

The Names on the wall

Chapter One

Lucy sat swinging her feet on the chair in the entrance hall.

“Your mum late again, is she?” the head teacher asked as she bustled past on the way to her office.

Lucy nodded wordlessly. Alone again she resumed swinging her feet. Suddenly she got up and made her way over to the double door that gave a view out into the car park. Still no mum, she turned to return to the chair. Her eyes ranged over the walls. There was a colourful display but this did not attract her attention. Just beside the door she saw what looked like a metal notice. Fascinated she moved towards it and, using the chair to kneel on, she was able to run her fingers over it. It felt cold to her touch despite the fact it seemed to be lit by a shaft of sunlight.

She supposed it had always been there but she had never really noticed it before.

She carefully read the words.

Erected by Scholars, Teachers and Managers in Loving Memory Of

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Annie Ingram | Sarah Ann Higginson |
| James Rigby | Harold Hilton |
| Fred Watson | Edwin Bibby |
| Sam Britton | |

Who were killed in the Munitions explosion June 13th 1917

She was just reading the last line when the buzzer indicating the door was opening drew her attention.

She looked around and smiled. Her mum had arrived. She was always glad to see her. Although she was often late and always turned up, somewhere at the back of Lucy's mind was the fear that one day she wouldn't come. That one day she would wait and wait and then someone else, probably a policeman she thought, would come and tell her something had happened to her mum and she would never see her again.

“Come on. We will only just make it to your swimming lesson.” Her mother told her.

“I know, I know. Look at this though mum.” Lucy pointed to the notice. “Who do you think these people were?”

Her mother gave a cursory look at the plaque. “I don't know some old people who died a long time ago by the looks of it. Hurry up that will be there tomorrow, your swimming lesson is due to begin in ten minutes. Come on.”

Lucy slid from the chair picked up her bag and followed her mother out to the car. She stopped only to look back at the plaque that seemed to shine gold from the sun light, as she got into the car.

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Lucy had showered and changed into her pyjamas ready for bed when she heard her grandfather's voice coming from downstairs. She put on her dressing gown and ran down to the living room. Her grandfather seeing her turned and held out his arms. She launched herself into them and he swung her around. He put her down and put his hand over his heart and pretended to breathe heavily.

"I won't be doing that too often now. You are getting too big." He grinned at her.

Lucy grinned back. "I won't mind, Granddad."

He ruffled her hair turning to talk to her mum, "You're a good girl, Lucy"

Lucy clutched his arm "Can I ask you a question?"

"You can ask. Can't guarantee I can answer it though?" He knew Lucy was insatiably curious. "What do you want to know now?"

"Well" Lucy began, "Tonight while I was waiting for mum at school I saw this notice in the entrance. It said people had died due to an explosion in a munitions factory. Do you know what that means?"

"Well I can tell you what a munitions factory is. It is a place where they make ammunition."

"You mean like bullets for a gun?"

"Maybe, but I don't think that's what that factory did." Her granddad replied.

"So what did they make?" Lucy demanded.

"That I don't know. I remember hearing about it when I was a lad but it had happened years before that."

"Mum do you remember the date?" Lucy called out as her mum had wandered off into the kitchen.

"I think it was 19 something, maybe 15?" her mum called back.

"That would be in the first world war. Like I said years before I was born. Sorry love I can't help you." Granddad said with finality.

"Time for bed for you young lady," her mum said as she re-entered the room.

"Aw, do I have to?" Lucy moaned.

“Yes you do, It’s school again tomorrow, off you go.”

Because Lucy was a good girl after giving both her mum and granddad a hug, she went.

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Although Lucy was tired she still lay awake for a while thinking about the sign on the wall. She wondered why she had noticed it today when she must have walked past it many, many times without looking at it. Finally she slipped into sleep.

A coughing sound woke her. She drifted awake slowly seeking the source of the noise. Startled she saw a young woman resting against her chest of drawers. For some reason she wasn’t afraid. She was dressed like people from the past century that she had seen in pictures at school when they were doing a project on the war. She was wearing a simple cloth skirt covered by an apron and a blouse with a shawl clipped over it. Her hair tumbled around her face that shone eerily in the dim light of the bedroom.

“You’re awake then?” she said looking at her.

Lucy looked back at her. “I don’t know. If I am awake how can you be in my room?”

“Good question. Maybe I am part of a dream. You will have to make up your own mind on that.” She replied.

“Whatever you are, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“You called me. When you ran your fingers over that plaque at your school your interest tugged me to you. You’re interested in the explosion?”

Lucy sat up in her bed eagerly. “You’re right. I am. Can you tell me about it?”

“I can do better than that I can show you.” She told her calmly.

“How can you do that?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t know how. I just know I can. Do you want to know or not.” The young woman shoved herself away from the chest of drawers as if she was maybe going to leave.

“Yes, I do. I don’t care how you do it.”

“Fine, then sit up and look at the window.” She moved to the window and pulled back the curtains.

The window was just a big black oblong shape. It was pitch dark outside. As Lucy watched colour seemed to appear at the edges of the window and then shapes began to move in the centre growing clearer with each second.

“What can you see?” she asked Lucy.

Lucy knelt up to try to get the picture clearer. “I can see lots of men dressed like soldiers walking in rows towards some old boats.”

“Ah, yes. Do you know what that means?”

“I suppose they are all going off to war.” Lucy guessed.

“You are right. It is 1914 and the First World War was under way. Those are men from the local volunteer regiment setting off to fight.”

Even as she spoke the picture shifted. Lucy’s room seemed to echo and the window shake, like when big fireworks went off on Guy Fawkes night.

Watching her face the woman asked. “And what can you see now?”

Lucy said what she saw. “There’s fighting and loads of explosions.”

“That’s how it all began.” She said.

“What do you mean? How what began?” Lucy asked.

“If you want to fight you have to have weapons. If you have weapons you need ammunition.” She told her.

“Like guns and bullets.” Lucy stated.

“Yes like guns and bullets but those big bangs, the explosions, they don’t come from guns and bullets.”

“What do they come from then?” Lucy demanded.

“They come from shells fired from cannon. Look more carefully. Can you see the cannon or the men feeding in the shells?”

Lucy leant forward. In one part the picture the smoke gradually started to clear and she watched as a soldier fed a long shell into the cannon. Then it came flying out and in the distance she heard it explode.

“So is that what they made in the factory?”

“Not exactly, look again.”

Lucy looked again and watched as the picture changed. The noise was gone and she was watching a man in an old fashioned black suit tidying some papers on his desk. He looked up as a knock came on his office door.

A man entered and announced. “Mr Sylvain Dreyfus and Mr Lucien Gaisman”

The man behind the desk smiled in welcome and indicated the men should take the seats in front of his desk.

“I understand you are interested in making TNT.” He said.

Both men nodded and the one called Dreyfus spoke. "We are most keen to assist in the war effort."

"We find many men are patriotic when there is a profit to be made."

Dreyfus spoke again "It is more than that for me. I came here from Alsace. My family knows what it is like to be overrun by the Germans. We lost our French nationality and came here rather than live under the German regime. We are keen to assist in pushing the Germans back behind their own borders."

"I see. You are chemists I understand and have the knowledge and experience to make TNT."

"What's TNT?" Lucy asked more interested in knowing this than listening to the conversation that was proceeding between the men.

"Simply it is an explosive. Its chemical name is trinitrotoluene hence TNT for short. It is what has to be placed inside the metal shell case to make it blow up." The young woman explained. "The thing is with all those shells going off the War office needed a lot of it and needed it fast. Listen to this bit now this is the important bit."

Lucy again leant forward and strained her ears so she would miss nothing.

The man behind the desk was speaking again. "Fine gentlemen, then I shall have contracts set up. We are agreed you will find premises and as soon as is possible start to produce 5 tons of TNT a week. We shall provide £10,000 to help you set up the factory and we shall monitor how you proceed. When you begin to deliver TNT we shall have the right to monitor and inspect its quality and there can be penalties applied if you provide a substandard product or supply it late. Is that agreed?" Both men nodded again and then they all stood and shook hands.

The window went dark again and in the dimness Lucy could see nothing. She felt sure she was alone again. She settled down again under her duvet and sleep quickly claimed her.

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Lucy woke the next morning feeling strange. Sun was streaming into her bedroom. She looked around but everything looked normal. Suddenly while she was looking at the chest of drawers she remembered the feeling that a young woman had been in the room with her and she had pulled back the curtains.

Lucy tumbled out of bed knowing now what was different she always slept with the curtains closed. She grabbed her dressing gown and ran down the stairs.

"Mum, I had this really weird dream" she began. She stopped suddenly as her eyes were caught by a piece of paper on the table where she usually sat. "What's this mum?"

"What's what dear," her mum replied as she buried her head in the fridge to get out the milk for Lucy's cereals.

Lucy picked up the paper and shook it at her mum. Taking the milk to the table Lucy's mum looked at the paper.

"That was on the carpet outside your room. It looks old. I thought you must have it for a project at school."

Lucy looked at the paper. It had a black letter head. Hooley Hill Rubber and Chemical Company Co ran across it in big letters. In smaller letters it said Co proprietors Sylvain Dreyfus (French Naturalised British) and Lucien Gaisman (Swiss). Lucy took a startled breath. These were the men she had seen in her dream last night. It gave the postal address of Hooley Hill near Manchester. Underneath the words there were two pictures of industrial type buildings and under them came the words Goods for chemical section to be addressed to Williams Street, Ryecroft, Ashton Under Lyne.

"What were you saying about a dream?" Lucy's mum asked.

"Oh nothing interesting, I'd better eat up or we'll be late for school."

Chapter Two

Lucy was quiet on her walk to school and quiet during assembly and during literacy. Everyone thought she was day dreaming a bit too much, but then she did have an active imagination.

In fact Lucy was going over and over what had happened during the night. She knew that she could not really have had a visit from a woman out of the past in the middle of the night. However it had felt real and she now had the piece of paper that was tucked into her reading folder. That was decidedly real. She couldn't wait for it to be dinner time when she could go on the computer.

As soon as she had finished her lunch she went to the computer suite and entered the words Hooley Hill Rubber and Chemical Company. Immediately a page of references popped up but only one related to all the words she had entered, that was the first. Clicking on it she found herself looking at a brief article in the Advertiser.

Under the heading Tragedy struck Ashton in 1917. It briefly reported that the munitions works of the Hooley Hill Rubber and Chemical Company in William Street that had begun making TNT for the war was destroyed in an explosion which could be heard up to 20 miles away on June 13, at 4.22pm when five tons of TNT detonated.

It said that 46 people died, including many children who were heading home from school. Some of these had been there watching the fire which had started before the explosion happened.

The explosion had also injured 500 and made 2,000 people homeless.

Lucy was right. This paper had come from the factory. How had it got in her house if the young woman had not brought it?

This and other questions ran round in her head all day.

When it was time to go home her teacher came to the door with her. Her mum was late again.

"Go through and wait in the entrance Lucy. I'll be there when I have seen everyone else off. Ask your mum to wait I want a quick word with her."

Lucy went through to the entrance hall glad for once her mum was late. The young woman said she had come because she had called her by running her fingers over the notice. Lucy quickly pulled the chair over and knelt up to run her fingers over it. Her fingers slowed as they came to the names. She thought of what she had learnt on the internet. Children had died on their way home from school. Was that what these names were? Just thinking it a shiver ran through her.

Lucy's teacher came through the door. "Don't kneel on the chair Lucy" she said absently. "You could make it topple over."

"Miss, were these the names of children who died?" Lucy asked.

Her teacher stopped surprised. "Why yes Lucy they are. Do you know that I am always surprised more children don't ask about this plaque but few seem to?"

"I was just interested Miss. I found out the name of the Munitions factory" Lucy said munitions carefully because it was not a word she was used to saying. "and looked it up on the internet."

"Well done Lucy. Even I do not know the name of the factory. What was it?"

"It was The Hooley Hill Rubber and Chemical Company and they made TNT for the war. You see Mr. Dreyfus who owned it; his family had already escaped the Germans once and wanted to help England's war effort."

"Goodness Lucy you do know a lot. Are you intending to write it up as a project?" her teacher asked.

"My mum thinks I am" Lucy mumbled as her mum came through the door.

Her teacher turned. Her mum looked at her. Lucy could tell she thought she must be in trouble.

"I was hoping to have a quick word with you." Her teacher said. "Lucy's been very quiet today. Not at all like herself and I thought she looked a bit pale. I was just going to suggest she might need an early night."

Lucy's mum looked at her. "She does look a bit pale and she was quiet all the way to school this morning. She did say something about a weird dream when she first got up. Maybe it will be best if she has an early night. It's as well it's the weekend she can have a lie in tomorrow as well if she likes."

Lucy's mum smiled at her glad she wasn't in trouble.

"Come on. I'm going out tonight with your auntie Pat. If you're really tired out you can be in bed before I go. Your Granddad will be pleased to get a bit of peace for once." She put out her hand and Lucy linked hers to it. Together they headed out to the car. Lucy just hoped she had done enough to call the young woman back.

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Granddad came up to say goodnight and see she was tucked in properly.

"I've found out more about the factory, Granddad. They didn't make bullets and guns they made TNT for shells that were fired out of cannons."

"Really Lucy, found it on the internet did you? I heard you can find anything on there if you know how to look."

Lucy almost told him the truth about how she knew so much but thought it was probably best that people thought that she was finding things out through the internet. This

sounded so much less crazy than saying you saw pictures of what happened on your bedroom window!

“The names on the notice are children who died on their way home from school, not like mum thought old people.” Lucy told him.

“You’re a funiosoty aren’t you? Worrying about things that happened years ago. “ He ruffled her hair affectionately. “Now don’t be thinking about all this sad stuff before you go to sleep your mum said you had a bad dream last night and that your teacher had worried about you because you were quiet.”

Granddad laughed heartily at this. “You know the teachers never worried when we were quiet at school Lucy. They only worried when we weren’t.”

Lucy laughed too and Granddad pleased to see he had put a smile back on her face instead of the serious expression that had been there moments before decided to leave her to sleep.

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Lucy lay awake waiting and hoping the young woman would come. She had left her curtains open just in case she did and there were more pictures to watch. It was like having her own private cinema. Tired from the previous night she drifted off to sleep sooner than she would have hoped only to be awoken by the coughing again.

Lucy rubbed her eyes and peered into the darkness the curtains were closed as usual. Her mum must have done that or her Granddad when they had come to check on her sometime during the night. The house was still though and as she waited in the darkness she heard the cough come again, closer this time. Then it seemed when she next blinked there the young woman was at the foot of her bed.

“Hi we didn’t introduce ourselves last night. I’m Lucy.”

“I’m May, pleased to meet you Lucy.”

“Were you one of the children that died in the explosion?” Lucy asked the question she had been wondering about all day.

“No not me. I worked there though, started when I was fourteen. “May told Lucy.

“Fourteen. You don’t look fourteen.”

“Well I don’t know what age I look to you do I but that was how old I was when I started at the factory.”

“I see. Can I ask another question?”

“Is it likely to be as impertinent as the last?” May asked.

“Worse I think. I have been wondering all day why do you look such a strange colour. The people in the pictures in the window all look kind of normal but you look if you don’t mind my saying so yellow!”

May began to laugh softly “Of course you wouldn’t know. We all looked yellow. All us girls looked yellow that worked at the factory.”

“Was it like a fake tan?” Lucy asked. “Some times people on TV look orange because they have a fake tan.”

“I don’t know what a tan is never mind a fake one.” May said.

“Oh a tan is what you get if you go out in the sunshine. Now people don’t like to go out in case they get skin cancer so they have themselves sprayed with fake tanning stuff.”

“No we did not get like this on purpose. It was because of the chemicals in the TNT. Most girls who worked in munitions was called munitionettes but not us they called us canaries because we were so yellow like the birds.” May explained.

“But if the chemicals made you yellow does that mean they were toxic?” Lucy saw the look on May’s face and knew she did not understand that word. She tried again “Were they poisonous?”

“Aren’t all chemicals in some way? We did here that there were some who died from it mostly we just went yellow.” May laughed, seemingly unconcerned that her employers had exposed her to dangerous chemicals. “Now enough of these questions do you want to know more or not?”

“Of course I do. I looked it up on the internet but it didn’t tell me much just that there was an explosion and that 45 people died including children on their way home from school and hundreds of people were injured and thousands made homeless.”

Saying this reminded Lucy about the letter heading. “Did you leave that paper with the names on?”

“I can’t tell you that as I said you have to decide these things for yourself. You do seem to have got a lot of the main details though. “

“Nothing was mentioned about Mr. Dreyfus and Mr. Gaisman and although it said the factory blew up after a fire it didn’t explain why.” Lucy said her tone of voice reflecting the disappointment she’d felt at how little information was to be found on the internet.

“If you will just be quiet” May said moving to pull the curtains back “I’ll show you more.”

Lucy sat up and waited for the pictures to form.

The first pictures clearly showed the street with gasometers on one side and the factory on the other. Lots of people were coming and going through the factory gates.

"They're changing shifts see," May said. "That's the night shift coming out and the day shift going in."

Lucy saw the night shift workers rushing off looking tired and the day shift workers pushing their way in. Neither lot of workers looked unhappy.

"Did you like working there?" Lucy asked.

"Does anyone really like to work? It was alright. With the men away at war most families needed the money. It was a laugh with the other girls. The big thing was though we were doing our best for the boys at the front. Without our explosives how could they protect themselves from the Germans?" May explained.

"What's going on now?" Lucy asked all the workers seemed to have disappeared but there was an argument going on at the gates that were now closed.

"Oh, that's Lord Moulton. He was trying to get in to see everything was being done right. He reckoned he should be let in once a month but the owners, they said he couldn't, not unless they didn't deliver the TNT on time or if there was something wrong with it. As it was always good quality and it always on time they wouldn't let him in." May said again not seeming to be troubled that her employers would not let the factory be inspected to ensure the way they were working was being done right.

"I remember something about that from last night. The owners were right that was what they agreed. But if they were doing it right why wouldn't they let the man in. Didn't it worry you that they did not want anyone to see what they were doing?" Lucy reckoned even a child could work out that if the owners didn't want the factory inspected it was because they had something to hide.

"No of course we weren't worried. They explained it to us. They were afraid of industrial espionage!" May said, as if she was proud of this.

"Industrial espionage?" Lucy repeated.

"Yes, you know other people stealing their ideas about how to make TNT."

"But that would mean they were making it differently from other people. That could be the reason it wasn't safe."

"But they was very clever and real gentlemen. They knew what they was doing."

In the picture she could see it was all quiet at the gates again. "So he went away just like that?"

"Yes, he had to agree they were right about the contract. But that wasn't the end of it. Watch"

Lucy watched the factory seemed busier than ever. "What's happening, May"

"They are expanding the factory. The War office wanted more and more TNT. First it went from 5 tons to 10 but then they wanted even more. By April 1917 we were making 25 tons a week."

"Who's that now?" Lucy asked.

"That's Dr Edgar. He came to inspect the factory because the contract had allowed for that when any building was going on. The expansion let him in."

"What are those big canisters he's stood next to?" Lucy asked.

"They're the nitrators, where the chemicals are mixed." May said.

"He seems to be unhappy look he's stamping his feet and pointing up at the roof."

"Yes well, he didn't like what he was seeing. He thought the place wasn't fireproof enough. See that platform he's stood on? It's made of wood. And see the wall he's pointing at? It doesn't go right up to the roof."

"So I suppose he made a report about that and it was changed." Lucy said.

"Not exactly, He did make the report but if you look again you'll see what happened next." May pointed to the picture again.

Lucy saw the picture showed the same part of the factory but now everyone there was panicking. Unlike the previous calm picture now men were racing about. The man she had seen the first night and that she knew to be Mr. Dreyfus seemed to be directing things. She could see liquid pouring from the canisters and where it touched the platform flames began to burn. The noise was unbearable as a loud fire alarm began to ring. People unrolled fire hoses from the hydrants but Lucy could see they had no chance. In minutes the flames had licked up the walls and the roof was alight. The men inside instead of running away and saving themselves all seemed to be doing something to make the leak stop or to roll the barrels of TNT away from the fire. The picture shifted slightly and the one man who had run from the room was making sure all the women were shepherded out of the building, having done that he began running from house to house along the road. You could see by his gestures he was telling everyone to get out.

Lucy watched fascinated, as he did this as a horse drawn fire engine pulled up.

Then it happened, an explosion that not just ripped through the factory but through the whole area. Windows shattered and buildings caved in. Flames shot into the sky from the gasometers. Lucy thought her bedroom window was sure to shatter as the sound echoed through her room as the picture dissolved.

"So that was it. The other chemist was right. The factory wasn't fireproof when it counted and it blew up just like that." Lucy lay back on the bed exhausted by what she had watched in the last few moments.

"So now you know" May said.

But Lucy felt she still didn't know enough "What about the children?"

Her question fell into the silent room. May was gone.

Chapter three

Lucy woke late the next morning. She sat up in bed and thought back over the things she had seen last night. It had been a terrible accident. However it was one that would have been possible to predict. If you work with unstable chemicals in a factory that was not properly fire proofed then once a fire started it would be unstoppable. Lucy climbed out of bed and went out to look along her street. Everything was quiet as usual on a Saturday morning. A few of the smaller kids were out playing but that was it. Looking out on tip toe she could just see the tops of the gasometers over the roof tops. She knew what she wanted to do. She made a hasty visit to the bathroom making enough noise she felt as she washed to make sure her mum would have woken up. Then she dressed for the day and went downstairs.

She didn't have to wait long before her mum came down. She could see she was still half asleep so she waited until they had finished their breakfast of tea and toast that was very nearly lunch as well, before she asked her question.

"Mum I was thinking could we go and look at where the old factory was? It can't be far from here because if I stand on my toes, from my bedroom window I can see the gasometers."

"Now what would be the point of that? The factory exploded in 1917. What do you think you are going to see if you visit it today?" her mum replied reasonably.

"I don't know. I just feel I will understand better if I see where it happened exactly then I can see why people were killed and where the windows were blown out." Lucy explained.

"Your interest in this is really morbid Lucy. I don't think I should encourage you. Since you started thinking about it you have been sleeping badly and it seems to have stopped you thinking about anything else. Look at the time you got up this morning. That's not like you. You still seem exhausted."

Lucy shook her head, "I'm fine mum, besides, once I understand I'll stop thinking about it all the time won't I?" Lucy was pleased by this argument.

"OK We'll see. I have a lot to do today. If we have any time before tea, if it stays as nice and sunny as it is now, we'll go and have a look." Mum agreed somewhat reluctantly.

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By tea time Lucy was fairly hopping with expectation. The sun was still shining and Lucy reckoned there was not another thing left in the supermarket her mother could possibly want to buy.

As her mum stacked the food in the cupboards in the kitchen she asked impatiently. "Can we go now?"

"I think I'll just have a cup of tea then we'll see."

“No mum come on its getting late, can’t you just have some juice or something?” Lucy pleaded.

“I suppose. It’s the only way you’re going to shut up isn’t it?”

Lucy nodded. “I’ll have some apple juice please if you are going to have a drink.”

After the quick drink they set out. As they got closer to Williams Street it got quieter.

“I think that must have been where the factory was,” Lucy called out to her mum. In her excitement she had gradually put some distance between herself and her mother.

She was walking along looking up at the buildings paying no attention to where she was going when she walked straight into someone who was doing exactly the same coming from the opposite direction.

The man she bumped into had been carrying a lot of things some of which were now scattered on the floor.

“I’m so sorry” Lucy said, smiling in a way that did not make her look sorry at all.

The man bent down to pick up his things. Lucy bent to help him. The one she picked up left her stunned.

She was holding a report stamped in the top left hand corner with the word “Secret” She quickly scanned down the page and saw it was a report of a government committee into the causes of the explosion.

The man held out his hand sensing Lucy’s reluctance to give it up.

“Lucy” her mum said “Give the man his papers.”

“But mum it’s a report into the explosion and it says it’s secret.” Lucy cried.

“Whatever it is Lucy it belongs to this gentleman” Lucy’s mum felt this was stretching the meaning of the word a bit. His clothes were somewhere between being in some weird way stylish while at the same time giving the impression he might be one of the homeless. His crumpled linen jacket was just not what men usually wore around Ashton neither was the battered hat that shaded his face making his eyes, that were already hidden behind tortoiseshell glasses, difficult to see. Untidy black hair poked out from beneath the hat. His chinos were as creased as his jacket was crumpled. From a distance she had thought he was a young man but close up she could see he was older, probably in his forties. An old leather satchel was slung over his shoulder.

“You are interested in the causes of the explosion?” he asked his gaze resting on Lucy his hand still held out for the document.

“I know the cause of the explosion” she said confidently handing the report back.

He turned his head to one side the better to see her. “You do?”

“Yes, the chemicals ran over from the canisters and set the wooden platform on fire. It was only time then before the TNT exploded.” Lucy told him.

“A concise account, Lucy” he congratulated her.

“You know my name?” Lucy asked surprised.

“I have just heard your mum say it. I’m Blaine.” He said.

“Well Mr Blaine we won’t keep you. Come along Lucy. We need to get home for tea.”

“It’s just Blaine actually not Mr.” the man corrected her.

“Fine” she looked pointedly at Lucy. “Let’s go.”

“But we have only just got here and I would like to ask Blaine what he’s doing and why he had that report.” Lucy refused to move.

“I’m sorry Mr, I mean, Blaine my daughter has developed what I can only call an obsession with this explosion. I’m sorry if she is bothering you.”

“But she’s not bothering me. I am glad she is interested in it. I would be only too happy to answer her questions.”

“See,” Lucy said pleased. “What are those maps on your clip board?”

“These are the reason for my being here. I have the ordinance survey maps drawn over the years. See this one from 1894 shows the gasometers and the small chemical works beside the West Mill. Now this one, in 1909 shows the West Mill as disused. This is where the factory was set up. Finally this one from 1922 shows everything gone.” He held the clipboard out to Lucy so she could see the changes over time.

“Fascinating,” Lucy said.

“I agree.” Blaine said. “Shall we walk on?” He seemed to take their agreement for granted.

Lucy’s mum watched, as heads together, they set off to walk the perimeter of the site of the old factory.

“It makes it feel more real being here.” Lucy confided.

“Mmm, I know. That’s why I like to make a site visit. Reading documents and old newspaper reports is one thing actually being there walking the same streets as those who both died and survived makes you feel closer to it.” Blaine and Lucy smiled at each other in a moment of perfect understanding.

“Have you had your tea yet?” Lucy asked.

“I’m afraid I got caught up with this and apart from a bar of chocolate I’ve had nothing since breakfast,” Blaine confessed.

“Would you come to tea? Then you could tell me all you know and about the report and things.”

“I don’t think your mum would like,” he got no further as Lucy left his side and dashed back to her mother who had been straggling along behind them.

“Can Blaine come to tea? Please say yes, please, please, please” Lucy held on to her mum’s arm as she dragged her closer to Blaine.

“I really don’t think,” she began, realising she was going to say that Blaine would not be interested in talking to a child, but she knew he would deny it and she had seen with her own eyes it wasn’t true. But they knew nothing know nothing about him so she continued, “we know Blaine well enough to invite him to tea.”

“Your mum is right Lucy. You cannot trust people you have just met in the street.”

“But Blaine, you said you were a journalist don’t you have some identity card or something you could show mum.” Lucy pleaded.

“I do have a press pass on me somewhere but I am sure your mum knows those can be easily faked these days. Perhaps your mum could be persuaded that I would not be here with all these maps and documents unless I am what I say I am.” Blaine explained reasonably before smiling at Lucy’s mum in a way she found for some reason very appealing. He looked, she decided, more like a lost puppy than a dangerous man.

Lucy had not given up, “Please mum, please, please, please.”

“Alright, we are only having pizza though” she told Blaine “and you can talk while it is cooking and while we eat then that’s it. You are having another early night. You seem to wake up more exhausted these days than when you went to bed.

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Back at the house Lucy’s mum cleared the coffee table before going out into the kitchen to pop the pizzas in the oven. She put knives and forks on a tray and some pieces of paper towelling to wipe their hands. Then, for some reason she took out wine glasses and a bottle of red wine that had been languishing in the cupboard and added those to the tray.

When she entered the living room Blaine was just producing what looked to her like a state of the art notebook computer from his old satchel. He looked up at her “No one expects this to be in there,” he said indicating the satchel by way of explanation.

“So if you are a journalist like you told Lucy aren’t you a bit late getting this story?” She challenged him.

“You might think that but I expect you have seen those TV programmes where the detectives go back over what they call cold cases, that’s what I am doing. At the time as Lucy was quick to notice the government report was declared secret. Not even the surviving owner.”

“Gaisman,” Lucy put in.

“Yes, Gaisman was not even allowed a copy of it. That caused all kinds of problems for him. Also whilst it was in the papers for weeks afterwards what was actually reported was censored. There was a war going on. Bad news was not good for morale.” Blaine continued with his explanation.

“So, you are finding out the truth and are going to tell everyone.” Lucy declared.

“Quite right, the truth is out there if people have the time to find it but sometimes myths and legends about what happened grow up and people are happy with them. As time passes and the story gets retold over and over again it can be hard to get people to listen to the real story. They think they already know it so why would they bother to research it now. This isn’t the only story we are working on”

“Blaine, mum says we don’t have long so can you tell me what the report said and why it was made secret.” Lucy asked.

“Of course, but first can you guess why the government wanted it to be kept secret?” Blaine challenged her.

“I suppose they must have been to blame. Granddad and his friends are always blaming the government for things” Lucy answered.

“You’re right Lucy lots of people blame the government for all kinds of things but in this case they would be right.” Blaine told her.

“But I don’t understand how. The government didn’t make the chemicals spill over and they had told the owners that it was not fireproof.” Lucy argued.

“The thing is, Lucy, things are never as simple as that. You are right no one from the government was there when the chemicals became unstable but just think about why it happened. Imagine at school you can do five spellings in five minutes then you have to do ten then 25 in the same time. What do you think would happen?”

“I’d rush what I was doing. I would panic and make mistakes.” Lucy answered.

“That’s right and that is what happened. You said you knew about their contract with the War Office well that had penalties in it if they were late delivering the TNT so as they had to make more and more they had to rush. Also, each time the government contracted with them to make more TNT they paid them less so to try to keep making a profit they introduced an experimental way of making the TNT. On the day of the accident we would call what happened human error. Because of the new technique the chemicals were not agitated, stirred enough, and that is why they became unstable.”

“I can see that the government would be worried that people would understand making demands for more and more TNT was partly responsible but they did need it for the war. Besides that doesn’t excuse them for not making the place fireproof.”

"No, it doesn't but that was even more the government's fault. Although they had a report saying the work needed doing they refused to give the owners the permits for the work to be done. I know you understand a lot of the men were at war. This meant there were few people to do building work. To make sure they did the most important work anyone needing work done had to have special certificates both to buy the materials they needed and to employ the men to do it. The government had refused to give these to them arguing that the work was not absolutely necessary. Despite this the owners had begun to do the work themselves and had already started to strip out the wood and replace it with iron."

"I see, so they were trying to be responsible. The government would have been seen to be directly responsible for that then." Lucy agreed.

"There was one more thing. The government had also approved the site. As you have seen from the maps this was not a good site even by the reckoning of the time. It was a very built up area next to gasometers. So again the government were concerned they may be held to account."

At that moment the timer on the oven went ping. "Pizza," said Lucy's mum who was getting interested in what she was hearing.

When she returned with the pizzas Blaine and Lucy had helped themselves to knives and forks and Blaine had poured two glasses of wine.

They were quiet for a minute while they were eating. Then Lucy said, "But that still doesn't explain about the children. Why did they die?"

"A good question, as you know the factory handled the fire alarm well and the workers were quickly evacuated and they tried to warn people in nearby houses. The problem was the fire. For some reason fire draws people and they came to watch. School finished at four in those days and the explosion happened at just after twenty past. It was a fine June day so children were on the streets, dawdling on their way home, or just playing with their friends."

"That's awful" said Lucy and her mum together.

Blaine caught Lucy's eye. "Imagine what it must be like waiting for someone to come and they never do."

"I don't have to imagine. I know." Lucy returned his gaze sombrely. "Every time my mum is late to pick me up I worry something has happened to her and I'll never see her again."

"Lucy, you've never said!" Lucy's mum exclaimed.

Lucy shrugged, she had now.

"What you can't imagine," Blaine continued, "Was how the bodies were identified. Now we hide death away. If you watch TV detective programmes where people have died you'll see bodies nicely presented for their relatives, perhaps behind a screen. Their injuries as far as possible are hidden. But that was not the way it was then. The dead

were gathered together and laid on the pavement so those who were searching for their relatives, including any children, could check if their loved one was there. Obviously some bodies were not in good condition. Sylvain Dreyfus was officially identified by Gaisman. It had been difficult, as he had been found near the factory gate his body severed in two. His uncle had helped identify him by the initials sewn into his clothes.”

“That’s something I don’t know Blaine. Where was Gaisman during the fire and the explosion?” Lucy asked.

“That is one of those twists of fate Lucy. He was on the train coming back from London where he had been told the government would no longer honour their contracts for TNT. The government were going to provide the money to convert the factory over to the production of dyes.”

“I think we have heard enough. It is getting late, time for bed, Lucy.”

Lucy went to hug her mum. She didn’t want to push her luck. “Thank you for letting Blaine come for tea. I know so much more now. Goodnight Blaine”

“Goodnight Lucy.” He turned to Lucy’s mum. “You have a very special young lady there. I don’t know where she got all her information from but she is very well informed.”

Lucy put her head around the door. “What was the notepad for Blaine?”

“I was going to show you some pictures I had on the internet.” He replied.

“We don’t have the internet here. I look things up at school”

“This is wireless, I can pick up the internet most everywhere. But as it’s late I’ll make a note of the sites where you can find them.” Blaine reached into his satchel to get out a pen and a pad.

“Mum couldn’t he come again?” Lucy asked. “He could show me then and explain what they are”

“We’ll see Lucy. Bed now” her mum said.

Left alone, Lucy’s mum watched while Blaine wrote out the names of the internet sites. He looked relaxed and comfortable on her couch. His hair was still untidy. He had pushed it back from his face with his hands as he bent over his pad. She took a drink of the wine left in her glass.

“You were very patient with her.”

Blaine smiled “Not at all, we need all the people we can get interested in history.”

“I wondered what had got into her when she started on about the names on the wall but she’s right we should remember.”

“We should do more than remember” Blaine said “we should learn. If we don’t we are doomed to keep repeating the same mistakes. That is why people should know what happened.”

“You are right. People should have all the facts, just listening though I could feel for those parents. It is your worst nightmare to lose a child.” She sank into silence.

“People don’t change much, not their deeper emotions anyway, the way you feel is the way they would have felt then.” Blaine confirmed her view.

“Lost wives and husbands and sons and daughters, lovers.” She shivered.

Blaine reached out and caught her hand and rubbed it gently with his. “Sweethearts, that’s what they would have said. You can’t help but feel it. Share their sorrow.”

“I’m getting as bad as Lucy. Will you come back and tell us what happened after the explosion? How everybody coped, how those left survived?”

“Of course, if you would like me to.” He smiled again and finishing his wine, began to pack up all his things. “I don’t know when it will be. I still have research to complete.”

Chapter four

Lucy slept well that night as so many of her questions were answered. She woke the next morning feeling lively and, after a hastily eaten breakfast she went out to call on her friend down the road. She was kept busy all day but as she played every so often her mind would flit back to what she knew about the explosion and new questions would pop into her mind.

That night when she was in bed she was unsurprised when she was woken by the sound of coughing. May was back.

“Still want to know more?” she asked.

Lucy nodded. “The explosion was just the beginning wasn’t it not the end?”

“Watch” May pulled her curtains back and immediately the glow started in her window. She watched as if she were flying over the streets she had walked with her mum on Saturday. Starting with the site of the factory she saw the devastation. There was only rubble where the factory had been. There were two big craters where the TNT had been. Fallen bricks and twisted bits of metal littered the scene. Huge boilers from the site had been blown away and landed in the canal. Beyond the canal the railway line was wrecked, the track bent out of shape. The building opposite the factory had also collapsed. The gasometers too lay in ruin. Many streets nearby were littered with the debris both from the factory and the gasometer. The way some of it had fallen had damaged all the houses in its path. In some streets the houses looked demolished. None of the buildings she could see had any windows.

Lucy felt the picture readjust and she saw that now she was looking at a bigger picture that took in the far side of the canal. She could see a part of Dukinfield as well as Ashton. Here it was the same. The gas works there had been hit and the gasometers had started to collapse. Another mill came into view with its windows smashed and the roof fallen in.

May provided a commentary, “Twenty four employees, all men, from the Hooley Hill company died, three men died who were working on the railway line, three others died in the mill opposite the factory as it collapsed. Eleven children and two women died in the streets and one man died at the gas works in Dukinfield. Hundreds more were injured.”

Lucy heaved a big sigh. “What happened to everybody?”

“They had to be found somewhere to go. They needed help to live. Not just the munitions workers had lost their jobs. The mills all had to shut down too. There was no gas and the drains didn’t work as many had collapsed. See where they went.” May said.

Lucy looked up at her window. She watched as what looked like several hundred people tried to settle down in a hall. As she watched a scuffle broke out finishing when one man was ushered away.

“What was that all about?”

“Some people tried to pretend they were homeless to get the free food. See now the genuine ones are all being given tags so they can prove their right to food and shelter.” May explained.

Lucy watched as each person was given a tag like she knew soldiers had worn during the war to identify them.

As she watched the picture changed and she saw a theatre. People were dressed up and there was a lot of laughter. On the stage a man was auctioning things. Lucy saw him hold up a bag of sugar. Bidding was fierce until it finally sold.

“Are they selling people’s things off?” Lucy asked.

“Not the people from the explosion. They were able to put anything they had left in storage at the Ice Rink or at the Snipe Inn. This was what I think you call a charity auction. People gave things to make money for a fund that had been set up to help the people.” May explained.

“Someone gave a bag of sugar!”

“Sugar was in short supply it fetched a good sum. They raised a lot of money not just from the auction. People wrote poems to be sold and they opened the factory site and everyone paid 3d to see it. They said over 10,000 people came to walk over the site.”

“How long did it take to rebuild everything?” Lucy asked.

“I can’t tell you that. I do know that they decided not to rebuild most of it. You see the people who lived there didn’t have much money and the houses were poor too. Lots of children died there Lucy, before the explosion, many more than in other parts of Ashton.” May said gently. “That’s why they decided not to rebuild. The people found other homes. Some went to stay with relatives, some moved away from Ashton altogether.”

Lucy looked at her window which was staying very black. So that was how it had ended. She sensed she was alone again. She snuggled back down in bed and tried to get back to sleep.

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At breakfast the next morning Lucy found another piece of paper at her place at the table.

“I do wish you would keep all the stuff for your project in a folder Lucy. I found that on the landing this morning.” Her mum scolded.

Lucy looked at the sheet of paper and began to read. Then she stopped. “Listen to this mum. It’s a poem about the explosion. “

Lucy’s mum came over to look and taking a deep breath Lucy began:

“The merry happy laughing throng,
All going on their way:

Some never thought of danger,
On this their fatal day.

Then came the fatal moment-
Then came that fatal roar:
Then a loving mother would fall beside her door.

Some children coming home from school,
Each one a "mother's love",
Whose loving souls have rested
In a home, far, far above.
Then each one sought their mother,
Their sweetheart, child or wife,
But some were disappointed
To find they had given their life

'Twas a terrible blow to the people,
In History this will remain,
For Ashton has done it's duty,
In which it has taken great pain.

So let not your hearts be laden,
But drive away dull care:
For you'll some day meet the dear one
Waiting with open arms-there"

"I see it says it's in aid of the crippled and injured." Lucy's mum pointed to the top of the paper.

"Yes they set up a fund and did all kinds to raise money for it. People even paid to go over the factory site." Lucy told her.

"They'd never do that today. Can you imagine people traipsing over rubble. Some one would sue. There would be sprained ankles or worse and some of the chemicals must still have been all over the site."

"Things were definitely different then. Have you got those web addresses Blaine wrote out for me? I want to look them up at school."

Her mum passed them to her from where she'd stuck them to the fridge with a magnet.
"Talking about school we'd better get going."

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At dinner time Lucy looked up the web sites. They had black and white pictures of the factory site looking just like she had seen it last night in her window. They also had photo's of Ashton Market's square filled with old fashioned funeral carriages each pulled by horses pulled up in front of the steps into the Town Hall. Lots of people stood on the steps with the ones at the front dressed in religious vestments. On another one she found a picture of the tags that had been issued to the families staying in West End school. She printed out the pictures to take home to show her mum.

“Still working on your project?” said her teacher as she passed the ICT suite on the way to the classroom.

“Yes Miss. Do you want to look?” Lucy asked.

The teacher came and looked at the sheets Lucy took from the printer.

“Goodness Lucy! You’ve found some interesting photos here.”

“It wasn’t exactly me. Mum and I went to the site on Saturday and we met a journalist called Blaine. He’s researching the explosion too and he gave me the names of web sites to visit.” Lucy explained honestly.

“Well I must say you are taking this very seriously Lucy. Perhaps you would like to tell the class, or maybe the whole school everything you find out when you have finished.”

Lucy thought about this. Maybe she would.

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A few days later Lucy was excited to find that her mum was not alone when she left school. Blaine was with her. Lucy ran up to meet them.

“Have you found out more, Blaine?” She asked excitedly.

“I have finished as much as I shall do here. I have to go back to London tomorrow.”

Lucy looked a little downcast. She liked Blaine. He talked to her as if she was a real person not a child.

“Let’s get home then Blaine can tell you what else he has found out.” Her mum said.

It was another nice sunny day so instead of going into the house to talk they sat at a plastic table on their small patio. Lucy’s mum brought them all cold drinks.

“So Lucy do you have any more questions?” Blaine asked.

“I realised the explosion was not the end of it for most people more like it was the beginning. I know they had a fund to help people. How did that work?”

“These days they’d have all got compensation” Lucy’s mum commented.

“They did then as well. Just twelve days after the explosion the government announced that, without admitting any liability, they would pay out for personal injury and damage to houses and personal property. They opened an office in the Clarence Arcade in Stamford Street where people could come to claim.” Blaine replied.

“Well that’s interesting. I’ve spoken to a few people since we talked and they all said there was no compensation.” Lucy’s mum said.

“Now you see what I mean about myths and legends. As for the fund, they raised nearly £12,000.” Blaine continued.

“£12,000 would have been a lot of money then.” Lucy’s mum said.

“It would have been worth about £450,000 in today’s money.” Blaine said.

“That’s quite a lot to have been given by people who didn’t have much to start with.” Lucy said.

They sat quietly thinking about the people’s generosity.

“The fund was used to help the survivors. They paid out on a sliding scale, starting with a £1 a week if you were on your own up to £2 and 8 shillings for a family of eight. Extra was given to the families where someone had been killed and any one could write in and make a case for an additional payment. It helped with the funeral costs of those who died too”

Then Lucy said “I looked up the web sites. One had pictures of a huge funeral in Ashton.”

Blaine described the event. “Yes, some of the people, thirteen in fact had their funeral together. It caused some problems. They say a quarter of a million people came to watch the funeral cortege pass by. It was a very hot day and people fainted with the heat and the crush of the crowds. The procession was very long with the hearses and a further 50 carriages with mourners as well as sixty survivors from the factory, eighty soldiers from the Ashton barracks, the Salvation army band and the mounted police. As generous as people were in giving there were rogues then the same as there are now and they took the opportunity of the crowds to steal. The police ended up arresting pickpockets both at the market place and along the route. “

“It must have been a sight to see.” Lucy’s mum said thinking the photo Lucy had showed her had not conveyed the size of the event.

“Mostly people were kind and didn’t think of themselves first but of helping others. I wonder if I could be as brave as the people in the factory.” Lucy mused.

“I hope you never have to find out but people were commended in that report we looked at the other day. Frank Slater, for one, who died trying to roll out the barrels of TNT and John Morton who raised the alarm both in the factory and in the street outside. The King and Queen sent a telegram.”

Lucy’s mum was sceptical. “That must have thrilled everyone.”

“It probably did.” Blaine stated ignoring her cynicism. “People thought well of them at that time. You have to keep reminding yourself there was a war on. What happened here was terrible but at the same time in London there was an air raid that killed 162 including 18 children as one of the bombs directly hit a school. This was just one more tragedy.”

Lucy and her mum sat quietly digesting this information. Finally Lucy spoke,

“My teacher has asked me to talk about it in school once I have all the information together.” Lucy said.

“I think that is a very good idea. I’ll be putting all the details I have together for my article so if you give me your email address at school I’ll send you a copy of everything.” Blaine offered generously.

“I will use the information. I want people to know. Perhaps when I am older I could get a job like yours finding out the truth for people who are too busy to find it out for themselves.”

Blaine Laughed. “Perhaps you could Lucy.”

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The term was nearly over. Lucy had taken time to sort out what she wanted to say to everyone in school before she left for secondary school. She had decided to be brave and speak at an assembly, one where not just the children but the parents would be there as well.

Finally the morning arrived. Lucy was very excited. She got up early and kept going over her notes. Granddad arrived as he was coming with her mum to listen too.

After registration everyone filed into the hall. Lucy came in last. She scanned the hall looking for her mum and granddad. She quickly spotted them but was surprised to see Blaine sitting looking his usual relaxed self in a chair beside them. He gave her an encouraging smile.

Lucy went to the front of the stage. The head mistress had just explained what Lucy was going to talk about.

She held up her notes and began

“On the 13th June at just after twenty past four in the afternoon a factory making TNT exploded. On that day Annie Ingram aged nine was killed by debris from the explosion on William Street James Rigby aged 12 was killed as he walked home from school. Harold Hilton also aged 12 who was visiting Ashton from London to see his father who was in hospital suffering from wounds he got in the war was killed while playing in the street with his friend Fred Watson who was 10 and also died. Edwin Bibby who was only six suffered head injuries and was dead on arrival at the hospital as was Sam Britton aged 8 who suffered a fractured skull. Sarah Ann Higginson