “What am I going to do?”

His voice was grim. “Not cause trouble, I hope. Because it won’t do you any good. I shan’t change my mind. It’s Meggie I’m marrying.”

Dinah drew back, wiping her eyes with one arm, staring at him pleadingly and laying one hand on her stomach. “But this is your child as well.”

He nodded. "Aye, I believe you there. You've too hot a temper to lie and cheat." He felt in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "I'll give you some money. It's all I can do now."

"*Money!*" She spat the word at him. "What good is money? It's a husband I need."

"Me and the lads went to the races last week and I had a bit of luck on the horses, couldn't seem to go wrong. I haven't told Meggie about it yet. Here, you can have half." He thrust some pound notes into her hand.

She nearly threw them back at him, only she couldn't afford to do that. "A few miserable pounds!" she whispered, looking down at them. "That's not much of a heritage for your oldest child, is it?"

He shrugged. "I can't marry two of you, can I?"

"I'll come to the church and stop the wedding."

He looked at her pityingly. "You can't stop it and you'll only show yourself up if you try." He sighed. "Go back to your aunt's, Dinah. Get her to help you, since she kept us apart. There's nothing more I can do for you." He fumbled with his wallet, stuffing it anyhow into his pocket. "I really do have to go." He saw her open her mouth and added, "I *want* to go! You and I have nothing more to say to one another."

Dinah bent her head and sobbed. When he made no effort to comfort her, she looked up to see the back door closing behind him. Disgust roiled in her stomach and she ran into the privy where she was violently sick. She came out, wiping her mouth, hating the sour taste, and decided she might as well go into the house and get a drink of water. There'd be no one there now.

She tripped over something on the mat and looked down to see Stanley's wallet. It must have fallen out of his pocket in his haste. Picking it up, she opened it, staring in amazement when she found it still contained quite a bit of money. He must have had a really big win. Trust Stanley bloody Kershaw. He always had been lucky.

She put the wallet down on the table and got herself a drink of water, but as she was turning to leave, her eyes were drawn once more to it. He had given her only part of his money, the mean sod. She counted the rest of the notes out one by one, slapping them down on the table. Another twenty pounds. A fortune to someone like her!

Shoving the notes back into the wallet, she flung it back on the floor and turned to leave. But at the door she spun round and snatched it up again. Cramming it into her coat pocket, she hurried down the yard and slipped out of the back gate. Then she picked up her skirts and ran towards the station, terrified that he'd guess what she'd done and come after her, though she still retained enough sense to take the back alleys.

Just before she got there she stopped, shook out her skirt, adjusted her hat and blew her nose fiercely. She would get right out of his life, right away from Overdale too, and never come back, because she wasn't going to face the shame of having folk point at her in the street for bearing an illegitimate baby. This child would be hers, all hers. As she settled herself in the train she glanced down at her stomach with its slight curve, thinking, *Poor little thing! You'll never even know your father.*

Weary now, she sat staring out of the window as she began the first stage of the journey back to Blackpool, then leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes. She'd have to plan this carefully. Her aunt wanted her to live there permanently. If Dinah did that, she'd insist they move away from Lancashire and settle somewhere else—in the south perhaps. Too many people from Overdale came to Blackpool for their holidays, and anyway her aunt's neighbours knew Dinah wasn't married.

But if her aunt would sell the boarding house and move south, Dinah would be able to pretend she was a widow. And after what her aunt had done, keeping her and Stanley apart like that, just let her try to refuse!

Dinah's expression grew softer as she thought of the baby. Mary Ann, she'd call it if it was a girl. That had always been her favourite name. She prayed desperately that it would be a girl. She wanted nothing more to do with men.

PART ONE

1905 ~ 1913

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July 1905 ~ Brighton

On her final day at school Mary Ann Baillie left home early, feeling near to tears. She loved school, had lots of friends there and was one of the top scholars. The only good thing about leaving was that she wouldn't have to squash into a desk that was too small for her, because at fourteen, she was taller than any of the teachers and was already worrying about how tall she'd end up.

When she got to school, she waved and ran across the yard to where Sheila and the other older girls were sitting, plumping down beside them to a chorus of hellos.

"I can't believe we'll not be coming here again," Sheila said with a sigh.

"We can still see one another at weekends," Lucy said firmly. "We've all agreed that we'll meet in the park on Saturday afternoons."

Mary Ann bent her head to hide sudden tears, but of course they noticed.

"What's wrong?" Sheila asked.

"When I told my mother about that, she said she'd not having me messing about in the park, getting into trouble." She blinked furiously as tears threatened. "I don't get into trouble. Why does she always say that?"

There was silence. Everyone knew how strict Mary Ann's mother was.

"Perhaps now you're nearly grown up it'll be different?" Sheila ventured.

Mary Ann shook her head, not saying anything because if she did she'd cry again. She'd cried herself to sleep last night when her mother had told her that she wouldn't be allowed out on Saturdays.

"Well, think how lovely it'll be to earn money at last," Lucy said. "I can't wait for my first wage packet. My mother says I can have that one all for myself—though I have to give her some from then onwards." She turned to Mary Ann. "Are you still going to work for your mother?"

"Yes."

"Is she going to pay you?"

"Not proper wages, just spending money." It wasn't fair. Their boarding house was comfortable and nearly always full. One day, when she was dusting, Mary Ann had found her mother's savings book with over three hundred pounds in it, an enormous sum of money. She hadn't said anything because Mum would only have flown into a temper, but she'd never forgotten it, especially when her mother later told her they couldn't afford the material for a new Sunday dress and Mary Ann would have to put a false hem on her old one.

The final day flew past far too quickly. Mary Ann won a prize for being the most capable senior girl, which had her blushing and beaming at her clapping friends as she went to receive it from the Headmaster. Sheila won the needlework prize and Lucy the arithmetic prize. All the prizes were the same: books. Mary Ann's was *God's Good Man* by Marie Corelli, which thrilled her. She loved to read stories, but her mother hated to see anyone being idle so she could only usually read at school.

When the final bell clanged, the girls were slow to leave the yard, parting from one another only after tearful promises to stay in touch.

At home Mary Ann found her mother starting to prepare the boarders' evening meal.

"You're late."

“It was the last day. I was saying goodbye to everyone. Look!” She held out the book. “I won a prize for being the most capable girl. It’s by Marie Corelli.”

Her mother sniffed. “You’d think they’d buy you something better than that rubbish.”

“It’s not rubbish! Miss Corelli writes lovely stories and there are hundreds of books by her in the shops. All the girls read them and lots of their mothers do, too.”

“Well, I’ve better things to do with my time and you’ll not be reading it till your work is done.” Dinah looked at the clock and clicked her tongue in exasperation. “We’re getting a new lodger from Henderson’s, so we’re going to be full up again. I knew they’d soon find another rep to replace poor Mr Brown. Powling, this one’s called.”

Mary Ann automatically began to clear things off the kitchen table, piling up the dirty dishes in the scullery, ready to wash. “Can I let my skirts down now I’ve left school?”

“At fourteen? Certainly not! You’re still a child. Now stop asking silly questions and put that satchel away in the attic. You can take the book up to your bedroom while you’re at it.”

“I wanted to show it to Miss Battley.”

“She won’t be interested in that. Hurry up, now. I need you to peel the potatoes.”