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## November 1919

Polly stumbled along the track to the farm, her feet slipping in the mud. She should have changed into stouter shoes. She still forgot sometimes how muddy the countryside could get because she'd been brought up in the terraced streets of Overdale, not here on the slopes of the Pennines. She hoped she could find her son before she had to ask for help; she was still regarded as an outsider in the village of Outshaw, and her husband, Eddie, was pitied for having married a townie.

He was a little devil, her Billy was, always into things, often going missing, but you couldn't help loving him. When a child smiled like that and gave you smacking great kisses, you knew you were lucky. Polly jumped up and down to look over the drystone wall. He was nowhere in the village, but surely he couldn't have come so far? What if he'd gone the other way and wandered on to the moors?

This would give Hilda Scordale yet another reason to criticise her. Polly had tried hard to get on good terms with Eddie's mother, but had slowly come to realise that the older woman was jealous of his love for his wife. Whoever he'd married, it would have been the same. And Eddie worshipped his mother, so could see no wrong in her. Hilda was the only reason he and Polly ever quarrelled, because his mother was always telling them what to do - well, telling Eddie and expecting him to convince his wife.

Things had improved a little after Billy's birth, but had started going downhill again once he began toddling and getting into mischief. Mrs Scordale said it was up to a mother to keep an eye on her children, but Polly defied anyone to keep Billy in check all the time. He was not only adventurous but clever enough to figure out how latches worked. They'd thought they'd got him safely penned in the garden with the new latch Eddie had fitted to the gate, but obviously he'd figured that one out now and you couldn't keep your gate padlocked when so many things had to be delivered to this isolated hamlet.

Just before she got to the farm she saw her husband walking towards her with Billy in his arms, and stopped to clutch her side and sigh in relief.

Eddie grinned at her as he held their son up in the air and gave him a mock shake. "I think we need a cage for this one!"

Billy crowed with laughter.

Polly tried to look severe, but could not help smiling at Billy's rosy little face with its mop of soft brown hair, like her own in colour but with a rebellious curl to it when you tried to comb it neatly for church. "Have you time to come back for a cuppa, love?"

"Nay, lass. Farmer Snape wasn't best pleased with our Billy turning up like this. I'd best get straight back to work."

She nodded and took Billy from him. The child flung his arms round her neck, planting a wet kiss on her cheek with wind-chilled lips. "You're a naughty boy, Billy Scordale!" Polly scolded.

"Naughty boy," he echoed solemnly, peeping sideways at her. "See the horsies."

Eddie kissed her other cheek. "You don't even sound angry with him, Pol."

She smiled ruefully. It was true. She did find it hard to stay angry with her son - with anyone, in fact. She knew she was too soft, but there was enough unhappiness in the world without creating more. Setting the child down, she took his hand firmly in hers and led him home.

Her mother-in-law was standing at the door of their house opposite and greeted her with, "Have you given him a good smacking?"

Polly suppressed a sigh. "You know I don't believe in hitting children."

"He'll never learn to behave if you don't chastise him."

"I'll find other ways." She waited till Hilda had gone inside, then let out her breath in a long sigh that turned into a near sob. Once inside her own home, she changed Billy's muddy clothes and set his little boots to dry in front of the fire, tears filling her eyes. If only there was someone her own age here,

someone to talk to. Eddie worked such long hours at the farm, and the other women in the hamlet were all Hilda's age and cronies of her mother-in-law.

When Billy fell asleep on the rug in front of the fire, Polly tiptoed out into the kitchen to stare blindly out of the window. There wasn't enough to keep her occupied in one small house. She'd been a maid at Mrs Pilby's before her marriage, working in a large house with several other staff members to chat to, lots to keep them busy and all the gossip from the town filtering through the kitchen. Here in Outshaw nothing much happened from one day to the next and she couldn't think what her mother-in-law did with herself once Jim Scordale had gone to work in the quarry.

Polly went to glance into the front room. How could she get angry at Billy who was the only small child in Outshaw and had no one to play with, poor little soul? Clicking her tongue in annoyance, she told herself not to brood on things, just get on with her life. And she'd certainly be busy for the next few days because as soon as she got word that her sister Lizzie's baby had been born, Polly was going to stay with her for a week. She brightened at the thought. There'd be plenty going on at Lizzie's. The Deardens lived in busy York Road over the large grocer's shop they owned, one of the posh shops which served the gentry.

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The Dearden's delivery van turned up the very next morning with old John calling out before he even got out, "The babby's arrived!"

"What is it?" Polly asked eagerly.

"A little girl. Hadn't been born when I left work last neet, an' your Lizzie sitting packing sugar in t'back room. But when I got in this morning I heard a babby skriking upstairs. Eh, it's got a right pair of lungs on it, yon has."

It only took Polly a few minutes to get ready. As she had arranged, she took Billy across to her mother-in-law's and for once was not greeted with a sour face. Mrs Scordale would enjoy having her son and grandson to herself for a few days. She'd soon find out what a handful Billy was. Polly smiled as she got into the van. Maybe then she'd be more understanding. And maybe not.

In the living quarters above the Dearden's, Lizzie greeted her sister with, "Come and meet your new niece."

Polly hung over the cradle. "Isn't she pretty? And you look well, too."

"This one was much easier than the first." Lizzie stretched. "In fact, I'm already fed up of lying in bed."

"You enjoy your rest."

Lizzie pulled a face. "Who wants to rest?"

With Peter and his mother busy in the shop below, the two sisters were looking forward to a few days together. Beth was a placid baby and her brother Matt was an easy child to look after compared to his cousin Billy, playing quietly with his toys while the two sisters talked for hours.

"What's up?" Lizzie asked after a while.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what's making you look so unhappy underneath?"

Polly sighed. "It's just - well, it's a bit lonely at Outshaw and try as I will, I don't really get on with the Scordales - especially *her*."

"There's something wrong with anyone who can't get on with you, my girl. You'd be better moving away from there and so would Eddie. In fact, it'd do you both a world of good."

"Eddie wouldn't go. His mother was so upset when his sister went to Australia, he promised her he'd never leave Outshaw. Besides, the house goes with the job and there aren't many farms which would take on a lame man." Polly shrugged. "Any road, I manage. I have Billy, which makes up for a lot. Eh, I'm missing him already."

The next day a letter arrived from the middle Kershaw sister, Eva, who was a school mistress over near Rochdale where she lived with her friend and former teacher, Alice Blake.

"Eva says Alice hasn't been well, so she can't come over this weekend to see her new niece." Lizzie pulled a face. "Oh, dear, they've had to have the doctor in again."

"Poor Alice. She's having a bad year of it, isn't she?"

"Yes, poor thing! But me, I'm having a good year. Never been so happy in my life."

“So you should be with Peter doting on you like he does.” Polly felt her sister deserved her happiness because she had had a bad time with her first husband, Sam Thoxby, who had been a wife-beater and a thief. Even when Lizzie had run away from him during the war, he’d found her and dragged her back. It had been a relief for them all when he’d been killed in an accident towards the end of the war, though you ought not to be glad of such a thing. Then Lizzie had been able to marry Peter Dearden, whom she’d known for a long time and they were so happy together it did Polly’s heart good to see them.

And though her own Eddie was not the most lively person to live with, he was a kind husband, a good father and a loving son. She had nothing to complain of, really, and didn’t know why she was letting things get her down.

“Are you two going to have any more children?” Lizzie asked idly one day. “You’re leaving it a bit late if you want them to be friends.”

Polly could feel herself blushing. “We’ve been trying, but no luck so far.”

“Well, you’ve proved once that you can do it, so there’s no need to worry.” Lizzie grinned. “You just have to keep practising till you get it right.”

Polly could feel her face heating up still further. She didn’t tell her sister that Eddie was often too tired to love her. That sort of thing was private as far as she was concerned and she’d never been able to discuss intimate things in the casual way Lizzie did.

Polly was sorry when the week came to an end, despite all the interrupted nights, and was thoughtful as she packed to go home. She had enjoyed the bustle of living above the busy shop and got on well with Peter Dearden and his mother. And, eh, the new baby was a pretty little thing, with a look of her Auntie Eva.

Polly would have loved a daughter. But if she had one the baby would no doubt have its mother’s mid-brown hair and plump, placid face. Polly knew her own shortcomings only too well. She had never been able to sparkle with life like Lizzie, or talk intelligently about the world as Eva did - nor was she as pretty as her clever sister. She was just ordinary. And so was her husband. She should be ashamed of herself for finding him rather dull, but she did - and was dreading going back to Outshaw.

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Two months after the birth of Lizzie’s child, the Mercer family gathered in a small village on the north Fylde coast to mourn the death of old James Mercer with due pomp and circumstance, though with little real grief. Indeed, there were expectations in more than one breast that there might be something to celebrate after the will had been read, so the gathering had a cheerful undertone to it.

Richard Mercer, who attended the funeral at the tiny church of St Paul’s with his wife Florence, was one of the few to feel genuinely sad because he had liked his Uncle James for all the old fellow’s fussiness. After the service they walked from the church back to the house along the sea front, pausing for a moment to look back towards the eastern end of the village, where the only hotel stood. It had changed its name since his last visit and was now Hotel Bella Vista, a stupid name for a hotel in Lancashire. They passed the long row of boarding houses or large private homes that graced the foreshore. Poorer people lived at the rear of the village in rows of cottages. The older ones were whitewashed and had thatched roofs, the newer ones were built of brick and tile but were still small.

As they turned from the shore down Seaview Close, with its select group of seven houses, Florence grumbled about the loose gravel path and the lack of amenities in Stenton-on-Sea, but Richard let her complaints wash over his head. Instead he breathed deeply, enjoying the bracing sea air and wishing they lived in a place like this instead of a grubby little town like Overdale.

Seaview House was at the end of the short close, looking down to the sea from a slight rise. It was one of the largest houses in Stenton and had a new wing at the rear where the servants were housed because old James had valued his privacy.

Richard gave his coat and hat to Doris who had been his uncle’s maid for as long as he could remember and whose eyes were reddened from weeping. He joined the other mourners in the sitting room, but went to stand on his own in the big square bay window with a glass of his uncle’s fine dry sherry in his hand, staring out towards the water. He did not feel like chatting to his relatives. His parents had died while he was fighting in France and he had lost touch with most of the rest of his family.

His cousin George was fussing over the ladies as usual. It always upset Richard to see the old aunties simpering at the handsome young man and watching him fondly as he moved on, because he knew what his cousin said about them afterwards and it was never flattering. He touched his cheek, feeling the scar, knowing it gave him a sneering expression these days which made people wary of approaching him. There were other scars on his body, because he'd copped a few minor wounds over the long years of combat, and he felt sometimes that there were scars on his mind, too. But George seemed untouched in any way by the fighting and muck and deaths, even boasting of having had a "good war". Trust *him* to come through unscathed!

"Well, at least old Georgie livens things up," Florence muttered, waving and smiling brightly across the room. "I hate funerals. Still, this one might be worth coming to. I expect your uncle's left you something - you and Georgie are his only nephews. He was a funny one, though, old James, and you could never count on him doing the right thing. I'm not surprised he never married."

A minute later she was off again. "You know, he refused to let me live with him while you were away and yet there was only him in this big house. It'd have been so convenient to have servants to help me look after Connie. It's not even as if I'd have been here all the time."

Richard replied when he had to and felt only relief when she left his side, though he was not pleased to see her gravitate towards George. Those two were birds of a feather, he thought glumly. He should never have married her, but she'd been expecting his child, so what else could he have done? Back in 1910 you did not even try to get out of doing your duty. He'd often wondered since what had attracted him to Florence - or her to him - for they were an ill-matched couple.

He now realised that their brief affair had been the result of sheer lust on Florence's part. She was the first for him, though he was clearly not so for her. He had believed her to be a friend in need after she had listened so patiently to his ramblings about the boredom of figures and office work when his father had forced him to become an accountant. He had been too naïve in those days even to know that women like her existed: decent to all appearances, but with the hearts and bodies of whores. He was quite sure Constance, whom they always called Connie, was his child, however, because his daughter had the fair Mercer hair that was neither brown nor blond, and she looked very like photos of his mother as a child.

He sighed and took another sip of sherry as he sifted through memories of coming here to Stenton-on-Sea as a child: paddling happily in the tranquil water, cycling along the rutted country lanes in a world without the hills of his home town. The Fylde coast could be bleak in winter, though, with the wind tossing white foam off the waves and howling across the flat land. But the air was always clean and tangy and he couldn't seem to get enough of it after the stink of the trenches.

A burst of laughter made him twist round and scowl at these vultures who had descended on Seaview House and who cared nothing for James Mercer. He'd be relieved when today's fuss was over. There had been too many deaths and funerals in the past few years - and he had had to stand there in his Captain's uniform without betraying his emotions at the loss of another young life. Since the fallen comrades were men from his company, the least he could do was offer them the outward trappings of military respect, but sometimes, when it was a particularly young lad in the simple coffin, some of whom he guessed to be well under the age of enlistment, it had been hard to suppress his own grief and bitterness at the waste. Many a time he had gone back to his bunker and sat there with tears in his eyes as he wrote to tell the usual lies to their families about a quick and painless death.

There were only a few men left now from the original "Hellhounds", as the men of his company had called themselves in those early, enthusiastic days when he became first their Lieutenant, then their Captain. He might have left the Army now, but he hoped the few remaining Hellhounds wouldn't lose touch - hoped they knew they could always turn to him if they were in trouble. And if that was blindly idealistic, as Florence had told him scornfully, he didn't care. She simply could not understand how little class and money had mattered out there, or how important such camaraderie had been in seeing you through. Still was. Peace wasn't proving easy after so many years of war, and Richard had been in the Army from the very beginning.

Someone cleared their throat and he jerked back into awareness of where he was to find his Uncle James's lawyer standing next to him. They shook hands and exchanged a few platitudes then Richard fell silent, waiting to see what Quentin Havershall wanted.

“Your uncle asked me to read the will in his study. Just you and your cousin George involved. Would now be convenient?”

Richard could see Florence watching eagerly from a few feet away, her lips parted avidly, showing the line of pink gum behind the bright red lipstick he hated so much. “Yes, of course.”

“I’ll find your cousin, then.”

When the old lawyer had moved away, she darted across and hissed, “What’s he want?”

Suppressing a sigh he told her. She beamed up at him, her dark bobbed hair swinging forward over her cheeks, the glossy strands touching a corner of the garish mouth beneath a small feathered hat that was pulled right down to her eyes when all the other women were wearing broad-brimmed hats. Even her skirts were shorter than theirs, coming only to mid-calf, and the material of her dress was too shiny. “Art silk, my dear,” she had said when he’d mentioned that. “It washes much better than the real thing. I’m going to trim this one up afterwards and use it for an evening gown.” She looked like a painted doll, he thought in disgust. Not even a soft, cuddly doll nowadays for she had lost a lot of weight since they first married - no, a wooden, peg-top doll come to life, with that cropped hair and over-thin body.

His wife made a little noise of satisfaction in her throat. “That must mean your uncle’s left you something. How much do you think he was worth? He certainly lived comfortably here.” She stared round covetously. “It’d be wonderful if he’d left you this house, wouldn’t it? Not that I’d want to live here but we could sell it and get out of Overdale, buy one of those smart new villas in London, perhaps.”

He stared at her bleakly. She had not uttered a single word of regret since they’d heard the news of his uncle’s death, just gone on and on about money. He was relieved when Havershall beckoned from across the room. “Excuse me.” He joined the lawyer, walking in silence across the big rectangular hall behind the fussy little man who barely reached his shoulder. As they passed a mirror, Richard grimaced at the sight of himself. He looked gaunt still after the years of privation and was beginning to wonder if he’d ever flesh out again. Beside him walked George, six foot three to his own six foot, and a bit beefy now, though he had been a scrawny child. They had always hated one another, right from the first time they’d met. George, the younger by a year, had been spoiled rotten by his elderly parents while Richard had been very strictly brought up - which he now considered preferable.

In the study Havershall took the big leather chair behind the desk, then reached into his briefcase and brought out some papers which he set out in precise piles. George plumped himself down in one of the two other chairs which had been arranged in front of the desk, sprawling like a schoolboy.

He grinned sideways at his cousin. “The moment of truth, eh?”

Richard could not return his smile. Uncle James had hinted that he would be left something, but not what.

“My client asked me to give you these letters to read before I go through the will.”

George snatched his envelope and tore it open, dropping the pieces on the carpet.

Richard stared at the one in front of him, reluctant even to pick it up. The spidery handwriting had always been difficult to read and yet Uncle James had been a faithful correspondent throughout the war. His letters had brought a welcome breath of sanity into the filth and mayhem. Florence had written very infrequently, mostly just postcards sent from so many different places that he’d wondered what she was doing travelling around- and what she’d done with their daughter.

*And after a while, he’d started to wonder who she was with, as well.*

He reached out to pluck the letter opener from the stand, but even before he’d inserted it into the corner of the envelope, George was cursing beside him.

“Mr Mercer, please! This is hardly the occasion for - ”

Ignoring the lawyer, George turned to glare at his cousin, flicking one finger at the piece of paper in Richard’s hand, still folded and unread. “You needn’t bother with that. Our dear departed uncle says in mine that he’s left you everything so your years of toadying have been richly rewarded!”

They stared at one another, Richard with a vivid memory of how things had been when they were children. George had always mocked him for his bookishness and quiet ways. They’d fought several times, once because George had taken all the eggs from a bird’s nest, leaving the poor mother fluttering around in blind panic. And although Richard had won that fight, George had stamped on the eggs - and then laughed uproariously until his cousin’s fist smacked into his mouth again. That blow had given

Richard immense, savage satisfaction, and he didn't care that his parents had punished him afterwards for fighting. They hadn't been able to make him apologise.

Nowadays George contented himself with patronising Richard and flirting with Florence, who had once been his girl and who still called him 'Georgie-boy' in caressing tones. Neither of them seemed to realise that this flirting meant less than nothing to Richard; that the only thing which did matter nowadays was his daughter - and to a lesser extent his men.

With a sigh, he unfolded the single piece of paper, sure that this was going to cause trouble.

*My dear boy*

*I've not been noted for my bluntness in the past, but this time there is no other way than to say it straight out. I'm leaving everything to you because George has turned into a gambler and would only waste it, as he must have wasted his inheritance from his father. All he gets is my gold watch. The rest is for you.*

*I've been careful over the years, invested my money prudently - and I hope you'll continue to do the same. It's not a huge fortune, but there will be enough to allow you to live comfortably if you are not extravagant - and maybe even write that novel you were always talking about.*

*Do not, if you care at all about my wishes, let George get his hands on the money. Do not even lend him any, whatever tale he spins you. He will not repay it, for he has not proved trustworthy in his dealings with me.*

*I have not been feeling well for a while and shall not be sorry to go, my dear nephew. I've enjoyed life in my own way, but I don't fit in with this scrambling modern world. I'm pleased that we've beaten the Hun at last - though I never doubted we would - and am greatly relieved that you've survived that dreadful carnage.*

*Havershall will advise you about the money. I'd be happy to think of you living in Seaview House, but that's your choice. If you sell it, please make sure that the servants are looked after. I've left Mrs Shavely and Doris small bequests and they have agreed to stay on with you. Indeed, this is as much their home as mine now.*

*Yours affectionately*

*James Mercer*

Richard stared at the heavy silver desk fittings and the inkstand blurred into a gleam of light against a dark background. He blinked furiously to clear his eyes, for he did not wish to weep in front of George and made a mental resolution to do exactly as his uncle had wished, even to living in this house for this quiet, windswept village would suit him very well. It would be good for his daughter, too. Connie needed somewhere settled to live. Florence had dragged her hither and thither while he was away, often dumping her with relatives or neighbours for days on end, and the child seemed very fretful and anxious. And, of course, the accident had left her lame and even more reluctant to face the world.

Richard was grimly determined on the need for these changes, no longer the malleable young man who had married sophisticated Florence Hawley, as she would find out during the next few weeks. He had been forged in the flames of war and as an officer had been responsible for other men's lives - and deaths. Did his wife really think she was going to lead him around by the nose? Villa in London, indeed!

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As soon as the lawyer had handed over James's gold watch, George left the library without another word, slamming the door behind him.

Havershall and Richard exchanged glances, then the lawyer began to explain the practicalities of obtaining probate and taking up the inheritance.

When Richard returned to the drawing room half an hour later, conversation faltered and he found himself the focus of a battery of disapproving gazes. Clearly George had wasted no time in spreading the word that Richard had wormed his way into James's good graces and stolen his cousin's inheritance. However, his wife positively beamed at him across the room and hurried across to join him, threading her arm through his and giving it a quick tug as he lingered to speak to his second cousin Jane.

“You don’t mind if I steal my husband away, do you?”

“Oh, no, no! Of course not.” Jane moved back to her mother’s side.

“There was no need for that,” Richard protested.

“There was every need! I can’t wait a minute longer to find out exactly what happened.”

“Uncle James has left everything to me - except his gold watch, which George gets.”

Florence threw back her head and laughed, laughing again even more loudly as a shocked murmur arose from those standing nearby.

Her jubilation was as hard to bear as George’s jealousy and Richard took her away soon afterwards, first promising Mr Havershall he would return the following week to take formal possession of the house.

The village’s one cab, an elderly horse-drawn vehicle, was waiting outside to take them to the station in Knott End.

“We could almost have walked,” he said. “Knott End is only a mile or so down the road.”

His wife looked at him incredulously. “You might have walked, but I am not dressed for the country. This skirt is too tight for walking and these,” she waggled her feet in their high-heeled shoes, “are too high.”

“Then why do you wear them? Why not choose something more sensible?”

Florence gave a trill of laughter. “Because I believe it’s a woman’s duty to look smart.” She looked back at the house as the cab turned on to the sea front. “How much do you think the place will be worth? Oh, Richard, isn’t it wonderful?” When he didn’t answer, she nudged him. “What’s the matter, you old sobersides? The funeral is over and we’ve left all the fuddy-duddy relatives behind so we don’t have to pretend to be sad any longer.”

He could only stare at her in disgust at this crass speech.

“Aren’t you even glad you’ve inherited?” she demanded.

He would have preferred to wait until they got on the train to say it, but she was tapping her foot impatiently. “Let’s get two things straight, Florence: I am genuinely sad that my uncle has died and I’m not going to sell the house. I love the place and always have done. I shall be happy to bring up our daughter here.”

For a moment her smile faded and her hand tightened like a claw on his arm, then she took a deep breath and said in a toneless voice, “No need to make a decision yet. We’ll have lots to discuss.”

“I shan’t change my mind.” But as he listened to her humming a few minutes later, he realised she was still confident of being able to get her way. Well, once she might have done, but not now. Unfortunately for him and Connie, until Florence resigned herself to the situation, life was going to be uncomfortable for everybody. She had a gift for creating a bad atmosphere in a house and it made him sad that even at the age of nine, Connie tried so hard not to upset her mother.