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Without Sin

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Extract

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One

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'You're not going to leave us here? Not in this place?' Meg turned her wide green eyes accusingly on her father. 'You can't.'

Beyond the black wrought-iron gates, the three-storey, red-brick building surrounded by high walls was an ominous threat. Its regimented rows of windows were like watching eyes. The young girl, face like a thunderstorm, wild long red hair, glanced at her mother, willing her to say something. But Sarah's pale face was expressionless, her eyes dull with defeat. Her thin frame drooped with weariness, yet she held one arm protectively around the mound of her belly. Sarah's time was near and she was anxious to have a decent place for her confinement. Despite their dire circumstances, Sarah didn't want to lose this baby. She'd lost so many that even the humiliation of the workhouse was better than giving birth in a ditch. Beside her, five-year-old Bobbie sucked his thumb and said nothing. He gripped his mother's hand tightly, his huge brown eyes glancing nervously between his sister and father.

Reuben Kirkland passed his hand wearily across his brow. 'I've no choice, Meggie. I'm sorry, we've nowhere else to go and till I can find work again . . .' His voice

trailed away and he avoided meeting his daughter's belligerent gaze.

Reuben's sudden dismissal from his work as a wagoner at Middleditch Farm had come as a shock to all the family, but Meg was the only one who had dared to voice her indignation. Sarah had said nothing.

'Why, Dad?' Meg had challenged him the previous evening when, still in their cosy tied cottage, Reuben had brought home the devastating news. 'What's happened? And what about me?' Meg worked for the farmer's wife in the dairy, but she helped with outdoor work too, at haymaking and harvest and at potato-picking time. 'Am I to go an' all?'

Wordlessly, Reuben had nodded.

Meg bit her lip, casting about in her mind. Was it her fault? Had she done something wrong, something so dreadful that her whole family were being put out of their home? Eyes downcast, Reuben had muttered bitterly, 'It's the missis. Got her knife into me, she has. The mester'd've been all right, but her with her tittle-tattling.' He had spat the last words out with unusual viciousness.

Fresh hope had surged in Meg as she cried out eagerly, 'But what about Miss Alice? She's my friend. Her dad'd listen to her. She'll not let him turn us out.'

Her father had refused to listen. He'd turned away towards the back door, wrenched it open and disappeared through it. Meg had stared after him. Then she'd felt her mother's light touch on her arm. 'Leave it, love,' Sarah had said softly, speaking for the first time.

Why? Why? *Why?* Meg had wanted to scream. But her mother's pinched face and tear-filled eyes had stilled her angry outburst. Instead, she'd been sorely tempted to run to the farmhouse, to bang on the door and demand to be told the reason for her father's dismissal.

And, more importantly, her own. She was sure there had been nothing wrong when she'd left the dairy earlier that evening. The mistress – Mrs Mabel Smallwood – was a hard employer. She was strict and humourless, but she'd never been cruel or unjust.

Meg couldn't understand the sudden, soul-destroying change in their fortunes. How had they come to this? A sorry little group in the pale light of early summer, standing outside imposing gates. The workhouse lay on the outskirts of the small town of South Monkford, the nearest place to Middleditch Farm and the home they had been obliged to leave. They'd left at dawn, tramping the five miles here. As they walked, the rising sun heralded a warm day. Pale pink wild roses dappled the hedgerows and elderflower bushes were laden with their heavy cream blossom. Birds flew overhead in frantic frenzy to feed their young. But Meg saw none of it.

'Why can't we look for work?' the girl persisted, in no mood to 'leave it' as her mother suggested. 'You and me, Dad? There must be something. It's shearing time. There must be plenty of work—'

'I'm a wagoner, Meg. 'Osses is all I know about. What would I know about sheep?'

'But—'

'We've been sacked without a reference. Both of us.'

Meg gasped. That was the worst thing that could possibly happen. New employers always, but always, demanded a reference from the previous master or mistress. Without it, finding work was almost impossible except for the most menial, disgusting of jobs.

Like in the workhouse.

Standing at the gate, which seemed to the young girl like the bars of a prison, Meg shuddered. 'Why, Dad?' she whispered, once more searching her mind for

something – anything – she might have done wrong. 'What's happened? It's not because of me, is it?'

She knew she was often pert and saucy, but the mistress wouldn't dismiss the whole family just because the dairymaid was a bit cheeky sometimes, would she? More than likely, Mabel Smallwood would have let Meg feel the back of her hand.

Then a far more worrying thought came into the girl's mind.

'You're a bad influence on my lass,' Mrs Smallwood had said more than once. 'She should be making friends of her own age. Nice girls who aren't fluttering their eyelashes at the farm lads half the time.'

'Alice talks to the farmhands, missis,' Meg would begin defiantly. Wasn't it from Alice that Meg had learned to laugh and flirt with the boys? 'So why can't I?'

'I'll hear no more of that sort of talk from you, miss. My Alice is different. She knows how to behave, knows where to draw the line. I can trust my Alice.' Her tone implied that she did not trust Meg. 'But how can you know at your age? Fifteen, indeed! Playing with fire, my girl, that's what you are. You'll come to a bad end, if you don't watch out. You mark my words.'

Remembering all this, Meg, suddenly afraid, asked her father, 'Is it to do with Alice? Is it because I'm friends with Alice and the missis doesn't like it?'

Beside her, Sarah gave a little sob and covered her mouth with her fingers. Reuben glared at Meg for an instant and then his gaze fell away. He turned towards his wife. 'I'm sorry, Sarah. Truly. I – I will come back for you. But I must get right away from here so – so that I can find work. You do understand, don't you?'

White-faced, Sarah lifted her head slowly and stared back at him. She bit her lip so hard that she drew blood,

but she made no gesture of understanding. Her eyes held only suffering and silent reproach.

Meg gasped. Her mother's look was directed, not at her as she had feared, but at Reuben. Sarah held her husband entirely responsible for their predicament. Meg pressed her lips together, making her firm jawline even more pronounced with new determination. 'Well, you needn't think we're going in there, Dad, cos we're not. I'm going back to the farm. I'm going to see Miss Alice. She'll speak up for us. I know she will.'

She started to turn away but her father's hand shot out and gripped her arm. 'You'll do no such thing, girl. You'll go in there with your mam and your brother and you'll look after them. You hear me?'

Meg gaped at him and twisted her arm free. 'You're hurting me.'

Reuben was at once contrite. 'I'm sorry, love—' He rubbed his forehead distractedly. 'I just don't know which way to turn. Now, be a good girl, Meggie, and take care of your mam and Bobbie. Will you do that for me, eh?' His brown eyes were pleading with her. He touched her face gently and Meg was lost.

'Oh, Dad!' She flung herself against him, hugging him. Muffled against him she said, 'You will come back for us, won't you? Promise?'

For a brief moment, Reuben held her close whilst Meg clung to him. She felt his chest heave beneath her cheek, heard the gulping sound in his throat, but then, without warning, he tore himself from her, turned and stumbled away.

'Dad,' Meg cried, 'Dad, don't go. Don't leave us . . .' But Reuben hurried on and though the forlorn little family stood staring after him, not once did he look back.

Two

The small, whitewashed cottage on Middleditch Farm, owned by George Smallwood, had been home to the Kirkland family for the past three years. Meg's childhood had been punctuated by moves almost every year as her father shifted from farm to farm. With a new home in a strange place, a different school where she was cast adrift in a playground full of strangers with scarcely a friendly face amongst them, Meg had learned early to rely on no one but herself. Often she had been the butt of bullies, the object of ridicule for her bright red hair and her second-hand clothes.

'Look at carrot tops,' some boy would tease, pulling her red curls. The name would be taken up by them all – even the girls.

'A' them clothes your mam's hand-me-downs?' A jeering ring would form around her in the playground and the laughter and the pointing would begin. 'Look at 'er shoes. Reckon they're 'er dad's.'

'I've seen better shoes on 'osses.'

That most of the other children were similarly dressed to Meg didn't seem to matter. She was the new girl, the object of derision, fair game for the bullies.

As a little girl Meg had worked hard to become one of them, to earn friends, but as she grew older she learned not to care. She would stick her nose in the air and make some scathing retort. She became handy with

her fists and many a time a harassed teacher had to prevent the red-haired she cat from pulling the hair of her opponent out by its roots. But at the age of ten Meg learned another way to deal with the taunts and jibes. She joined in the teasing directed at herself. She was the first to say, 'This is me mam's old skirt –' then she would pull a wry face and add – 'and you should see the bloomers I have to wear.' Instead of using her fists, Meg used her lively wit. She would laugh the loudest at herself, but behind the laughter in her green eyes, there was a hint of steel. Meg was learning fast how to stand on her own two feet in an unkind world.

There was only one reason why Meg was still goaded into using her fists now and then – if anyone dared to tease little Bobbie. Then his assailant would end up with a bloody nose and running to his mother.

'She hit me. That big girl hit me.'

Meg would clench her fists, narrow her eyes and, gritting her teeth, turn to face the irate mother.

'You're old enough to know better than to hit a little chap half your size.'

'Then your little chap shouldn't hit my brother.'

'My Arthur wouldn't do a thing like that.'

'Then why has Bobbie got a black eye?'

''Spect you did it and you're trying to put the blame on someone else.'

Meg would take a step closer and the older woman would back away, intimidated by the young firebrand. 'I *never* hit my brother.'

'All right, all right, but you leave my Arthur alone.'

'I will.' Then Meg would add ominously, 'As long as he leaves our Bobbie alone, an' all.'

When Meg was twelve, Reuben found work as head wagoner to George Smallwood and brought his family

to the cottage that came with the job. Reuben was good with horses, loved them and understood them. Meg loved them too, the way the huge shires shook their great heads, snorted and stamped their heavy hooves. She loved their power, their might.

'You'd make a good wagoner, Meggie,' her father told her proudly and then spoilt it by adding, 'if only you were a lad.'

Meg did not go back to school. She was old enough now to be employed on the same farm and soon she was under Mrs Mabel Smallwood's eagle eye in the dairy. But Meg had never known such happiness and contentment. She worked hard, though she rarely earned even the most grudging praise from the farmer's wife.

And at last she found a real friend in the Smallwoods' daughter.

Although Alice – buxom, fair-haired, blue-eyed and pink-cheeked – was five years older than Meg, she was kind to the young girl. There were no girls of a similar age to Alice on the neighbouring farms, so the two were thrown together even in their spare time. Though there was not much of that for either of them, Meg thought wryly. Alice took Meg to the big church in South Monkford every Sunday morning. They knelt together demurely during the service, but on the walk home Meg watched as Alice smiled coyly at the youths gathered near the church wall, laughing and talking whilst they watched the girls parading in their Sunday best.

'Come for a walk with us, Alice.' One spotty-faced youth was a particular admirer, but Alice only tossed her hair and stuck her nose in the air. 'What? With you, Harry Warner?'

The young man grinned. 'I was all right to walk out with last Sunday.'

Alice laughed her tinkling laugh and dimpled her cheeks. 'That was last week.'

'Oho, someone else, is there?' He pressed his hand to his chest. 'My heart is broken.'

'I'm sure Lizzie Lucas will help it mend.'

'Lizzie Lucas means nothing to me.'

'That's not what I've heard.' Tossing her hair, Alice linked her arm through Meg's and, with a cheery wave to all the watching youths, walked down the lane, swinging her hips. Meg, too, turned, grinned saucily at the lads and then tried to copy Alice's provocative walk.

Middleditch Farm lay in the rolling countryside of east Nottinghamshire. The nearest town was South Monkford, with narrow streets of shops and a market held on Wednesdays and Saturdays. On the outskirts was a racecourse that was becoming quite famous and it was George Smallwood's ambition to own a racehorse one day.

'You'll look after it for me, Kirkland,' the farmer would say, clapping Reuben on the back. 'We'll rear a winner, eh?'

And several times a year, when there was a big meeting on, George and his wagoner would disappear for a day at the races. On those days Meg would lie in her bed at night under the eaves and listen to her father stumbling about in the room below when he arrived home late and much the worse for drink. Her mother would be tight-lipped for days afterwards, but there was little Sarah could do about it when it was their employer who was the ringleader in such escapades.

The family's three years at Middleditch Farm had been the longest they had stayed anywhere that Meg could remember. And they had certainly been the happiest years for her. But suddenly, disastrously, that had

all changed. And Meg was very much afraid that somehow it was all her fault.

Had Mabel Smallwood found out about last Sunday's picnic, when she and Alice had taken sandwiches, cakes and beer into the recreation ground beyond the church? They had sat on the grass in the sunshine, talking dreamily about the kind of man they'd like to marry, when they'd been startled by two youths from the town whom Alice knew vaguely.

'Well, well, well, if it isn't the lovely Alice Smallwood. And who's this?' The taller of the two young men had turned his attention to Meg, but it had been Alice who had invited the lads to join their picnic. The four youngsters had had a merry afternoon. There'd been a little flirting, a little horseplay and when they parted in the early evening, a chaste kiss. Though it had all been innocent enough, Mrs Smallwood wouldn't think so. And, Meg thought fearfully, she would not blame her own daughter. In her eyes, Alice could do no wrong. No, the mistress would lay any blame squarely on Meg's head. But without going back to Middleditch Farm, there was little Meg could do to find out if this was the reason for their sudden dismissal.

One day, the young girl vowed, *I will find out. And I'll tell Mrs Mabel Smallwood exactly what I think of her – and her precious daughter.* For what hurt Meg more than anything was the growing realization that, whatever had happened to cause this catastrophe, Alice – her dear friend and confidante – had not spoken up for her.

That hurt the young girl much more than the fact that she and her mother and brother had now to enter the much-feared workhouse.

Lifting her head with a show of defiance, Meg said,

'Come on, Mam – Bobbie. We'd best go and knock at the door.'

She pushed open the heavy gate and marched up a long, straight path leading through an orchard and neatly cultivated vegetable gardens. Sarah, with Bobbie holding her hand, trailed listlessly behind her. They passed between high walls surrounding yards on either side of the main entrance at the front of the building and then climbed wide, stone steps to the white pillared door. Meg rang the bell. Somewhere deep inside they heard a faint clanging. It seemed an age until the door was thrown open and the biggest man whom Meg had ever seen stood there looking down on them.

Isaac Pendleton, master of South Monkford workhouse, was six feet tall with a girth that seemed almost the same measurement. A large, bulbous nose dominated his florid face. His lips were fleshy and wet and heavy jowls bulged out over the starched white collar. His dark hair, greying at the temples, was thinning and smoothed over his crown in a vain attempt to cover advancing baldness. Yet his eyes seemed kindly.

'What's this? What's this? Ragamuffins knocking at my front door?' His voice was as large as his frame, deep and resonant. He was dressed in a dark, sober suit, but a multi-coloured waistcoat, stretched tightly over his ample chest, lightened his otherwise sombre appearance. Looped across it was a gold watch chain. It was as if his position demanded that he dress with sobriety and authority, yet his waistcoat revealed a more flamboyant side to his nature.

Sarah quailed and Bobbie shrank against his mother's skirts, but Meg stood her ground and gazed boldly up at him. She opened her mouth, but before she could speak the master boomed, 'Round the back with you.

You'll find someone there to direct you.' He seemed about to shut the door in their faces, but then he hesitated. His gaze roamed over Meg's face and hair.

'By,' he murmured, 'but you'll be a beauty one day an' no mistake.' Then his glance went beyond Meg to Sarah's face.

Though at present she was pale with distress and heavy with child, Isaac Pendleton, who prided himself on being a veritable connoisseur of women, could see beyond Sarah's temporary weariness. She was undoubtedly feeling humiliated too, he thought, at having to present herself at his door, but she was a pretty, gentle-looking creature with lovely eyes.

Isaac smiled. 'My dear lady, pray come in.' He bent closer, as if sharing a confidence. 'We'll break the rules for once, shall we? This is the main door to the guardians' meeting room and to my apartments. It's not normally used by the – er – inmates. But come in – come in.' He extended a long arm and ushered the reluctant little family inside.

Isaac Pendleton was not at all what Meg had expected the workhouse master to be like. From the imposing look of the building's walls and windows from the outside, she'd expected the man in charge to be as threatening, treating people down on their luck as idle, good-for-nothings. Yet this man was leading them down a room, past the long, polished table to a door at the far end on the left-hand side. Reaching it, he paused and turned. Putting his finger to his lips, he chuckled, 'Now, not a word to the others, mind, else they'll all expect to use the front door. Go through here and out of the door on the right into the yard and then to the buildings on the far side. That's the way you should have come in.' He beamed benevolently down at them. 'The porter's

lodge is at the end near the entrance gate. See old Albert Conroy. He'll admit you and then arrange for someone to take you to the bath room and fit you out with uniforms.' He took Sarah's hand and raised it to his lips. 'Don't fret, my dear lady. You'll be well looked after here. You and your little ones.'

For the first time since Reuben had brought home the dreadful news, Sarah managed a weak smile. 'You're very kind,' she murmured and a faint tinge of pink touched her pale cheeks.