



The Lost Daughter

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Chapter One

Hull, East Yorkshire, 1930

The rain lashed at her face and body, her thin cotton nightdress clinging to her bare legs, her shoeless feet hitting the hard pavement, but she didn't stop running. Fear gripped her heart, and every bone and muscle in her body. Terrified, she glanced over her shoulder, seeing a dark shadow looming. Was it him? Panicking, she ran faster, the pain in her chest almost at bursting point. She could still see his dark, evil face as he lunged at her. Ahead, she could see the faint glow of a light: the police station. *Help me! Help me! Save my little girl, my little girl!* The words reverberated in her head.

Stepping out into the road, she stretched out her arms to propel herself even faster. Then screeching and skidding noises on wet surface and the sound of screaming filled her whole body and mind. The impact, the pressure of metal against her thin body sent her up into space. She felt herself flying over the cold, sodden street. And then the silence of oblivion swallowed the pain and terror of her anguished body.

* * *

The man in the black saloon car slammed on his brakes. 'Bloody hell!' he yelled, his voice juddering with shock.

The duty policeman hurried from the station. 'What's happened?' he asked.

'I didn't stand a chance!' the driver wailed. Both men stood staring down at the still body of the young woman.

'Is she a gonner?' someone asked.

A middle-aged woman knelt down by the side of the young woman and took off her coat, placing it over the cold, wet figure. She shouted at the useless men. 'She has a pulse. Get an ambulance – quick!'

The woman's voice galvanised the men into action.

'Who is she?' asked the policeman.

They shook their heads and mumbled, 'Don't know.' No one seemed to know who the young woman was.

No one took any notice of the big man, well wrapped up in his jacket, muffle and flat cap, standing on the edge of the gathered crowd, surveying the scene and listening to what was being said. Then he silently slipped away.

Back at the house in Dagger Lane, the man quickly wiped up the blood and set the furniture right. Going upstairs to the bedroom where the little girl was sleeping, he stood for a few moments just watching the gentle rhythm of her breathing. He felt nothing for her. She was just a kid, a damned nuisance as far as he was concerned, and she had no place in his life. He needed to get rid of her. Going downstairs, he sat on a chair and rolled a cigarette, lit it and drew heavily, contemplating what to do next. With any luck, his useless bitch of a wife would die. He didn't want to be tied down to a woman and a bairn; his biggest mistake was marrying her. He liked his freedom and to have any woman he fancied.

He must have dozed off for the next thing he knew was the kid bawling its head off, crying for her mammy. ‘Shut your bleeding noise,’ he bellowed up the stairs.

‘I want a wee-wee,’ the little girl cried.

He was just about to race up the stairs to shake the living daylight out of her, when he stopped. An idea just dropped into the lump in his head he called a brain.

He galloped up the stairs to the little girl’s bedroom.

‘Mammy,’ she sobbed. Her tiny, convulsed body shrank away from the big man.

‘Shurrrup and stop moaning.’ He snatched her up from the wet, sodden bed, clumsily wrapped her in a blanket, and clattered downstairs and out into the street.

‘Everything all right?’ asked the next-door neighbour. She’d heard the banging, clashing and shouting last night and the bairn crying for her mammy this morning.

The big man was just about to give the nosy neighbour a mouthful of abuse when he stopped and thought, and then said, ‘It’s the bloody missus, she’s gone off with another bloke and left me and the bairn to fend for ourselves. I’ve ter work so I’m tekkin’ bairn round to her granny’s.’ *That’ll give the bloody old hag something to gossip about,* he thought, as he hurried down the street, avoiding going near to the police station.

The child, frightened in the big man’s huge arms, shut her eyes tightly, put her thumb in her mouth and sucked.

Arriving at his wife’s mother’s house in Marvel Court off Fretters Lane, the big man rushed in without knocking. Four bairns were sitting round the kitchen table eating a basin of watery porridge each. Wordlessly, they all stared at him. Their mother, Aggie, who was in the scullery washing the pan used for the porridge, spun round at the sound of heavy feet crashing into her kitchen.

‘Ted, what’s up?’ She was surprised to see her son-in-law for he rarely visited – he wouldn’t have been her choice for her daughter to marry. He was too rough and full of himself – she might be poor, but she had standards. Then she noticed the bairn in his arms.

At the sound of her granny’s voice, the little girl began to cry. ‘Mammy,’ she hiccupped.

Ted thrust the child into the startled woman’s arms. The lies came easy to him. ‘Your bloody daughter’s upped and left me for another bloke, and I’m off ter work, so you look after the brat.’ With those words, he turned and stalked from the house.

Aggie fell onto her chair by the kitchen fire, holding the wet bundle. The little girl, arms locked around her neck, sobbing onto her bosom.

Finally, getting over the shock, Aggie unfastened the tight arms from her neck and, with an edge of her pinafore, she wiped away the snot from her granddaughter’s nose. Then she rocked her gently until her sobbing ceased.

All the time, her children went about their daily routine, not speaking a word, not wanting the wrath of their mother’s tongue or a smack across their ears. Their breakfast finished, the three boys went off to school and the girl to work in a shop.

Feeling annoyed at being left with the care of her granddaughter, Aggie discarded the little girl’s sodden nightdress and bathed her in tepid water in a bowl in the scullery stone sink. She found a vest, knickers and a dress, all old and tatty. ‘They’ll ’ave ter do for now,’ she muttered. One thing was for sure, she wasn’t going to have the bairn shoved on her. No! She had her whack of looking after her own bairns with no help from anyone. Come tonight, she’d take the bairn back to Ted and let him sort out her care.

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was a wedding present from her father and it reminded her of happier times. That was all she had left: memories of when she was a young married woman with high hopes until the Great War changed everything. Her Albert came home a broken man, only good for bedding her, and then he died, leaving her with seven children and another on the way. She lost three of the bairns to diphtheria. Life became a brutal, harsh struggle with poverty and hunger, a never-ending daily toil to survive, and she was still doing it – struggling! She couldn't cope with another bairn, not at her age. Besides, she had advertised for a paying lodger and a middle-aged man who worked at the floor mill was coming in a fortnight. That would give her chance to buy a second-hand bed and turn her front room downstairs into a bed-cum-sitting room. She'd given up the pointless idea of having the front room to be used only on special occasions. What occasions did she have, anyway?

'Time I was going to work,' she said to the little girl who sat on the floor, her eyes brimming with tears.

Aggie had two daily cleaning jobs, one during the day at a big house on Baker Street and the other one was in the evening, cleaning offices down Bowlalley Lane. There was no way she could take the bairn with her to either job, and she wouldn't leave her in the house on her own, so she carried her to a neighbour's house. 'I just can't understand our Alice leaving her bairn. She is so devoted to her,' she said to the old widow, Mrs Yapham.

Mrs Yapham, who liked to sit at the window to pass her days and to earn a bit of money by keeping an eye on working mothers' children, tutted and said, 'Bring me a packet of ciggies back with yer.'

'I suppose,' Aggie replied, grudgingly. She'd make sure she

got the money back off that lout, Ted. 'It's a right mess,' she said. 'Men are so bloody useless. They've no idea about bairns. Our Alice hasn't got the sense she was born with bugging off with another man. Though I can't believe she'd leave her bairn behind. It's not like her.'

Later on, when Aggie had given her children their tea of bread and dripping, she bundled the little girl, Daisy, up in a blanket and, taking her daughter Martha with her, set off to see Ted. As they trundled along, Aggie was getting fraught and Martha was now carrying a scared bairn who hid her face in the blanket.

'Bloody men,' Aggie muttered under her breath. She felt too old and exhausted to have to be looking after another bairn.

Martha kept quiet. All she thought about these days was how soon she could escape her mother's grasp. And she certainly wasn't going to marry a fellow and be a drudge and have too many bairns to look after. No. For the past few months she'd been working an extra hour most days and, so that her mother couldn't take the extra pence, she left the money safely at the haberdashery shop. Mrs Jones, the owner, had agreed to keep these secret savings and not to mention it to Aggie.

'We're here, thank God,' Aggie said. She hammered on the front door and, when no answer was forthcoming, she shouted through the letter box. 'Ted, open this bloody door.'

'Mammy,' Daisy whimpered, sobbing into the blanket, trying not to make a noise. She didn't like her angry grandmother. She wanted Mammy.

Aggie banged on the door again.

'He's gone.' It was the next-door neighbour, Mrs Green.

'What do yer mean?' Aggie snapped. She had reached the end of her tether and she had to go to work this evening.

'He came home from work and banged about, and the next

thing, he was off with his bag on his shoulder. I asked him where he was going. Said he'd got a ship and was off to see the world. I said, "But what about yer bairn?" He just laughed in my face, the callous bugger.'

After a cup of tea at Mrs Green's house, Aggie went off to work and Martha made her way home with Daisy.

Once home, Martha had instructions to put the dirty clothes in to soak in the stone fire boiler, then to see to her three brothers who were used to being left on their own in the early evenings. They had made a den under the table and were playing at wild Indians. Upstairs, the three boys shared a bed in the back bedroom and Martha shared a bed with Aggie in the front bedroom. It was into this bed that Martha put the sleeping child. The beds were covered with old blankets and their coats, but they were never warm enough and the palliasse was torn and lumpy. They had no other furniture. What they once owned had either gone to the pawnshop or had been chopped up for firewood. But, according to the authorities, they were lucky to have a whole house to themselves. One thing Martha could say about her mother was that she always paid the rent; even if they went hungry, she kept a roof over their heads, so they would never have to resort to living in an overcrowded house with other families. Many a week they'd lived on potatoes and bread, and once, when Aggie cleaned out a boat on the dock, they'd lived on bananas all week. This house, her mother was fond of saying, was for her old age. It was Aggie's dream to take in a paying lodger so that she'd only have to work during the day and have the luxury of having the nights to herself.

'Is our Daisy living with us now?' asked Jimmy, one of the twins. Martha shrugged, she didn't have an answer.

* * *

Everyone was in bed when Aggie returned home from work. The wet clothes hung on the pulley above the fire and she sat by the dying embers, drinking a mug of weak tea, re-patching her work dress and thinking. What was she going to do about Daisy? She hadn't the strength to bring up another bairn, she didn't want to, nor did she have the money to do so. She gave a heavy sigh. When her lodger started paying her money, she'd be able to give up the evening job. She rubbed the aching stiffness of her arthritic knees. No more scrubbing floors for her.

After a restless night, with Daisy wriggling about between her and Martha, and wetting the bed, Aggie felt more tired than when she went to bed. Her temper was sharp, and everyone kept out of her way.

It was left to Martha to haul the palliasse to the open window and to take an upset Daisy, who kept crying for her mammy, downstairs. This pulled at Martha's good nature and she felt guilty, and decided that with the extra money she earned today, she would buy food and hoped that Aggie wouldn't ask where the money came from.

For a whole week Aggie left Daisy with Mrs Yapham when she went to work. But the next day, Mrs Yapham was taken ill and was not able to look after Daisy. There was no one else available. 'I'll have ter tek yer with me, so you best keep quiet,' Aggie threatened Daisy.

The Melton family lived in a tall, three-storey Georgian house with iron railings fronting it and steps leading down to the basement, which was the entrance Aggie used. Baker Street was a prosperous area in Hull and Aggie was lucky to have found employment with such a fine household. But, to her credit, she was a good and reliable worker. This morning, her employer, the lady of the house, Mrs Melton, was at home.

‘Drat,’ muttered Aggie. She pushed Daisy into the outhouse at the back where the washing tub and mangle were kept. Mrs Melton rarely ventured into the basement and never into the outhouse. Aggie spread out a piece of sacking on the stone floor. ‘You can go ter sleep, and no noise and be a good girl.’

Aggie tied on her work apron and set about her daily tasks. She was a good, methodical worker. And, as the morning passed, she went to check on her granddaughter who was fast asleep, curled up and sucking her thumb. She shut the door and went back to her work, and became so absorbed in her tasks that she forgot about her granddaughter until she heard an almighty crash and a child screaming.

Rushing to the outhouse, she collided with Mrs Melton, who had also heard the noise. ‘Sorry, madam,’ Aggie said.

‘Good gracious, what is happening?’

Aggie gave her employer a look of alarm and ran towards the outhouse. Breathing heavily, she pushed open the door to see Daisy, her clothes soaking wet, crouching in a corner, and the washtub tipped over and water flooding the floor.

Aggie covered her mouth with her hands at seeing the chaos of the scene. Her first thought was that she would lose her job.

Mrs Melton was behind her and, at first, speechless.

Half an hour later, with the mess in the outhouse cleaned up, Daisy, wrapped in a towel while her clothes dried, sat at the kitchen table drinking a glass of milk and eating one of Cook’s shortbread biscuits.

Meanwhile, Aggie took off her work apron, which kept clean her wrap-over pinafore that she wore like a uniform and hid the old, patched working dress. She tidied back her grey hair, which she wore in a bun at the nape of her neck and knocked on Mrs Melton’s sitting-room door. She was asked to enter and, as she

did so, she bobbed a curtsey. This was not usual for her to do, but she thought it might help. Aggie told Mrs Melton every detail of how she came to have her granddaughter staying with her. When she had finished, the room filled with an uneasy silence.

Then Mrs Melton spoke. 'Do you know where your daughter is?'

'I've no idea where she's gone,' Aggie said, desperately. 'It's the bairn. I can't work and look after her, and I need my wages from you to feed and clothe my own bairns, and to pay the rent. I don't know who else to turn to.' Aggie lowered her eyes, but not before she saw the look of sympathy on the face of her employer.

'Have you spoken to the authorities?' Mrs Melton asked.

Aggie gulped. She mistrusted the authorities who would come snooping around. They'd once tried to evict her from her house. 'No, Mrs Melton,' Aggie answered, demurely.

'Very well, leave it with me and I will see what can be done to help your awkward situation.'

'Thank you, madam,' Aggie replied, dipping her arthritic knees. And before the mistress changed her mind, she then scuttled from the room. In the passageway, she heaved a great sigh of relief. Her job was safe and soon Daisy would be gone.