Rosie
GOODWIN

# The Rag Princess

ZAFFRE

First published in the UK in 2025
This paperback edition published in 2025 by
ZAFFRE
An imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 105 Bunhill Row, London, EC1Y 8LZ

Copyright © Rosie Goodwin, 2025

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the
prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Rosie Goodwin to be identified as Author of this
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and
incidents are either the products of the author's
imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, or actual
events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-80418-835-4

*Also available as an ebook and an audiobook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.




The authorised representative in the EEA is Bonnier Books
UK (Ireland) Limited.
Registered office address:
Block B, The Crescent Building
Northwood, Santry
Dublin 9, D09 C6X8
Ireland
compliance@bonnierbooks.ie
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

*This one is for all my amazing family, friends and readers who have shown me so much support since my writing career began.*
*You are all stars, many thanks*

# *Prologue*

*October 1900*

The sky was grey and overcast, and as two pall bearers took the tiny white coffin of Penelope Elizabeth Lilburn to the newly dug grave in Coton churchyard, the clouds opened and the rain poured down as if someone in heaven had turned on a tap. Within minutes the gathered mourners were soaked to the skin, but they continued to pick their way amongst the drunkenly leaning headstones until they reached the child's final resting place.

Dry-eyed, Maggie Lilburn leant heavily on her husband's arm as she watched the coffin being slowly lowered into the small grave, wishing with all her heart that she could have gone with her beloved child. The vicar was slowly intoning the last part of the burial service, but the words seemed to float over her head. For now, she was beyond hearing or feeling anything but an overpowering sense of loss. The tears would come later.

Levi, her husband, however, was unashamedly weeping as he watched the body of his darling girl being lowered into the earth. It was so wrong! Penny had been such a sweet, fun-loving little girl, always laughing and full of mischief. He was finding it hard to believe that he would never hear or see her again, apart from in his dreams.

Penny had been just four years old when the terrible accident occurred. She had been playing with her friends in Abbey Street in their home town of Nuneaton when she had run into the road and straight into the path of two large dray horses delivering

barrels of ale to the nearby Kingsholme Inn. There was nothing the driver could have done to prevent what happened. By the time he had managed to halt the two frightened horses, the wheels of the wagon had already run over Penny. After examining her the doctor had informed them that she would have died instantly, for which Levi thanked God. At least he didn't have to think of her suffering.

He glanced towards his three sons who stood solemnly with their heads bowed. Ten-year-old Barney was the oldest of his brood and took after his father, with his dark hair and blue eyes. Then there was eight-year-old Charlie, who also took after his father. Lastly came Harry, aged six, who, with his copper-coloured hair and dark eyes, looked like his mother, just as Penny had. As her face flashed through his mind, a fresh spasm of weeping overtook him and he had to take a deep breath to pull himself together. It wouldn't do to fall apart now – Maggie was depending on him.

At last it was almost over and the vicar solemnly passed around a box of earth so that each of the mourners might throw a handful onto the coffin. When that was done, the man crossed to the family to offer his condolences once more, then with the flaps of his wet cassock slapping against his legs, he strode back to the comfort of the vicarage and a warm fire.

'Come on, hinny,' Levi encouraged as Maggie stared sightlessly down at the mud-spattered coffin. 'Let's get ourselves off to the wake now. There's nothin' more to be done here. We'll go an' get a nice hot cup o' tea inside you.'

He nodded towards the boys, who had silently rounded the grave to stand beside their parents, then they all turned and made for the lychgate, beyond which a carriage was waiting for them. The journey to the Pig and Whistle Inn in Abbey Street, which was just a stone's throw away from where they lived, was made in silence. When they arrived, Levi paid the driver and ushered what was left of his family inside out of the cold and wet.

Quite a few of the mourners were already there; the men with pints of ale in their hands while the women sipped tea or sherry wine and whispered amongst themselves.

'I don't know how Maggie will ever get over this,' one of the women was saying to another with a sad shake of her head. Peggy Walker was the Lilburns' neighbour from one of the courtyards spread all along one side of Abbey Street, and Maggie's best friend, although they were total opposites. While Peggy was plump and easy-going, Maggie was more ambitious and kept her house squeaky clean. 'I can remember the day little Penny were born as if it were yesterday,' Peggy sighed. 'Desperate for a little girl, Maggie were, an' when she clapped eyes on Penny she couldn't stop smilin'. She were a bonny little thing, mind, an' bright as a button an' all. The whole family doted on 'er.'

The woman she was talking to nodded in agreement. 'Ah well, life can be cruel.' Bridie Fellows was the local gossip and was making the most of the free bar Levi had laid on; she was already on her second glass of sherry and was greedily eyeing the plates of sandwiches and hot pies the landlady was placing on a long table to one side of the room. 'Anyway,' she said abruptly as her stomach rumbled in anticipation, 'I'm just goin' to grab a bite to eat. I've had nothin' since last night an' me stomach thinks me throat's cut.'

Meanwhile Levi settled his wife and sons on some chairs close to the fire before hurrying away to fetch them all a drink. He returned shortly with a pint of ale for himself, a large brandy and a cup of hot tea for Maggie and three glasses of lemonade for the boys. Anyone seeing them would have thought they were a very well-to-do family, clad as they were in their smart clothes, but in actual fact Levi ran a thriving rag-and-bone yard next to their tiny two-up, two-down cottage.

Levi had travelled to Nuneaton some years before from Seaton Delavel, a small mining village seven miles outside of South Shields,

following the death of his parents. He had come to work on the railways, and soon after he had met Maggie. He had been almost penniless at the time, taking work wherever he could find it once the railway navvies moved on. Eventually he had bought a barrow and walked the streets collecting rags, bones and any scraps of metal he could find, which he would sell on, until eventually he had bought the small yard he now ran very successfully. Shortly after this, he and Maggie had wed and he had thought himself the luckiest man alive. He still did, although he and his wife were as different as chalk from cheese.

Levi had been raised in an overcrowded garret, where he and his six brothers and sisters had slept top to toe on straw mattresses, and they hadn't always known where the next meal was coming from, so he was proud of what he had achieved and thankful that his family didn't have to suffer the hardships he had. Maggie's parents had died when she was young, and she and her siblings had been brought up in the courts by an aunt. Although her aunt did her best, money had been tight, and they, too, had often gone hungry. Sadly, her aunt had died shortly after she and Levi were wed.

Her background had made Maggie determined to pull herself and her family out of poverty and she had worked beside Levi to make their business successful. Once it had started to turn a profit, though, she preferred to mix with the more influential people of the town and had insisted that her children should have the very best clothes Levi could provide. He was happy to oblige, although sometimes he had to gently rein in her spending. Today she was clad in a black bombazine mourning gown and a wide hat covered with a black veil, and the boys were dressed in smart little suits and white shirts with starched collars, as he himself was, although he could hardly wait to get home and get out of it. Levi was never happier than when he was getting his hands dirty and had never been one for dressing up.

'There you go, pet,' he said gently as he placed Maggie's drink before her, but if she heard him, she gave no sign. Instead she sat staring sightlessly straight ahead, just as she had since the day of the terrible accident. People were approaching their table offering condolences and Levi acknowledged each of them with a nod, praying for this dreadful day to be over.

'Can we go soon, Da?' Barney asked. The boys were white-faced and fearful. This had been their first encounter with death and they didn't quite understand it – it was just too hard for them to accept that they would never see their cheeky little sister again.

'Aye, we will, lad.' Levi reached across the table and affectionately ruffled the boy's dark hair. 'Meantime, why don't you take your brothers over there an' get somethin' to eat? I doubt yer ma will be up to cookin' the night.'

Barney obediently ushered Charlie and Harry towards the food table as Levi turned his attention back to his wife. 'Shall I be fetchin' somethin' for you, pet? You've had not a bite between yer lips for days, an' I don't want you makin' yourself ill now. Perhaps a bit o' pork pie or a sandwich?'

Maggie raised a hand to lift her veil back and he was shocked to see the pain and venomous look on her face. 'A bit o' pork pie you say? How can you even *think* of eatin' on such a day? Don't you understand our lovely girl is gone, Levi? We'll not see her again in this life. I just pray she'll be waitin' for us in the next.'

Her words cut like a knife, but his voice was calm as he answered, 'Of course I know that. But I also know we still have the boys to take care of. They need us more than ever now, so we've got to try an' be strong for them.'

'I know that well enough!' she rasped. 'I also know that if you'd bought us that house in Swan Lane that I wanted this might never have happened!'

Levi groaned. 'Oh, not *that* again. Didn't I explain that I couldn't afford it yet? And don't go tryin' to lay the blame for the accident

on me, woman. I was workin' when it happened, but where were you? Drinkin' tea from yer dainty china cups an' saucers an' entertainin' yer fancy friends, were you?'

The minute the words had left his lips he wished he could take them back, but it was too late and he cringed as he saw the look of hurt burning in her eyes. 'I'm sorry, hinny. I shouldn't have said that,' he said, running his work-worn hands through his thick mop of hair. 'It was an accident pure an' simple, an' no one were to blame. It was just one o' those terrible things that can happen from time to time. What we have to do now is find a way to come to terms wi' it.'

The boys returned at that moment with their plates piled high with thick ham and cheese sandwiches, pickles and a variety of pies. At least the accident hadn't affected their appetites, Levi thought ruefully.

The afternoon dragged on but when the food table was empty and the bar was almost drunk dry, the last of the mourners left and Levi let out a deep sigh of relief. He went to settle the bill with the landlord before shepherding his family out of the pub and the few yards down the road to the courtyard where they lived.

'Here we are then, me boys,' he said, forcing a note of cheer into his voice as they passed through the yard. Opening the door to their cottage, he ushered them in out of the damp October afternoon. 'How about you go up an' get changed out o' your best suits, eh? An' hang 'em up tidy, mind, else you'll have yer ma skelpin' yer backsides. Then when you come down, we'll all have us a nice hot cup o' tea.'

The cottage was a complete contrast to the rag-and-bone yard outside. Everything was neat and tidy and so clean that Levi often joked he could eat his dinner off the floor. There were two comfortable mohair sofas with gaily coloured cushions scattered over them to either side of the fire, and a good quality mahogany table with six chairs stood in the centre of the room with a matching

sideboard against one wall. Thick velvet curtains, which he had collected from a big house on the outskirts of town, framed the windows, and good quality fringed rugs were scattered about the highly polished floorboards. Outside was his domain but Maggie insisted on only the best of what he collected for the inside.

Now she crossed to the side of the dying fire and dropped heavily onto one of the sofas while Levi threw some coals onto the glowing embers before hurrying away to put the kettle on.

'I'll just pop up an' get outta this suit then I'll make us all a nice cuppa, pet.' His words met with no response so with a heavy heart he made his way up the steep narrow staircase to the two small bedrooms. In one he could hear the boys talking as they got out of their best clothes, and as he stepped into his and Maggie's room, the first thing he saw was the small truckle bed that Penny had slept on to the side of theirs. It was neatly made with her favourite teddy bear propped up against the pillows, for all the world as if it was waiting for her to come for bedtime. A lump swelled in his throat as he dropped down onto the side of the bed and buried his face in his hands. It felt as if the whole family had fallen apart and Levi had no idea how he was ever going to put it back together. But one thing was for sure, he was going to have to try to for the sake of the boys.

That evening, after the boys were in bed, the torrent of tears that Maggie had held back suddenly burst from her like a breached dam and all Levi could do was squeeze her hand and speak soothingly to her. He supposed they were better out than in, but as the days and weeks passed with no sign of them ceasing, he wondered if they were ever going to stop.

# PART 1

# *Chapter One*

*September 1904*

It was late afternoon and the light was fading fast as the two boys Levi employed to collect bones for him entered the yard, pushing their small handcart ahead of them.

'We done well today, mister,' the smaller of the two told Levi happily as he swiped his sleeve along the bottom of his runny nose, leaving a shiny trail of snot. 'We went to the slaughter yard an' picked through the bones an' some of 'em will be good enough to make handles.'

Levi crossed to look into the cart and nodded. 'Well done, lads. Yer right. Some o' these will make right good handles fer cutlery for the toffs. The grease from 'em will make some good soap an' all.' The rest of the bones he would sell to a merchant who would grind them down to make glue and fertiliser, so none of them would be wasted.

Fishing in his pocket he took out some coins and paid the boys, who went merrily on their way to buy bread that would ensure their families ate that evening. Levi pushed the barrow to a corner of the yard and threw a tarpaulin over it before crossing to the horse and cart he had just come home in. He too had had a good day, and the cart was loaded with rags and scrap metal, all of which would be sold for a profit. A woman would come in the next morning to sort through the rags to see if any of the clothes were worth salvaging. Those that were would be sold to the rag stall in the marketplace, and those that were beyond reusing would be sorted into whites and coloureds. White rags would fetch tuppence to threepence a pound,

depending on their condition and would be sold to paper merchants. Coloureds and wool would fetch tuppence a pound and would be sold on to shoddy factories where they would be ground down to a fibrous mass and mixed with fresh wool before being made into new garments. But as Levi had discovered, it was the scrap metal that would fetch the most, so he spent the majority of his days scouring the streets for what he could find. Old brass, copper and pewter could fetch as much as five pence a pound so were highly valued.

Before unloading the cart, he unharnessed the horse and led him to the stable. Levi had bought old Dobbin some years before, shortly before the birth of his first son, and was more than a little fond of him. He gave him a brisk rub down and a nose bag before leaving him to rest and going back out into the yard where he began the unenviable task of sorting out his day's finds. It was a dirty, smelly job but Levi was used to it, and anything was better than being down the mines – as he had been back in his home town. He had almost finished when the cottage door opened and Maggie appeared. 'Your meal is almost ready. Ten minutes. And make sure you wash before you come in.'

'Right y'are, pet.' Levi hefted the rest of the rags into a shed he had ready for them. They had to be completely dry before they could be sold so he couldn't risk them getting wet. Finally, after swilling his hands and face in the trough of water to one side of the yard, he went into the kitchen.

Maggie was at the stove stirring a large pot from which delicious smells were issuing and the three boys were seated at one end of the table doing their homework.

'Best get that put away for now,' Maggie instructed them. 'And then get the table laid. This is ready.'

'Yes, Ma.' The boys immediately did as they were told. The fun-loving mother they remembered from before Penny died had disappeared over the last almost four years and they had to watch their p's and q's now or suffer a clip about the ear.

Levi hurried off upstairs to change – he didn't dare sit down in his work clothes – returning shortly to take his place at the table with his family just as Maggie ladled out a brimming dish of beef stew and dumplings for each of them.

'This looks delicious, pet,' Levi commented – there was no one could make stew and dumplings like his Maggie – but she didn't react to the compliment, merely carried on picking at her own portion.

Levi watched her from the corner of his eye and frowned. Maggie barely ate enough to keep a sparrow alive and she had lost weight. Since losing Penny she had become a shell of the happy woman she had once been and she rarely smiled anymore. She still took good care of him and their sons, admittedly, but the house was devoid of joy. Even the boys seemed to save their fun for outside the cottage and rarely spoke inside unless spoken to.

They were almost halfway through the meal when Maggie suddenly laid down her spoon and after staring at Levi for a moment she said quietly, 'I dare say I shall be wastin' me breath but there's somethin' I'd like to talk to you about.'

'Oh aye?' He gave her an encouraging smile. 'Talk away then, hinny.'

She shook her head. 'Not until the boys have finished eating.' She rose from the table and carried her almost full dish of food over to the large wooden draining board.

When the boys had eaten their fill, it was Barney who asked, 'Can we go outside to play for a while, Ma?' Of the three of them Barney was the most outspoken.

Maggie nodded. 'Yes, if you wrap up warmly, but only for half an hour, mind. It'll be properly dark soon an' you never know who is about.'

There was a flurry of activity as the children dashed to get their coats on and once the door had closed behind them, Levi retired to the sofa to one side of the fire and lit his pipe before patting the

seat at the side of him. 'Come an' tell me what you wanted to talk to me about, pet.'

Maggie dried her hands on a large piece of towelling, and once seated, she folded them primly in her lap. 'Well . . .' She licked her lips. 'I dare say my request will fall on deaf ears as it normally does, but Mrs Clarke called in today for a cup o' tea an' she was sayin' . . .' Mrs Clarke was the local greengrocer's wife and known for her airs and graces.

'Yes?' Levi prompted.

'She was saying that another house has come up for sale in Swan Lane.' She sat back and waited for his reaction. When none was forthcoming, she rushed on, 'Now I know we've had this conversation before but the lads are growing now and there's barely room to swing a cat around in that little bedroom of theirs. It's one of the townhouses that's become available. Three floors it has and four bedrooms, plus another two in the attics. Just think, the lads could have a room each if they'd a mind to.'

Levi puffed on his pipe and stared at her thoughtfully. It had been some time since she had asked to move and he could only take it as a good sign that she was doing so now. Perhaps this would be the start of them getting back to some sort of normality.

'So how much are they askin' for this townhouse?'

Her eyes lit up for the first time in ages. 'I'm not sure but Mrs Clarke gave me the name of the estate agent who's handling the sale. It's here, look. He has a shop in Queen's Road.' She handed him a piece of paper.

He took it from her and stared at it for a minute before saying, 'All right. I'm not promisin' anythin', mind, but I will pop in tomorrow when I'm on me rounds an' make a few enquiries.'

'Oh Levi, thank you!' Suddenly he saw a glimpse of the girl he had fallen in love with, and a flicker of hope flared in his chest. There had been times over the last few years when he had feared that the Maggie he loved was gone forever. If truth be told he

could possibly afford to buy a larger place – depending on the price of the property, of course – and if it would bring his wife back to him, he was willing to do it.

Leaning across the sofa, she pecked him tenderly on the cheek before she set to clearing the table as Levi settled down to read the *Evening Tribune*.

Later that evening, when the boys were settled in bed and Maggie sat darning, she said cautiously, 'Actually, there was something else I'd like to speak to you about.'

Glancing up from his seat by the fire, Levi narrowed his eyes. He knew that tone of voice. Was she going to ask for something new for the house that had caught her eye, or perhaps some new clothes for the boys?

'Go on then, spit it out,' he chuckled. 'How much is it goin' to cost me?'

'Oh nothing . . . nothing at all.' A flush had come to her cheeks as she laid her darning aside, and after taking a deep breath she went on, 'It's just that I've been thinking . . . You know that Peggy next door works up at the workhouse, well she was saying that the nursery there is full of little ones waiting to be adopted, so I got to thinking . . . perhaps you and I could consider taking another child?'

Levi's jaw dropped and he stared at her in amazement. '*Us* . . . take in another child? But we have three fine healthy sons already.'

Lowering her eyes, she nodded. 'I know that . . . but I thought we might consider taking a little girl.'

He frowned. 'And what's put this idea into your head? You realise that we could never replace Penny, don't you? So if that's what you were thinkin'—'

'No, no I wasn't thinking that at all,' she said hastily, a catch in her voice. 'I know better than anyone that a dozen little girls could never replace our Penny . . . But I just thought it might help to . . . to ease the pain a little.'

He was instantly sympathetic as he stared at her lowered head. He knew how much she still missed Penny – they all did. During the first year following Penny's death, Maggie had gone to visit her grave every single day come rain or shine. Thankfully the visits had now slowed to three or four times a week, but he knew that she was still grieving.

'I think something like that needs a lot o' thought, hinny,' he said eventually. 'How do you think the lads would feel about introducin' another little girl into the family? And haven't you just said yourself that the cottage is bulgin' at the seams now the lads are growin'?'

'Yes, but that wouldn't be a problem if we moved to Swan Lane, would it? And I'm sure they'd be fine with it. You know how much they all doted on Penny.' Seeing his uncertain expression, she rushed on, 'Won't you at least think about it . . . for me, *please*?'

'Aye, pet, I'll do that.' And for then the subject was closed, although Levi had a funny feeling it wouldn't be the last he would hear of it.

The following day, when the children had gone to school, Peggy popped into Maggie's for a cup of tea. It was her day off from the workhouse and a weekly ritual they had.

'So did yer get chance to speak to Levi about the house an' adoptin' a child from up at the workhouse?' Peggy asked as she dunked a biscuit into her cup of tea. The dainty china cups and saucers that Maggie insisted on always amused her. They only had pot mugs in her cottage.

Maggie nodded as she joined Peggy at the highly polished table. 'I did and he seemed to consider the house, although he didn't seem too taken on the thought of another child.'

Peggy sighed. She and Maggie had gone through school together and had remained close friends, and she knew how much she missed Penny.

'Well, takin' on another little 'un is a lot to ask,' Peggy pointed out. 'Just give him time to get used to the idea afore you broach it again. An' as for the house . . . I dare say you'll not have time fer the likes of us lot if you do move to Swan Lane.'

Maggie frowned at her. 'Don't be so daft, woman. We've been friends forever. You'll still be welcome to come and see us whenever you've a mind to.'

Could they have known it, at that very minute Levi had left the estate agent after picking up the details for the house Maggie had set her heart on as he had promised. He had to admit it looked a fine property, although the asking price was considerably more than he had thought it would be. He could still just about manage it, so long as Maggie understood that money would be tight for a time. There would be lots of rooms to fill and he knew of old that she wouldn't settle for just any old second-hand furniture. Still, if she agreed to be reasonable and bide her time on the furnishings, he would give it some serious consideration. The next step would be to go and view the place if they did decide they wanted to go ahead. It would be nice to see Maggie smiling again and a fresh start in a new house away from all the memories of Penny might be just the tonic she needed. However, he still didn't like the idea of adopting another child. What would be the point? A hundred little girls could never replace the daughter they had loved and lost as far as he was concerned.