

Chapter 1

Confrontation

September 1933 Halifax Yorkshire

When the Norton motorbike skidded to a halt on the wet cobbles, Emily, an attractive brunette, sat glued to her seat behind the driver and glared at the detached millstone house outside which they were parked. She felt fearful, dreading the consequences of confronting her father with a decision she knew he would never approve.

‘Are you absolutely sure we need to do this?’ She spat out the words slowly in the driver’s ear. ‘I’ve lived in that house all my life, yet I’m no longer sure it is still my family. We used to be happy together but over the last few months father has been quite impossible.’

Ever since her teenage years, she had resented the tight control which her parents tried to exercise over her, stifling her along with her spoiled younger sister, Mary. Both had been forbidden to have any boyfriends whose suitability had not been vetted by her father and Emily was determined to wait no longer before escaping from such shackles. She loved Walter dearly – the way he looked at her and treated her as if no other woman existed, his wicked sense of humour and his intelligence and ambition.

‘You know what we agreed’, Walter told her as he climbed off his bike. ‘Come on, let’s get it over with; no point in sitting out here in a thunderstorm.’

They gave one another a big hug, then taking a deep breath to calm her nerves and wiping the raindrops off her face with the back of her hand, Emily reached out and gripped Walter’s hand; he squeezed her hand firmly in response. They stood together in silence for a few moments, struggling to pluck up their courage, neither of them quite ready to enter the house.

The weather ended their hesitation with a flash of sheet lightening followed by an ear-shattering clap of thunder. Under dark skies and increasingly heavy rain, Emily glanced at the earnest young man standing beside her, scrabbled in her handbag for the front door key and quickly ushered him into her childhood home.

Still holding hands, they stood dripping on the tiled floor and Emily, biting her lip, stared at the closed lounge door. She could hear the familiar mumble of

her father's voice reading aloud from the Bible. Behind that door, she knew he would be sitting bolt upright in his chair still wearing his best black suit kept for use when he delivered sermons as a lay preacher at the local church. The words of the Bible penetrated through the door and caused her to hesitate.

She could picture her mother and young sister, sitting quietly on the dark brown leather settee, hands folded on their laps, waiting with quiet patience for him to finish. A year ago, she would have been sitting there with them.

She felt her hand getting clammy in Walter's grip and, when she glanced at him, noticed that he too looked paler than usual. It gave her some comfort to know that he felt just as nervous as she did. She gave his hand one last squeeze before dropping it, turning the door handle of the lounge with trembling fingers and pushing the door wide open.

Blushing with embarrassment, she blurted out: 'This is Walter Lingard, my fiancé. We are getting married on my twenty first birthday.' That bore little relation to the script which the young couple had spent all day rehearsing, but the pressure of the moment became too great for her to exercise self-control.

Her father put down his Bible and glared at them. 'How dare you burst into the room and interrupt me when I'm reading from the Bible. Now, young lady, would you repeat slowly what you just said?'

Walter tried to intervene, 'Please Sir . . .' he began, but a withering glare from the father abruptly silenced him: 'You, young man, get out of my house NOW.'

Emily knew her father well enough to know he would never change his mind and pleaded with Walter: 'Please go before he throws you out. Your presence only makes matters worse; I love you, you know that,' she sobbed, trying unsuccessfully to hold back her tears. She took his arm and led him quickly to the front door.

As he stepped out onto the drive into the thunderstorm still raging all around, he tenderly cupped her face in his hands, and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. 'Please call me as soon as you can. I need to know that you are safe.'

Emily clasped her arms around the love of her life and kissed him hard on the lips. Then, closing the front door firmly behind her, she wiped her tears away, took a deep breath, tossed her head defiantly, straightened her red polka dot dress and walked back into the lounge with a heavy heart to face her father.

‘If you marry that man, you leave this house for good – never to return. NEVER. Do you understand me?’ he boomed.

Emily looked at his reddish purple face and knew that he meant every word. How often had she heard him say ‘Honour your father and your mother’?

‘Look at me when I’m speaking to you. Are you going to obey me?’ His words seemed to weave themselves with a slow hiss around his cane as he picked it up from its resting place against the highly polished mahogany sideboard. Emily had rarely seen her father quite so angry; he lost his temper on occasion but usually kept his self-control. Now he seemed beside himself; she could smell the whisky on his breath.

Is the cane merely a threat or does he really intend to use it on me, she thought, remembering all too vividly that as a child he used to bend her over the back of the settee and smack her bottom until she cried. People used to say: ‘Spare the rod; spoil the child’. But now I’m a fully grown woman; he won’t dare, will he?

Pleading for support, she glanced at her mother, an overweight matronly lady in her fifties who had been subjected to the control of her husband all her married life, sitting wringing her hands together on the couch beside Mary. Emily realised what kept her mother frozen in her seat and vowed that she would never allow herself to become so submissive.

Her mother whispered to her in a low voice, ‘Take care not to make your father angry or you’ll be in real trouble and I won’t be able to stop him. You really shouldn’t disturb our Sunday evenings like that; you should be ashamed of yourself.’

Mary, who had remained completely silent throughout the angry exchanges, now suddenly let out a sob which she tried unsuccessfully to stifle. Fearing her husband’s rage would be turned on her younger daughter, the mother instantly grabbed the tearful girl and ordered her to bed even though the grandfather clock in the hall had not yet struck nine o’clock. Mary stumbled out of the room, sobbing freely as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

Now just the three of them remained in the room. Emily took a moment to survey the scene – her mother on the couch, eyes downcast, shoulders slumped; and her father pacing up and down the dark green carpet square tapping the cane against the palm of his left hand.

How dare he bully her like that and her mother should surely at least make some attempt to stop him. She grimaced at the smell of furniture polish; the faded yellowy brown wallpaper which passed itself off as gold but above all at the brown leather settee where her father used to beat her as a child.

She felt herself begin to tremble, but from anger not fear. At twenty years old she felt to be emancipated and free, not a child to be dictated to by a father she no longer respected. Who did he think he was? Charlie Chaplin. Did he seriously expect her to run upstairs in floods of tears and bend to his will?

Surely, now he must see her as a mature adult and not as just a child whom he could punish with impunity. She looked her father full in the face and, as she glared at him with the full power of her rage, noticed his eyes flicker momentarily.

‘Go to your room and stay there until you come to your senses,’ he finally roared, slapping the cane against his leg.

Emily turned on her heel and marched smartly out of the room, head held high, and up the stairs to her bedroom next to Mary’s room, slamming the door in a vain attempt to shut out the sound of her father ranting about herself and Walter.

Even so his voice penetrated into her eyrie: ‘We can’t let her marry that street urchin. He has no money, no prospects and spends his time roaring about the place on that motorbike, disturbing all our neighbours. He’s the boy I told you about who used to shoot at me with a pea shooter when I delivered groceries to the Co-op in Hebden Bridge and his father is a trade union leader always getting himself into the newspapers.’

Her father felt so strongly about Walter that he might well try to prevent her marriage; at any moment he might burst into her bedroom cane in hand. What would she do if he did?

She flung herself back onto the soft pillows of her bed and stared at the ceiling, reflecting bitterly on the contrast between the way Walter’s parents welcomed the news of her engagement and her own parents’ reaction to it. ‘His father after all is a local celebrity in his own right,’ she muttered to herself.

She remembered how proud Walter had been when he told her: ‘Apart from my dad’s union activities, he puts himself about in the local community, conducting the male voice choir, singing solos in various Methodist chapels and

organising celebrities like Gracie Fields to come to local concerts. He is himself a well-known tenor soloist who has won many competitions - even being accorded the honour of singing solo before the King at the Royal Albert Hall. London amazes him, as he says, how does such a city survive with so few mills and so little industry?’