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Mothering Sunday

Written by Rosie Goodwin

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Rosie

GOODWIN

Mothering Sunday

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For Zillah

But the child who is born on the Sabbath day is bonnie and blithe and good and gay.

Prologue

Treetops Manor, Hartshill near Nuneaton, September 1870

'*Still* no news?'

The maid paused to stare coldly at the tall, handsome man who was pacing up and down the long landing like a caged animal, before answering, 'No, more's the pity. The poor lamb is havin' a terrible time of it.'

'It will all be worth it if it is a boy,' Sir Ashley Hunter said unfeelingly.

She glared at him, making no attempt to hide her dislike. Zillah had never wanted her young mistress to marry him in the first place but the girl had been besotted by him. 'She should at least have had a proper doctor to attend her,' she grumbled as she made to pass him.

He caught her arm in a grip that made her wince with pain and his handsome face turned ugly as he ground out, 'The midwife I selected is *more* than capable.'

Aye, of keepin' her mouth shut, the maid thought, but she didn't say it aloud.

'And just remember, if it *is* a girl . . .'

A shudder ran through her as he went on, 'You know what you must do – otherwise it will be the asylum for your darling and the workhouse for you. A woman who can't provide me with an heir is no good to me nor any other man.'

Shrugging her arm from his grip, she stamped away downstairs for more hot water. He was a devil, that's what he was, and God willing one day he would get his comeuppance. But for now, all she could do was pray that the poor mistress would give birth to a male. What Zillah was being ordered to do – should the child not be a boy – was just too awful to contemplate.

Minutes later she tramped breathlessly back into her mistress's bedroom and placed the large jug she had just fetched from the kitchen down on to the table that had been placed at the side of the bed. The hot water and the towels would be used to wash mother and baby when the birth was finally over; dear God, let it be soon.

The house was quiet as a graveyard. The master had given the rest of the staff the day off, the moment his wife had gone into labour. He had told them all it was so that she could have some privacy – but Zillah knew better. The less that they saw of what was going on the better, as far as he was concerned. Most of them had gone to church, it being Sunday, and then to visit family.

Now she took the young woman's hand and stared down into her face. Strands of Lavinia's fine blonde hair were sticking to her damp forehead and she looked exhausted.

'Wi-will it be much longer?' she gasped.

The midwife who was attending her – a plump, hard-faced woman with a beaked nose – answered shortly, 'Not if yer do as yer told an' save yer breath.'

The maid gritted her teeth. There was nothing she would have liked to do more than land the woman a clout but instead she plastered a smile on her face and told her mistress, 'Almost there now, sweet'eart. Just bear down when the nurse tells yer an' yer'll be holdin' a fine son in yer arms in no time.'

'B-but what if it's not a son?' Lavinia moved her head restlessly.

'Shush now an' pay heed,' Zillah urged, and almost before the words had left her mouth another sharp contraction ripped through

the poor soul on the bed and she arched her back as she screamed in agony.

Two long hours had passed when the midwife announced triumphantly, 'Here it comes! The head is crownin'. The next good push should do it.'

By then the mother-to-be was slipping in and out of consciousness, barely aware of what was happening.

'That's it, pet. Did yer hear?' her maid asked gently. 'Just one more good push now on the next pain an' it'll all be over.'

But her beloved girl was too far gone to respond so the nurse lifted a wickedly sharp knife and did what had to be done . . . and seconds later the sound of a newborn's wails echoed around the room.

The child was quite exquisite, with eyes the colour of bluebells and a head full of soft, blonde, downy curls exactly the same colour as its mother's but Zillah's heart sank as she saw that it was a girl. And then the door suddenly crashed inwards and the father was standing there, demanding, 'Well?'

'It . . . it's a little lass,' the maid told him fearfully and watched as his hands clenched into fists of rage.

'Then you know what you must do – get rid of it!' He picked up a pillow and threw it at her. 'And you also know what will happen if you ever speak of this to anyone.' He cast one withering glance at his wife then marched from the room, saying, 'I shall tell Matthews to prepare the grave.'

The midwife rinsed her hands in the bowl that was placed ready for her. When the master finally sent for the doctor she would testify that the child had been born dead and he would then issue the death certificate. But right now she felt the need for the large glass of gin that Sir Ashley had promised would be waiting for her in the kitchen so, leaving the maid to clear up, she gathered her things and departed. As far as she was concerned, her job was done and she didn't much care one way or another what happened to the mother or the baby now.

An hour later, Zillah carried a tiny bundle through the kitchen and past the stable block until she came to the orchard where lay two other tiny graves. Within them rested the latest baby's two sisters who had been born a year apart. Unlike this one, they really had been born dead and she almost wished that this one had been too. Matthews, the master's valet, was waiting for her at the side of a gaping hole, leaning heavily on his shovel.

'About bloody time,' he grumbled and the maid looked down her nose at him. She was sure that he would have jumped off a cliff if his master had told him to and she disliked the man intensely. Most of the staff did too, if truth were to be told.

'Give it here then and let's get this over with.' He reached out for her precious bundle but she slapped his hand away and clutched it to her ample bosom.

'She's not an *it*, she's a little lass,' she snapped as tears slid down her cheeks. 'And I shall lay her in the grave meself, so you keep yer hands to yerself.'

Regardless of the muddy earth, she dropped to her knees and tenderly leaned into the grave to lay the pathetic bundle within.

'Sleep tight, me little one,' she whispered brokenly, then standing again she gave him a curt nod. 'So get on with it then!'

Matthews began to shovel earth across the tiny form as the maid looked on, and in no time at all the job was done and he patted the ground level with the back of his spade.

'That's it then,' he muttered, and leaving her standing there, he hurried back to the warmth of the kitchen. Once he'd gone, she followed him back to the house. Her mistress could regain consciousness at any time and then it would be Zillah's unfortunate duty to inform Lady Lavinia Huntley that she had given birth to yet another stillborn little lass. Better that than for the beloved girl to ever discover the truth.

Chapter One

Nuneaton Union Workhouse, November 1880

As the cane whistled through the air and cracked down across the crouching child's back she started but not a sound left her lips; instead she stared up at her attacker with a mutinous expression on her small face.

'What do you think you're doing, Small? I told Daisy to do that, not you!'

The small girl tucked into ten-year-old Sunday Small's side began to whimper with terror but Sunday continued to stare back at the woman undaunted.

'I've already finished my job, Miss Frost, so I thought I'd help Daisy. She's only little and this is a big floor for her to scrub.'

Miss Frost – aptly named, for she didn't have a warm feeling in her body – seemed to swell to twice her already considerable size. The matron, and housemother to the girls, was a tall, well-made woman with steel-grey hair which she wore in a tight bun at the nape of her neck, and cold, steel-grey eyes.

'You,' she stabbed a finger towards Daisy, 'get on with what you were told to do. And don't think I won't be back to check on it. If it isn't done to my standard, it will be the punishment room for you and no supper. Do you understand?'

'Y-yes, miss.' The child snatched the heavy scrubbing brush from

Sunday and began to swipe the floor as if her life depended on it, while the housemother grabbed Sunday by the arm and hauled her to her feet before shaking her much as a dog would have shaken a rat.

'How many times do I have to warn you not to interfere with my orders?' she raged, her cheeks flushed with anger. 'Let's see if a day or two in the punishment room will get you to be a little more obedient, shall we?' The woman began to drag Sunday along and the child went without protest. She had learned long ago that to argue only made things ten times worse.

At the end of the long, gloomy corridor Miss Frost paused to select a key from the chatelaine about her waist, then after unlocking a heavy wooden door she pushed Sunday ahead of her down a stone staircase. The steps were worn in the middle where feet had trodden on them over many years and the walls were damp and smelled fusty. By now, most of the children in the workhouse would have been screaming blue murder, but not Sunday. Her chin jutted with defiance and her deep-blue eyes looked straight ahead with not a tear in sight. This only incensed the woman more, and once at the bottom of the steps she unlocked yet another door and flung the child into a tiny dark room.

'There then.' She was panting with exertion now. 'At least you'll be company for the spiders and the rats,' she added spitefully, and with that she slammed the door resoundingly shut leaving Sunday to cower in the darkness.

The child had fallen heavily on her elbow and now she leaned against the rough-plastered wall and rubbed it, wincing with pain. She could hear Miss Frost's footsteps receding and then there was nothing but deep darkness and biting cold – but still she wouldn't cry. Her main concern was for Daisy and how the little girl might cope without her. Ever since Daisy and her brother, Tommy, had been admitted to the workhouse some months before, following the death of their mother, Sunday had taken the pair under her

wing. She felt fiercely protective of them and, whenever she could, she'd try to find ways to make things easier for the two of them. Having never known any other life than that of the workhouse, Sunday expected nothing – but Daisy and Tommy had known love and missed it sorely, poor little mites.

Sunday centred her thoughts on her friends as she huddled on the damp floor, wrapping her arms about her knees to try and keep warm. A worn wooden bench stood against one wall, but she knew from past experience that if she chose to sit on it she risked splinters so she preferred to stay where she was on the floor. There was no window so the darkness was all-consuming. She shivered. The other children would all be going into the dining room soon for their evening meal, such as it was. Probably some thin, greasy gruel with a few chunks of vegetables floating in it and dry, grey bread washed down with cold water. Meat was only served three times a week and even then it was so gristly that Sunday often wondered how she didn't break her teeth on it. Sometimes at night as they cuddled down in their beds, which were next to each other, shivering under their one thin blanket, Daisy would whisper to her about the wonderful meals her mother had used to cook, and the cakes she would bake before she became ill, and the cosy little house they had lived in. It had opened up a whole new world to Sunday, who would listen enviously.

Now she tried to ignore her rumbling stomach as she rocked to and fro. She doubted very much whether Miss Frost would let her out before the next morning at least. Miss Beau, who came to the workhouse each day for two hours to teach the children, had told her that the guardians of the workhouse had ruled that the punishment room should only be used as a last resort for short periods at a time, but as Sunday knew to her cost, what did Miss Frost care for rules? As far as the housemother was concerned, what the guardians didn't see wouldn't hurt them and none of the children were brave enough to tell them what really went on. Miss Frost

seemed to enjoy making their miserable lives even more bleak. Over the years Sunday had seen at least two children locked away, never to be seen again. Shortly after, two small new graves had appeared in the graveyard at the back of the workhouse. When questioned, Miss Frost had stated that the children had died of influenza. Sunday had her own thoughts about that. She firmly believed that the already undernourished children had been left to starve, but who would have listened to her, had she voiced her opinion – and would she be left to the same fate?

She tried to think of something nice as her breath floated on the cold air in front of her. *Think of Sunday School*, she told herself. Sunday was the highlight of the week, for on that day the children were only made to work until it was time to attend the morning service at the church at 11 a.m. Even the lunch they were served was slightly better on a Sunday. They had meat, albeit gristly, and potatoes and vegetables if they were lucky; sometimes they even got a bowl of rice pudding to follow, but not very often. Now she tried to imagine the sweetness of the rice pudding on her tongue but she was shivering so hard she couldn't manage to do it.

After lunch, when the children had washed and dried all the pots and returned them to their rightful places in the kitchen, the girls would be lined up for inspection and Miss Frost would walk along, inspecting them. Anyone who hadn't taken the trouble to brush their hair or change into their Sunday-best clothes would be sent back to their room. If they offended twice in the same month they would be whipped. Those that passed muster would then be frogmarched down the Bull Ring to All Saints Church at Chilvers Coton and left to the tender ministration of Miss Beau for an hour in the afternoon. Sunday loved the walk in the fresh air, past the florist's shop on the corner, which always smelled wonderful, over the canal bridge and under the Coton Arches, a huge viaduct that spanned the road.

The girl sighed as she thought of Miss Beau. The kindly teacher

would read the workhouse children wonderful stories from the Bible. Sunday's favourite story was about baby Moses being found in the bulrushes, and with Miss Beau's help she could read it all by herself now – a fact of which she was very proud. The guardians insisted that all the children should learn to read and write, and Sunday was like a little sponge, eager to read anything and everything she could get her hands on. It was Miss Beau who had told her of the town's history. Until not so very long ago, Nuneaton had been the heart of the ribbon-weaving industry and had housed many ribbon-weaving factories; the ribbons that were made there had been transported all over the world. Some of them had gone to the hat factories in nearby Atherstone to trim the hats for which they were famous; others had gone to London. But now the town relied mainly on the local brickworks and the pits.

Despite the bitter cold and her hunger pangs, Sunday smiled into the darkness. She was beautiful, was Miss Beau, just like her name, inside and out. Her bouncy brown hair matched soft brown eyes that always seemed to be smiling. The child would have walked over hot coals for her if asked, for Verity Beau was the only adult who had ever shown Sunday an ounce of affection. As well as teaching the girls, Miss Beau spent time in the nursery with the babies and also helped out in the sick wing. She had often told Sunday tales of how, when she was a baby in the nursery after being found on the steps of the workhouse, Sunday was the only one who ever cried.

'The other babies soon learned that crying achieved nothing,' Miss Beau said sadly. Though Verity did what she could for them whilst she was there, no one ever came to them apart from to feed and change them occasionally. The shocking fact was that the majority of them never made it to their first birthday. All except for Sunday, that was, and Miss Beau had told the girl that even as a small child she could always be heard protesting loudly about the lack of care shown to the infants. 'You were a force to be reckoned

with even back then,' the woman had informed her with a grin as they sat in the makeshift schoolroom for a small snatched moment after the other children had been dismissed one afternoon.

'And who gave me my name?' Sunday had asked.

'Well, I think you were named Sunday for obvious reasons,' Miss Beau informed her. 'And you were given the surname Small because you were so tiny.'

Miss Frost and Miss Beau were quite regularly at odds; the latter's questions or forthright suggestions enraged the other woman. Miss Beau was the only one, as far as Sunday could see, who ever stood up to Miss Frost or dared to question her disciplinary methods or matters such as the children's diets. Sunday sometimes wondered why her idol had never been dismissed. No doubt it was because Miss Beau was engaged to Mr Lockett, the local vicar, who gave the orphans religious instruction at Sunday School with his fiancée. Even the formidable matron wouldn't dare to upset him, because he was a very influential man in the community.

The girl was so deeply lost in her thoughts that for a moment she wasn't aware of the approaching footsteps – and when she did become aware of them her heart began to pound with fear. Could it be Miss Frost coming back with her cane to eke out yet more punishment? Sunday was the only child in the workhouse who refused to show her fear of the sadistic housemother – and this usually caused her punishment to be much more severe than if she had cried and shown remorse as the others did. She often went without a meal or was whipped and she knew that she sorely tried Miss Frost's patience, but she didn't care and would rather die than weaken and shed a tear in front of her.

Now she watched with trepidation as the key turned in the lock. As the door inched open, the gloomy light from the corridor filtered down into the room and suddenly there was Miss Beau, standing at the top of the stairs, holding a wooden tray.

Sunday let out a long sigh of relief.

'Oh, you naughty girl, whatever am I going to do with you?' Miss Beau said kindly. 'What have you done to upset Miss Frost now?'

'I were only helping Daisy to scrub the floor,' Sunday told her indignantly. 'Daisy's only little an' there was too much for her to do all on her own.'

Miss Beau tutted sympathetically as she handed the tray to the child.

'Eat this up as quickly as you can so I can get the tray back to the kitchen,' she urged. 'Daisy managed to whisper to me where you were when I missed you in class, but if Miss Frost should catch me down here I shall be in trouble too, for flouting her authority.'

Sunday obediently lifted the bowl and quickly drank the thin gruel before emptying the water glass. The gruel was lukewarm and salty but she was grateful for it. She then sat back with the chunk of bread in her hands to chew on when she was alone again.

Miss Beau stared sadly down at her. Sunday knew that Miss Beau cared for her and seeing how she was picked on upset her.

'Why can't you try to be a little more subservient to Miss Frost, dear?' she said now. 'It would make life so much easier for you.'

Sunday sniffed. 'I don't like bullies,' she replied simply, and the teacher shook her head. The child had spirit and Verity Beau knew that it was going to take a lot more than Miss Frost to break her.

'I have to go now.' Bestowing one last smile on the girl she went back up the stone steps and slowly closed the door again. As the key turned in the lock, Sunday was left once more in darkness. Something warm with a long tail ran across her foot and she hastily kicked it out of the way. It was a rat, no doubt after any crumbs she might drop. She shuddered, then began to chew on her chunk of bread. At least her hunger had subsided and after all the cleaning she had done she was tired now. Eventually she lay down on the cold floor, using her unhurt arm as a pillow, and in no time at all

was fast asleep, dreaming of the day when, with her best friends Daisy and Tommy, she would leave the workhouse for ever.



Sunday had no idea how long she stayed in the punishment room. There was no way of determining night from day down there but she supposed that she had been there for at least a day and a night before she heard footsteps again, for her stomach was growling ominously.

The door creaked open as Sunday peered up through bleary eyes to see Miss Frost staring down at her.

'So, are you ready to do as you are told yet?'

Sunday opened her mouth to tell her captor to go away but then thought better of it. Daisy might need her and she couldn't help her while she was locked away. She was also afraid that Miss Frost might leave her there for ever if she didn't agree with her.

She forced herself to nod although it went sorely against the grain and the woman smiled a cold smile.

'Come along then. There is work waiting to be done. You know the saying "idle hands make work for the devil". But first you must clean yourself up. You smell like a sewer.'

It was hardly surprising, Sunday thought, seeing as there was only a bucket to use as a chamber pot. It was half-full now and the smell rising from it in the confined area was overpowering.

'Bring that with you,' the woman snapped. 'And make sure it is emptied and thoroughly washed out.'

Sunday lifted it, feeling as weak as a kitten, but she didn't say a word. She knew all too well that Miss Frost only needed the slightest excuse to push her back into the room and leave her there again.

Once she had lugged the heavy bucket upstairs she found that it was afternoon. There was no sign of any of the children so she assumed they would all be at their lessons with Miss Beau. She

trudged outside to the privy block and emptied the contents of the bucket then washed it out at the pump as she'd been instructed before heading for the grey stone wash-house. Normally she would have loved to be out in the fresh air but she was so cold that her teeth were chattering and she just wanted to get back inside. She was almost halfway there when she realised that she would need some clean clothes so she darted back to the dormitory that she shared with Daisy and six other girls. Like the rest of the building the dormitory was a bleak place. It contained eight iron beds on which lay thin straw mattresses and one ragged blanket each, four on either side of the room. Between each bed was a small wooden locker to house the girls' meagre belongings, and on the end wall was a window set high up, through which the wind whistled. There were no pictures or ornaments of any description to soften the austere surroundings but Sunday didn't miss them for she had never known any different. She had expected to find the room empty at this time of the day so was shocked to see a slight form huddled beneath the blanket on the bed next to hers.

'Daisy, is that you?' she asked, instantly forgetting what she had come there for.

A tiny voice moaned, 'Yes.'

'But what are you doing in here at this time of day? Are you feeling ill?'

There was no answer so Sunday approached the bed and gently drew back the blanket.

'Oh, poor Daisy – what's happened to you?' The child was naked save for her faded cotton bloomers, and angry red weals made a striped pattern across her back.

'It . . . it was Miss Frost,' Daisy whimpered. 'She punished me for allowing you to do my work for me.'

Sunday swallowed the lump that had risen in her throat before tenderly placing her arm about the skinny shoulders.

'For as long as we're here I'll try to protect you, Daisy, and one

day we're going to get out of here,' she promised in a voice that trembled with rage. 'We'll go somewhere where Miss Frost can never hurt any of us again, you just see if we don't!'

There was such determination in her friend's voice that Daisy allowed herself to believe her as the girls clung together, drawing what comfort they could from one another.