



From This Day Forward

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Chapter One

Lambeth, London, 1880

In desperation Jane Roberts tried to wrestle her purse away from her husband. ‘That’s all I’ve got to feed us. If you take everything then you won’t get any dinner tonight.’

Bert Roberts pushed her roughly away and slipped the money in his pocket. ‘I don’t care, cos I won’t be here, so you’ll have to find another way to get money. I’m fed up with you and the kids and I’m leaving.’

Her son Charlie rushed to catch her before she fell, and then rounded on his father. ‘Don’t you dare treat Mum like that!’

‘You shut up, kid, or I’ll give you a hiding you won’t forget.’

She held her son’s shoulders to stop him from getting into a fight with his father. ‘Where are you going?’

He smirked. ‘Found myself another woman, and she’s real handsome. You ain’t nothing like the smart girl I married.’

‘Is that surprising after sixteen years of worrying about keeping a roof over our heads and food on the table? I’ve never known if you were going to give me any money or if you were gambling it away at the dogs. That is enough to break anyone’s spirit.’ Jane studied the man in front of her with disgust. ‘You’re not the dashing man who persuaded me to defy my parents and marry you, either.’

‘And what a bloody mistake that was. They disowned you and threw us both out.’

She almost gasped, surprised just how much that hurt after all these years. ‘You hadn’t expected that, and it ruined all your schemes for an easy life, didn’t it?’

‘Too right, and I was stuck with you, but I ain’t putting up with it no more.’

‘Who is this woman? I suppose she’s got money.’ Jane was stunned by what she was hearing. She knew her husband hadn’t been faithful to her, but she had put up with it for the sake of the children.

‘She’s got enough.’ He tipped her handbag upside down to make sure there wasn’t anything of value there.

‘How can you do this, not only to me, but to your children? Don’t you care what happens to us?’

Bert shook his head, then threw the house keys on the table and headed for the door. Before leaving he looked back. ‘You are going to have to manage on your own. It ain’t no good creeping back to your high-and-mighty family, cos they haven’t even bothered to find you after all these years. There’s always the workhouse if you can’t pay the rent.’

With that he slammed the door behind him and she stared at it in disbelief. He really had gone, and dread rushed in and hit her like a tidal wave.

‘Mum?’

She looked down at her youngest son’s worried face and gathered him close, dismayed that Joe had witnessed that unpleasant scene.

‘What did Dad mean? We haven’t got to go to the workhouse, have we? That isn’t a nice place.’ His bottom lip trembled as he gazed imploringly at his mother.

‘No, no, we won’t let that happen.’

‘We certainly won’t!’ Charlie ruffled his younger brother’s hair and dredged up a smile in an effort to reassure the eight-year-old boy. He stood behind Joe so the youngster couldn’t see his expression, and looked at their mother, his hazel eyes blazing with fury. ‘What was that all about? What did he mean about your parents?’

Jane shook her head, worry and disbelief etched on her face. ‘He was talking nonsense in an effort to hurt me as much as he could before leaving. He’s taken every penny we had, Charlie.’

‘Is there anyone we can go to for help?’

She shook her head. ‘Everyone in this slum has enough trouble feeding their own families. We can’t ask them to help us.’

Little Joe was gazing from his mother and then back to his older brother. ‘Helen will help.’

Jane took a deep, silent breath in an effort to steady herself, knowing she had to stay strong in front of her children. ‘I was hoping not to trouble her with this.’

‘She’s got a right to know,’ Charlie stated. ‘She’ll be furious if we don’t tell her.’

‘You’re right, of course. I’m not thinking straight at the moment.’

‘I’ll go and see her now.’ Charlie shot out of the door and ran up the street at speed.

‘Helen will know what to do,’ Joe declared, seeming more at ease now Charlie had gone for their big sister. ‘She’s clever.’

‘Yes, she is.’ She looked lovingly at her youngest son. He was clearly frightened and she had to get control of her feelings in order to calm his fears. ‘I need to go into the other room for a while, so why don’t you do those arithmetic lessons I gave you.’

He nodded and sat at the table to do the work she had set him. Jane hurried out of the scullery, determined to clear her mind, because the last thing she must do was panic.

She sat down and closed her eyes, allowing her mind to go back to that time sixteen years ago. Most of her young life she had lived in different countries as her father had moved around. It had been a life of luxury, with servants on hand to meet her every need. Being an only child, she had been spoilt and denied very little. They had returned to this country when she was eighteen and London was exciting. She had slipped out one day on her own and stopped by the river to watch some swans. A young man had come up to her and given her a crust of bread to feed the birds and they had laughed at their antics. That’s how it had started, and from then on she met him every time she was able to get out on her own. One day, without telling her what he was going to do, he had come to her house and introduced himself to her parents. Her father had immediately seen what he was and had forbidden her to ever see him again. She had defied him and continued to meet Bert, believing herself to be in love.

Jane moaned in disbelief. How could she not have seen what he was really after? He had seen a young girl of good class on her own, and spotting an opportunity for gain had courted her with charm and laughter. After her father's rejection of him he had set about to persuade her that if they were married he would be accepted into her family. He had made all the arrangements and she had gone along with them, completely fooled by his declarations of love.

Jane allowed the tears to run freely down her face as she recalled that terrible time. Furious that she had defied him, her father had disowned her and turned them both away. It was devastating and she'd looked to her new husband for support, but it wasn't there. He was in a rage that frightened her, and he brought her to this slum, telling her that she must get used to it because it was all they could afford. It was the first time she had seen where he lived and, disgusted with the squalor, she had scrubbed to remove the filth until her hands were raw. She soon found out he expected her to meet his needs, cook and do as she was told. The sensible thing would have been to leave him immediately, but she had no money and nowhere to go.

Since she had been in this disgusting place she'd had three children. Helen was now fifteen, Charlie thirteen and Joe eight. Helen was a determined girl and would fight her way through any obstacle. Charlie also had the same spirit. He was tall and strong in body and mind, but Joe was the one she worried about the most. He was gentle and kind to everyone, always wanting to help, and he was the most vulnerable of her children. That didn't mean he wasn't intelligent, because behind those clear eyes there was a sharp mind that didn't miss much. At least

something good had come out of these nightmare years, and she would never regret that. She was prepared to do anything needed to keep them safe, but at the moment she was reeling with shock and the disaster facing them seemed insurmountable. *Helen*, she prayed silently, *I need your clear thinking and positive attitude.*

‘Psst . . .’

Helen Roberts put the bucket down and turned her head to see who was making that hissing sound, and then gasped in surprise when she saw her brother’s head peering round the kitchen door. She rushed over to him. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘That is what I was going to ask.’ The housekeeper, Mrs Tarrant, swept over to them. ‘Come inside, child, and close the door.’

Charlie stepped inside hesitantly and wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand, but held the stern housekeeper’s gaze without flinching. ‘I need to see my sister, please. It’s urgent.’

‘From the state you are in that is apparent. You may talk to her.’ She stepped back a pace but didn’t move away.

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he replied politely.

Helen caught hold of her brother’s arm, very concerned. Something bad must have happened or Charlie would never have come here for her. ‘How did you get here?’

‘I ran all the way.’

‘What? It must be five miles or more. Why didn’t you take the bus?’

‘Couldn’t. Didn’t have any money, and I had to get here. We need you, sis.’

Then she asked the question she had been avoiding. 'What's happened?'

'Dad's gone,' he told her.

'What do you mean, "gone"?''

He cast a quick glance at the housekeeper and the rest of the staff who were all listening intently, and with a shrug he turned his attention back to Helen. 'He left. He took all his things, the money out of Mum's purse and the rent money out of the jar, threw his door key on the table and stormed out.' Charlie lowered his voice for a moment and then said in a quiet voice, 'Said he'd found himself a better woman.'

Furious now, Helen erupted. 'What the daft bugger means is he's found a woman with a bit of money he can gamble with. How's Mum?'

'Worried sick. There's no food in the place, the rent man is due in two days' time and we can't pay him.' He looked at his big sister imploringly. 'We need your help, sis. Dad said if we get chucked out, they'll take us to the workhouse.'

'Oh no they won't!' Helen clenched her work-worn hands into fists. 'That's not going to happen to my family.'

Charlie breathed an audible sigh of relief when he saw his big sister's determined expression. 'Tell me what I can do.'

Mrs Tarrant made an angry sound of disgust and turned to Cook. 'Make up a basket of food for Helen's family.'

'Thank you, Mrs Tarrant. I must go home.'

'Of course you must. You can have a week to deal with this crisis. I will hold your job open for you that long, but no longer. You are a good worker and I hope you will return before the week runs out.'

‘That is kind of you, and I will be back as quickly as possible.’

The lady gave one of her rare smiles. ‘How old is little Joe?’

‘He’s eight and Charlie is thirteen.’

‘Quite a difference in your ages. Just the three of you?’

‘Yes,’ Helen told her. ‘Mum didn’t think she was going to have any more after me and Charlie, but she did eventually have Joe.’

While they had been talking, Cook had given Charlie a meat pie and a large cup of tea, which he devoured rapidly, muttering thanks in between mouthfuls.

‘Good heavens, child,’ Cook exclaimed. ‘How long is it since you’ve had something to eat?’

‘A while,’ was all he said, watching as his cup was refilled. When that was quickly emptied, he smiled at Cook. ‘It was a long run.’

The butler pulled a coin out of his pocket and gave it to Charlie. ‘You and your sister are to take a ride home.’

‘Oh, thank you, sir.’

He patted the boy on the shoulder and said to Helen, ‘Your brother is like you, polite and well spoken.’

‘That is kind of you to say so, Mr Gregson. Mum taught us to read and write before we went to school, and insisted we had good manners.’

‘Very wise of her. Now off you go and see what you can do for your family, and hurry back.’

She rushed upstairs to collect her things, and then ran back to her waiting brother. ‘Come on, Charlie, let’s sort this mess out.’

Cook handed her a basket full of food. ‘That should keep you going for a couple of days.’

Helen hugged her, her eyes misting over with gratitude. With a heavy heart she walked out of the door, wondering if she really would be able to return. She was only a lowly maid, but the staff treated her kindly and she was grateful for the job.

Once outside, Charlie took the basket from her. ‘Sorry I had to come for you, sis, but I didn’t know what else to do.’

‘You did the right thing. I’ve been saving up for a new pair of shoes, so I’ve got enough money to pay the rent man this week. That will give us some breathing space, but we need to find a way to earn some money – and quickly.’

He linked his arm through his sister’s, confident that she would find a way. Helen could do anything. ‘Dad said some peculiar things before he left.’

Helen snorted in disgust. ‘That doesn’t surprise me.’

‘I know, but he talked as if Mum comes from a wealthy family and they threw her out when she married him. I asked her about it, but she said he was just talking nonsense.’

‘Well, we know she has had a good education, but he probably thinks that anyone with a couple of shillings in their pocket is wealthy.’

‘I expect you’re right.’

On the journey home Helen’s mind was racing, trying to find a way for them to survive, and she was also curious about their father’s remarks.

The moment they walked in the house little Joe rushed up and threw his arms around her, holding on with all of his might. He gazed up at her, his bottom lip trembling. ‘Don’t let them throw us out on the street, Helen – please!’

She ruffled his curly brown hair and smiled. ‘No one is going to do that. I’m not going to let anything hurt our family, Joe.’

He grasped her hands, holding on tight. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘I know, sweetheart. I’ve brought a basket of food with me and Charlie’s unpacking it now. We’ll eat as soon as I’ve seen Mum, so you set the table while I do that. Where is she?’

‘She just went in the front room.’

Joe rushed off to carry out his task and Charlie said quietly, ‘She’s doing her best to hide it but she’s in shock and needs shaking out of it or we are going to be in a real mess.’

‘I’ll do that.’ She gazed affectionately at her brothers, both looking happier now, and determination surged through her. Charlie was old enough to understand the situation, but the terrified look in Joe’s eyes had upset her.

Jane Roberts was sitting in a chair and staring into space, her eyes red from crying. Helen stood in front of her and spoke sharply. ‘Mum, pull yourself together – and why the blazes are you crying over that man?’

Her daughter’s reprimand made her jump in surprise, unaware she had come into the room. ‘He’s left us.’

‘About time too. You are too good for him – always have been.’

‘That’s what my parents said, and I wouldn’t listen to them.’

Ah, that was the first time her mother had ever mentioned them. Helen pulled up a chair and sat in front of her mother. ‘You are educated and he’s an ignorant man who can’t read or write. All he can do is bet on the dogs and drink beer with his friends.’

‘I tried to teach him just like I have the three of you, but he wasn’t interested.’

‘All he cares about is the pub and the dogs. As long as he could make out the numbers in the races, that was enough for him. That man has dragged you down to his level, but now that is going to stop.’

She stared at her daughter in disbelief. ‘He’s taken every penny I had. I can’t pay the rent or buy food for any of us. We’re at rock bottom.’

‘That’s true. There is only one way we can go now and that is up!’

‘That is a good thought, but how on earth are we going to do that?’

The spark was back in her mother’s eyes and Helen drew in a silent breath of relief. ‘I’ve got a plan, but it is going to need every one of us to pitch in and make it work.’ She stood up. ‘I’ve got enough to pay the rent this week and I’ve brought food for all of us. Go and wash your face and join us for a meal. You mustn’t let the boys see how upset you are.’

Jane hauled herself out of the chair, drained of all energy by this sudden turn of events. ‘I’m sorry about that but it hit me hard and I let it show, so I came in here for a moment to try and get my thinking straight. Thank you for coming, Helen. I hope you haven’t lost your job because of this?’

‘They’ve given me a week to sort this mess out.’

Her mother straightened up. ‘Then we had better see what this plan of yours is.’

‘I’ll explain when we have all had something to eat. Joe is starving.’

Jane gave a slight smile at the mention of her youngest son, and then walked out of the room, her step sure and her head up.

Good, Helen thought. That was the first hurdle over.

Cook had filled the basket to overflowing, and when they had all eaten their fill there was still enough left over for the next day. As an extra surprise the kind woman had even put in one of her famous large fruit cakes.

Joe's eyes opened wide when he saw it and exclaimed excitedly, 'It's so big! Can I take Granny Jarvis a slice? She doesn't get many treats.'

'Do you still go and see her?' Helen asked. Charlie had told her all about Joe's determination to look out for the elderly woman who had moved in next door two months ago.

He nodded. 'Every day. She hasn't got any family left and no one bothers to visit her. I get her shopping and make sure she has enough to eat.'

Her youngest brother was such a kind boy, and Helen loved him dearly. 'Does she have enough money to pay her rent and buy the food?'

'I'm not sure, but she must have, or they would have turned her out before now. She can't have much, so I wait until the shops are about to shut and I get the best bargains I can for her.' He grinned at his mother. 'Like you do, Mum. Can I take her a slice of that cake, please?'

'Of course you can. We must share our bounty.' Jane cut a large slice, wrapped it in a napkin from the basket and handed it to her son.

With a huge smile on his face he jumped to his feet and raced out to the elderly woman's house.

Charlie gave a quiet laugh. ‘He really cares about that old lady. I went with him once just to check that everything was all right, but there’s nothing to worry about. He chats away to her and there is noticeable affection in her eyes as she watches him trotting around doing any odd jobs for her. She tries to give him a penny at the end of each week for what he does, but he won’t take it. When I asked him why, he said he doesn’t do it for money. He likes her and she needs someone to make her smile and help in small ways.’

‘He’s an extraordinary little boy,’ Jane remarked. ‘I knew from the moment he was born that there was something different about him. I am desperately sorry I frightened him.’

‘Don’t worry, Mum, he’s fine now. Anyone else want a piece of cake before Joe decides everyone in the street should have a slice?’

They all laughed and Charlie patted his stomach. ‘I couldn’t, but I will manage a piece later on.’

‘We’ll save it for then.’ Jane stood up and began to clear the table.

By the time the washing-up was done, Joe burst back into the house.

‘Granny said that was the best cake she had ever tasted. I made her a pot of tea to go with it.’ The smile faded from his animated face. ‘I told her that Dad had left us and she said I wasn’t to worry because everything was going to be all right. It will be, won’t it, Mum?’

Jane smiled down at him. ‘Everything is going to be just fine. I was shocked that your father should even think about leaving us, but Helen’s here now and she has a plan.’

He nodded, the bright smile back. ‘Helen’s clever.’

‘She is, so there is nothing to worry about. Now, we have decided to keep the cake for tea, but would you like a small piece now?’

‘I can wait. I’m full up after that lovely meat pie we had.’ He ran to his sister. ‘What is your plan? Can I help?’

‘It will need every one of us. Let’s sit down and I’ll explain.’ Once they were seated, Helen handed round paper and pencils. ‘I’ll want you all to write down what you are good at. It doesn’t matter what it is, just put down anything that comes to your mind. For instance, I’m good at scrubbing floors.’

That made them all laugh and turn their attention to the task.

Helen watched to see they were all busy writing before starting her own list. She had no idea what the outcome of this would be, but a way had to be found for the family to survive. The situation was desperate and the meagre amount of money she was earning at the house would nowhere near cover their needs. If they failed, then the spectre of them living on the streets begging for food was frightening, and the final humiliation would be the workhouse. She wouldn’t let that happen to those she loved. She wouldn’t!

For a moment the desperate situation they were in tried to overwhelm her, but she pushed it away. The last thing she must do is let in fear and doubt. It was obvious her mother was shocked and not thinking clearly, so they were all depending on her to find a solution and give them hope. She wouldn’t let them down.

When everyone had stopped writing she looked up and smiled. ‘All right, let me see what you’ve written.’

Joe handed his over first, looking rather dejected. 'I couldn't think of much.'

He'd only put down that he could read and write, and run fast in the school races. 'Oh, we can add quite a few things to your list,' she told him gently. 'You are good at looking after people, like you do with Granny Jarvis. You are good at figures and know how to get the best value for money. You are kind and care about people.'

The boy straightened up as he watched his sister add to his list.

Helen tapped him playfully. 'But you, young man, have forgotten the most important thing. Not many people can write as beautifully as you can. In fact, quite a few around here can't even sign their own name.'

'Mum taught me,' he said proudly. 'I'm the best in school at reading, writing and adding up. But how can that help us?'

'I have an idea, but we'll go through that when I've read all the lists.'

Charlie had put down quite a few things. He was tall for his age and strong. If anything needed fixing, he was the one to go to. He was good with his hands and would tackle any job.

Her mother's list was short, but Helen already had an idea for her. That left her contribution. She had learnt a lot from the staff where she worked about the running of a large household. It took planning to make everything run smoothly and the attention to detail fascinated her. She would use those organising skills to drag her family out of this mess. After writing on a fresh piece of paper for a while, she sat back and looked around at the expectant faces watching her. 'Right,

this family is going into business. We are going to put cards in the corner shop window advertising our services.'

They all stared at her in disbelief.

'What services?' her mother asked.

'Joe will write letters for people who can't do it for themselves. The charge will be a halfpenny for a short note and a penny for a long letter. If it is for the authorities, then I will help with the wording.'

He wriggled in his chair excitedly. 'I can do that.'

'I know you can. Now, Charlie, you will offer to take on any building or repairs, for a price to be agreed between you and the customer.' When her older brother smiled agreement, she turned to her mother. 'You are educated and have given us lessons in many subjects, so you are going to set up classes for those who need to learn how to read and write – whatever their age.'

Jane's expression was one of astonishment. 'But the people round here can't afford to pay for something like that.'

'To begin with you will take anything they can offer. If it's a farthing or a cabbage that will do. We are going into business to survive. However, we mustn't forget that the people in these slum areas are desperately poor, so if we see a very needy person, you can relax the rules and teach them at no cost. Everyone around here must be aware of what we are trying to do, and above all they need to be able to respect and trust us. I want people to come to us with their concerns, knowing we will not take advantage of them. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'You mean we are going to have to go slowly at first and build up a reputation for being honest and caring,' her mother stated.

‘Exactly.’ She glanced round at each person, her expression serious. ‘It isn’t going to be easy and there will be times when we want to give up, but that mustn’t be allowed to happen. We keep going, whatever the difficulties.’

When they nodded, Helen sat back and sighed deeply. It was a plan, but it remained to be seen if it would work.