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The Ribbon Weaver

Written by Rosie Goodwin

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THE
RIBBON
WEAVER

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Prologue

Nuneaton 1830

‘Come on, Molly gel, let’s be havin’ yer. It is Christmas Eve, yer know, an’ some of us have homes to go to.’

Molly grinned as Amos Bennett’s good-natured face poked through the opening into the great attic where she was working.

‘I’m just finishin’ now, pet, I’ll be down in two shakes of a lamb’s tail,’ she promised, barely taking her eyes from the intricate length of fine gauze ribbon she was weaving. Nodding, Amos disappeared back the way he had come.

Slowly, Molly stopped treadling and after placing down the shuttle she skilfully steadied the weight that hung beneath the loom. As the machine came to a creaking halt, she stretched stiffly and glanced up at the skylights that ran the length of the attic. The snow that had been threatening to fall all day was now coming down with a vengeance, and all she could see was a thick white coating of it that covered the glass and cast an eerie glow into the room. She shivered. Apart from herself the huge attic was deserted, the looms silent. The women who worked them had long since scurried away to begin their Christmas preparations with their families. However, it suited Molly to work late. Since losing her husband Wilf almost three years before, she had no one to rush home to, and for her, apart from the loneliness, Christmas Day was much like any other.

She was never short of invitations admittedly, but Molly Ernshaw was known for keeping herself to herself, just

as she had when her Wilf was alive. Back then, she had considered she needed no one else but him and now, at the age of forty-five, she felt it was a bit late in the day to teach an old dog new tricks.

Standing, she slowly straightened her back; it was aching from the long hours bent across the loom.

Gazing around the silent ribbon factory, she shuddered. Now that she had stopped working, Molly was suddenly cold and tired. If she had allowed herself, she would also have admitted to being more than a little sad at the prospect of the lonely Christmas before her.

Still, she consoled herself, there were a lot of folks much worse off than she was, and on that thought she pulled her thick woollen shawl more closely about her. Taking up an old tweed coat that was draped across the back of her chair, she pulled that on too. Then, after lifting her bag, she made her way painfully down the crude wooden staircase to the floor below. Amos was hurrying about, turning off the gas lamps and making sure that all the doors were securely bolted.

It was almost like descending into a rainbow. Everywhere she looked stood boxes and spools of ribbons of every shade and hue, all ready to be transported to the hat factories in Coventry, where the majority of them would be used to adorn headgear for the ladies of fashion. There were silk ribbons, satin ribbons, pearl-edged ribbons, finely worked gauze ribbons, and tartan ribbons, all of various widths and colours, and Molly never tired of seeing them. She herself was one of the best silk weavers in the whole factory and proud of it. Her Wilf had taught her all she knew. His old loom now stood silent in the attic of her little cottage, and she could quite easily have worked from there as many of the local people did, but she preferred to work here in the factory for company.

As she picked her way amongst the boxes, Amos hastened across to open the door for her.

‘A Merry Christmas to yer then, Molly.’ He beamed, and she wearily smiled back.

‘And the very same to you and yours,’ she returned, then stepped past him into the almost deserted street. The bitter cold took her breath away. ‘By God above, it’s enough to freeze the hairs on a brass monkey out here,’ she muttered to herself as she pulled her old coat more tightly about her. Head bent, she then began to pick her way across the slippery cobblestones.

The snow was falling in great white flakes, and the few people that dotted the streets passed her as if she was invisible as they scurried along with their heads bent, keen to get back to their firesides and out of the biting cold.

By the time Molly had turned out of Abbey Street and towards the empty stalls of the cattle-market, she was breathless and cursing. ‘Bloody weather,’ she said irritably, intent on trying not to slip on the treacherous cobbles. ‘Why couldn’t the snow have waited till I was safely home?’

All she could think of was her cosy fireside and a good strong brew of tea, and the thought made her press on. The snow seemed to be falling faster and thicker by the minute, and by the time she had left the town centre behind her, it was falling so densely that she could barely see a hand in front of her. She was lost in a silent white world, the only sound being the putt, putt, putt of the gas lamps as she hurried past them. The snow had now risen above her old leather boots, and her feet and the hem of her coarse calico skirt were sodden. Street lamps cast an eerie glow on the thick white carpet, making it sparkle as if it had been sprinkled with diamonds, but tonight, Molly could find no pleasure in the sight. All she wanted was the comfort of her little cottage and her feet immersed in a tin bowl full of nice hot water.

As she approached the Parish Church she decided to cut through the churchyard. There were those that feared the graveyard at night, but the dead held no fear for Molly.

It was the living she worried about! There were some that would cut your throat for sixpence in these hard times, as she well knew. Besides, this short-cut could save at least five minutes from her journey and she regularly took it.

The gravestones leaned drunkenly towards her as she hurried as best she could along the pathway, and soon the gas lamps and the little light they cast faded away as the great yew trees that bordered the church surrounded her. It was hard to keep to the path here, and occasionally Molly stumbled on a rock buried beneath the snow, but she ploughed on.

When she finally reached the dark doorway to the church, she paused to catch her breath, leaning against the cold stone wall inside. The wind had picked up now and the yew trees swayed beneath their heavy weight of snow. Here and there, the scarlet berries on the holly bushes shone through, and it was as Molly stood watching them that a noise from the deeply recessed doorway came to her. It sounded almost like a moan, and suddenly nervous, she held her breath for what seemed like an eternity in case the sound should come again. After some time, Molly dared to breathe, chiding herself, 'You're goin' soft in the head, gel, hearin' noises as ain't there. Why, you'll be scared o' yer own shadow next if you ain't careful.'

Still unsettled despite her brave talk, she pushed herself from the wall and was just about to set off again when the noise came once more. Molly knew now that she hadn't imagined it, and her heart began to thump painfully against her ribs. Her eyes sought about for someone to help her, but there was no one – nothing but the snow and the swaying yew trees that stood as silent witnesses to her distress. Even as she stood there, uncertain what to do, she heard the noise again, louder this time . . . much louder. Someone was in the doorway with her and, if Molly judged rightly, that someone was in great pain.

Chewing nervously on her lip, she stepped cautiously

into the deeper darkness. 'Is anyone there?' Even to her own ears her voice sounded frightened. Her heart was thumping so loudly that she feared it would leap from her chest, but nevertheless she forced herself to stand there listening intently.

'Help me . . . please.' The voice that finally answered her was so weak that Molly had to strain her ears to hear it.

It was a woman's voice and so, calling on every ounce of courage she had, Molly edged a few more timid steps towards it.

After the glare of the blinding snow it took her eyes some seconds to adjust to the blackness, but gradually as she peered into the shadows she saw a shape, right at the back of the porch. It appeared to be lying against the huge, heavy wooden doors of the church.

Cautiously she advanced, and as her eyes gradually became accustomed to the inky blackness, her fear was instantly replaced with compassion.

A young woman raised her hand imploringly towards her and without a moment's hesitation Molly now dropped to her weary knees beside her. Realising at once that the woman was in a bad way, Molly took her outstretched hand and gripped it comfortingly. She was distressed to note that despite the bitter cold the girl's hand was feverishly hot and she was shivering uncontrollably. Molly's kind heart went out to her, and her eyes filled with tears at the poor soul's plight.

'Hold on, me love, I'll go an' get help,' she promised as she tried to rise, but the girl shook her head and gripped Molly's hand all the tighter.

'No, please.' Her every word was an effort. 'It's . . . too late to help me now.'

Molly's heart was aching as, fumbling deep in her coat pocket, she pulled out a white linen handkerchief. She could sense that the poor girl was almost at her end and a wave of helplessness washed over her. Leaning, she began

to dab at the beads of sweat that glistened in the darkness on the girl's forehead, searching her mind for words of comfort, but finding none.

The young woman was gasping for breath now and struggling to tell Molly something. Molly leaned closer to try and hear what the girl was attempting to say. She suddenly turned imploring eyes to Molly, and the older woman's heart skipped a beat as she stared back at her. The girl was breathtakingly beautiful, with tangled auburn hair, a perfect heart-shaped face and huge dark eyes fringed with long dark lashes. Even in her pain, she was easily the prettiest girl that Molly had ever seen.

'Please . . . take my baby.' The girl's voice was genteel, and Molly's eyes almost started from her head with shock at her words.

'What did yer say, love? What baby?' Molly cast her eyes about the freezing recess, sure that she must have misunderstood what the poor lass had said. The only thing her eyes could pick out in the darkness was a large tapestry bag tucked close to the girl's side, but there was no sign at all of a baby and Molly guessed that she was delirious.

'There ain't no baby here, love,' she told her gently, but even as she uttered the words the girl was becoming more and more agitated and, with what appeared to be the last of her strength, was trying to push the bag at Molly.

'*Please*,' she begged again as the tears coursed down her ashen cheeks. Molly nodded quickly. 'All right, all right, me love, calm down now. I'll take yer baby – I promise.'

The girl let out a sigh of relief. 'Oh thank you, God bless you.' She gasped, and suddenly her grip on Molly's hand slackened and there was only silence, save for the swaying of the yew trees in the wind.

Molly scratched her head in consternation. She had no way of knowing if the girl had lapsed into unconsciousness or passed away. All she did know was that she had

to get help – and quickly. Her mind sought about for the best thing to do. There was no way at all that she could carry the girl. That was out of the question. She would have to go and get people to help and bring them back here.

Afraid to waste another minute, she hoisted herself to her knees and then she suddenly remembered the tapestry bag and the girl's insistence that she should take it.

Reaching down, she grasped the handles and swung it as best she could on to her shoulder. Inside there might be some clue as to the girl's identity, and if there was, then she could let her next-of-kin know what had happened. With a last worried glance at the poor young woman, Molly stumbled from the shelter of the doorway and back out into the blinding snow.

Within the shelter of the snow-laden yew trees a silent observer drew further back into the shadows, scarcely daring to breathe in case Molly should see him. He had followed the girl for days and witnessed the whole sorry tragedy that had just taken place. But now all he had to do was wait for Molly to leave and then his job would be almost done and he could report back to his master.

In the warmth of the back room in the small tavern, the servant stood twisting his cap in his hands as he faced his master.

‘It is done then?’

‘Yes, sir. Just as you said.’

‘And the child – are you quite sure that it was dead?’

‘Aye, sir. I am. She died trying to bring it.’

‘Then go – and *never* breathe a word of what has happened this night or it will be the worse for both of us.’

‘Yes, sir.’ The master extended his hand displaying five gold sovereigns but the servant shook his head and backed away. Then turning about, he scuttled from the room like

a thief in the night. He wondered how he was ever going to live with himself after what had passed this night. But it was too late for regrets now. What was done was done.

Once alone, the man turned and, leaning heavily against the mantelpiece, he stared down into the fire as tears trickled down his cheeks.

‘May God forgive me for what I have done this night,’ he murmured, but only the snapping of the logs on the fire answered him.

Chapter One

By the time the little row of terraced cottages in Attleborough Road where she lived came into sight, Molly was almost dropping with exhaustion. The added weight of the tapestry bag, and having to battle against the snow following a hard day's work, had taken their toll on her and she sighed with relief at the sight of her home. But it wasn't to her own door that she went first but to Bessie Bradley's.

Without pausing to knock she flung open the door unceremoniously and Bessie, who was kneeling before an old tin bath in front of a roaring fire, turned startled eyes to her. Bessie was in the process of bathing one of her brood who seemed to be dotted everywhere Molly looked.

'Bessie, come straight away,' gasped Molly, and Bessie's mouth dropped open at the bedraggled state of her.

'Good God, woman, whatever's wrong wi' yer? Yer look like the hounds of hell are pantin' at yer heels.'

'Just come *now*.' With no more words of explanation, Molly disappeared back into the snow, leaving the door swinging wide open to the elements. Already, Bessie was standing and drying her hands on her rough linen apron with a deep frown on her face.

'Mary, you see to this lot fer me, I'll be back as soon as I can,' she told her oldest daughter as she rushed to the door, snatching up her huge old cloak and thrusting her feet into her boots. And with that she slammed it shut behind her and quickly picked her way through the thick white carpet to Molly's cottage.

Molly was pacing the floor agitatedly when Bessie

entered; she turned to her immediately and said, 'Bessie, I don't know what to do. There's a young woman in the doorway of the Parish Church and she's in a bad way.'

Seeing that her friend was deeply distressed, Bessie patted her arm comfortingly.

'Calm down now then and tell me slowly what's happened.' Then, as the sorry tale was told: 'Poor soul, happen she's a street girl fallen on hard times.'

Molly shook her head in quick denial. 'She weren't a street girl, Bessie, I'd stake me life on it.' A picture of the girl's sweet face flashed before her eyes and again she heard the melodic ring of her voice. 'There was somethin' about her – some sort o' quality that seemed to shine from her, and I'm telling yer, she had the face of an angel.' She shook her head again. 'That girl is class, Bessie, believe me. I couldn't carry her nor do nothing for her, but she needs help – she's lying there all alone. What are we to do?'

Molly's eyes filled with tears as she thought of the plight of the poor girl, and in a second, Bessie's mind was made up. Molly was known as a bit of a loner but she had always been good to the Bradley family, helping them through many a hard time. Now Bessie could finally do something for her in return.

'Look,' she said kindly, noting Molly's pinched face, 'you're all in. I'll go back to the church, see what's happening, then I'll run fer the doctor, eh?'

Molly stared at her, gratitude lighting her face. 'Oh Bessie, you're a good 'un, but mind yer wrap up warm, it's bitter out there and no mistake.'

'Don't yer go worryin' about me now. You just make yourself a strong brew and get those wet clothes off, else it'll be you I'm fetchin' the doctor to.' Bessie looked at Molly's soaking wet skirt and flinched as she saw the blood on it, as well as the melted snow. Even more reason to make haste. 'I'll be back before yer know it,' she promised, and with that she quickly let herself out into the

blizzard. Within minutes she was back in her own cottage pulling her shawl over her head. A hundred questions were being flung at her from the children but she didn't make time to answer them.

'Now, Mary, you and Toby are in charge till I get back, do yer hear me? Tell yer dad I've been called away on an errand fer Molly when he comes in.'

Mary nodded obediently as Bessie left the warmth of the kitchen to begin the journey back to the church. Within minutes she found herself up to her knees in snow, and more than once she lost her footing and almost went head-long, but still she pressed on. If the poor girl was as ill as Molly had said, then every second counted and she didn't even pause to catch her breath.

Attleborough Road was deserted and the odd cottages that she passed all had their curtains drawn tight against the freezing night. Now and again, the sound of families singing Christmas carols hung on the night air. Normally, Bessie would have found pleasure in the sound, but tonight all she could think of was reaching the church. At last it loomed into sight and for the first time, Bessie slowed her steps. She had never before in her life entered a graveyard at night. She was very superstitious, but after coming this far she didn't intend to let Molly down.

Battling up the path past the yew trees, she glanced this way and that at the tilting gravestones. Her heart was beating wildly but she was almost at the church doorway now. The snowfall had long since filled in Molly's earlier footsteps and appeared as a fluffy white carpet right up to the steps of the doorway.

'Hello?' Bessie called into the blackness. When no one answered, she cautiously stepped inside. Standing for some seconds, her teeth chattering with cold, she peered towards the heavy wooden doors. 'Hello!' Again there was no answer. She inched her way in further and further until at last her hand touched the cold brass handle of the door.

But there was no one there – no girl, nor anything to suggest that anyone had ever been there.

As Bessie plodded back to the lychgate, she had no idea that her old boots left red footprints in the snow.

Pulling aside the curtains, Molly peered up the lane yet again for a sign of her neighbour. The oil lamp was casting a warm glow about the room and the fire was blazing merrily now, but Molly couldn't settle, not till Bessie was back with news – and she knew that this could take some time if Bessie had to run for the doctor. But then suddenly the door banged inwards and poor Bessie almost fell into the room. She was white all over, and Molly dragged her to the fireside.

'That was quick. I didn't expect you back so soon. How is she? Did yer get the doctor to her?' Molly bombarded Bessie with questions but the poor woman was so puffed out after her battle with the blizzard that for a few moments she could not answer. Molly pulled off her sodden boots and pressed her into a chair, and as Bessie held her blue feet out to the warmth of the fire, the hem of her skirt began to steam.

It was not until she had taken two great gulps from the mug of scalding hot tea that Molly had placed into her perished hands that she was able to answer. 'There were no one there,' she said gravely, looking her neighbour straight in the eye.

Molly's mouth stretched in disbelief. 'What do yer mean, woman? O' *course* she were there – the poor love were almost at death's door. What do yer think she did, just got up an' walked away?'

Bessie shrugged. 'I'm tellin' yer, love. There was no one there. As God's me witness, she were gone.'

Molly couldn't believe it and began to poke the fire in her agitation. 'Perhaps someone else found her after I left?' she suggested hopefully.

'That is a possibility,' her weary neighbour admitted. 'Unless . . . you imagined it.'

Molly bristled with indignation. 'I *did not* imagine it, me gel. I ain't taken to fancy, as well yer should know.' Suddenly a thought occurred to her. 'Her bag!' she cried. 'Why, bugger me, I've got her bag. Yer know – the one I told yer she insisted I take? Why, I'd forgotten all about it.'

She rushed to the side of the door where she had put down the bag when she first entered the room. Lifting it, she carried it to the hearth and placed it down on the brightly coloured peg rug. 'There,' she said triumphantly. 'Now tell me I imagined it.'

Bessie grinned at her sheepishly. 'Sorry, duck, but come on then – open it. It might give us some idea as to who she was.'

Molly bent and after fumbling with the catch, she opened the bag. As she peered inside, the colour suddenly drained from her face.

'What is it, love?' Bessie's voice was concerned.

Without answering, Molly reached into the bag and lifted out what appeared at first sight to be a bundle of clothes. Carefully she laid it on the hearth and as she did so, Bessie's face paled too.

'Why, God in heaven . . . *It's a baby.*' Bessie could hardly believe her eyes.

Solemn-faced, Molly nodded. 'So, the poor love weren't delirious after all.' Looking at Bessie with fear shining in her eyes, she whispered, 'But why is it so quiet?'

Dropping to her knees beside her, Bessie began to unwind the clothes that the baby was wrapped in. The outer layer consisted of a black skirt, worn but neatly wrapped around a tiny pair of bloodstained scissors. The skirt was darned but obviously of a fine quality. Next was a white blouse, with tiny mother-of-pearl buttons slightly frayed at the cuffs, and lastly a shawl of pure blue silk, the like of which neither woman had ever seen. However, it wasn't the shawl that

held their attention but the tiny child wrapped inside it. It was a little girl and she was beautiful. A mop of tiny auburn curls framed a perfect heart-shaped face with long dark eyelashes that curled on to pale dimpled cheeks. But she was so still and silent that Molly gazed at Bessie in terror.

‘Is . . . is she dead?’

Pulling herself together with a great effort, Bessie took control of the situation. ‘Right – get me some warm water,’ she ordered briskly, and without a murmur Molly scuttled away to do as she was bid. She felt sick inside, for the sight of that little innocent had reawakened memories that she had thought were long gone.

In her mind’s eyes she saw again three tiny graves all lying side by side in the churchyard – the graves of her own three stillborn babies – and the heartbreak of losing them one after the other all those years ago swept through her afresh. She and Wilf had lived in Atherstone, a neighbouring town, back then. Molly had not met and wed him until she was in her thirties, and they had dreamed of having a large family. But each pregnancy had resulted in a stillbirth, and even now never a day went by when she did not mourn her lost girls. Still, her consolation had been her beloved husband. It was he who had found the cottage she was living in now shortly after the birth of their third daughter, and they had moved here and lived happily ever since until his premature death.

‘Please, God, don’t let this little one go the same way as my babies,’ Molly prayed silently as she stared down at the tiny form, and she went on praying as Bessie began to rub and coax life into the tiny infant. Once the water was ready, Bessie washed the little body inch by inch, forever rubbing and moving the little limbs to bring her back to life. But her efforts appeared to be all in vain, for the child remained motionless.

Molly’s heart ached as she looked on helplessly. ‘It’s no good, Bessie.’ Her voice was loaded with sadness as

she reached out to still her neighbour's arm. Slowly, Bessie sat back on her heels to wipe the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

They gazed on the infant in silence for some moments, each lost in their own thoughts, until Bessie suddenly gasped and reached out to clutch Molly's arm.

'I'm sure I saw her fingers move just then . . . Yes, yes, I did. Look, she's alive!'

Without waiting for encouragement, Bessie immediately renewed her efforts, rubbing and moving the little limbs methodically. Suddenly the baby's eyes flew open and a thin wail pierced the air. Both women whooped with delight and by the time Molly had bent to lift the child into her arms, her lusty cries were echoing from the rafters.

'By God, Bessie, it's a miracle. Nothin' short of a miracle.' Molly laughed through her tears as Bessie looked on, beaming in agreement.

'Aye, it is that, but I reckon the next thing we need to do is feed the little mite. By, them cries are enough to waken the dead.'

Hastily she stood and dropped into the comfortable old rocking chair that stood at the side of the fire. Then, after fumbling with the buttons on her blouse, she pushed aside her warm woollen undershirt and bared her swollen breast.

'Here, give her to me,' she ordered, and within seconds the baby's cries stopped as if by magic as she fastened on to Bessie's nipple. As she sucked greedily, Bessie and Molly grinned at each other.

Bessie's own two-month-old baby, Beatrice, was tucked up in her crib fast asleep in Bessie's cottage, her little stomach full of her mother's milk. But it was obvious from the hungry slurping of this child that there was more than enough in Bessie's generous breasts to satisfy her too. After what seemed an age she gave a big hiccup of contentment and her lashes fluttered down on to her cheeks as she fell fast asleep in Bessie's arms.