

**'ONLY EIGHT'**  
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Chapter 1: Where my story started

I've been asked who I am and where I'm from many times but I never really know how to answer. I don't really belong anywhere. From eight onwards I've never had a place I can call home because nowhere's ever felt safe.

I started off in a small village near Bristol living in a glass blowing shop with my mother and father. My father owned the shop so I would often watch him working his skilled hands around interesting shapes. There wasn't much food but enough to keep us going and although I don't remember much about my time in the village, I can remember being fairly carefree.

It all went downhill after my father became ill. We couldn't afford a doctor and so never even knew why he was sick. There were many possible diseases like measles and whooping cough. I was only eight so I didn't really know what was going on. I didn't notice my father suffering. He died that year. No one really explained what death was, they just said he was in God's hands now. I kept asking God to give him back, it wasn't fair to take him away from me, but of course my father never came back. Instead me and my mother moved to the Bristol Workhouse. It was our only option as we'd lost the house because my mother couldn't afford it anymore. If they'd only let us keep the house maybe I wouldn't cry myself to sleep at night or jump at the slightest noise.

Chapter 2: Chewed potatoes

I hated the workhouse from the word go and every day was exhausting. Our diet mainly consisted of plain boiled potatoes which we didn't even have plates for. We had to eat off our dirty aprons and scavenge the floor for any dropped morsels of chewed potatoes. However food wasn't my main worry. I had barely any time to even think about the emptiness inside me which, although it helped me forget about my father, it meant I was very tired. From six in the morning to nine at night I was working, usually cleaning the medical floor from all kinds of nasty substances that just thinking about makes me feel sick. I think the worst part was that I was so lonely. My and my mother were separated as soon as we entered the doors so I had no family, no friends and no one to talk to. I guess it could have been worse. I'd heard many stories of other harsh workhouse conditions and the cruelty that went on behind closed doors. I don't know if all the rumours were true though. Many were made up to make people avoid workhouses because although workhouses are supposed to be a place for people who are poor to stay, they don't want people to get the wrong idea and use it as an easy way out of poverty. Workhouses should be the last resort if all else fails. However, when people finally thought up the 'great' idea of using the workhouse as a means of cheap labour, some of these rumours became reality.

One tale that I have never forgotten is of a woman who stood outside the workhouse gates begging to come in. She was in labour and needed a place to stay, however the guard, although lawfully required to let her in, refused to open the gates. All he was thinking of was money. You see, babies are expensive and can't earn their keep and while the vulnerable mother may be able to work and make some money for the workhouse, a baby was too much trouble. So the guard left the woman outside in the cold, which is not a safe nor practical way to bring someone into the world. The mother survived, however the baby wasn't so lucky.

### Chapter 3: Head Down, Mouth Shut, Work

I spent a year in the workhouse. It felt like forever. The days were all the same, boring and tiresome. I left there with grubby hands, sleepy eyes and a torn cotton dress that I could hardly breathe in. I'd love to say that I escaped Bristol Workhouse but that isn't exactly the case.

It happened in the dead of night when the world was wrapped in a blanket of darkness. I was asleep in my room, as small as a cupboard, which I shared with many other girls, our beds squashed together in tight rows. Suddenly the door slammed open and I was shaken awake. I couldn't understand what they were doing. Everyone was getting up so I quickly did the same. I was shoved into a line and we stumbled outside like cattle. My head was throbbing and I wanted my mother. That's when I saw the carts. Children were being bundled into them with no explanation as to where they were going. It was all too sudden. I was lifted into the tiny cart and crammed in between two girls who I'd never seen before. We were all too tired to talk so we sat in silence. I fell asleep to the gentle clatter of horses' hooves.

Eventually the horses came to a stop and I was jolted awake. I slowly opened my eyes, blinking as the sunlight streamed through the cart. We must've been in there for a while. The cart door opened and we bustled out to find ourselves surrounded by countryside in the middle of nowhere. I could hear the sound of birds and a river trickling in the distance. This wasn't the terrifying place I had imagined. We were escorted by men round to a massive mill and led through the back gate which was actually very odd though I thought nothing of it at the time. We entered a room where a tall man greeted us with a plastered grin on his face.

"Welcome to Cressbrook Mill, where we adopt poor young souls and transform them into polite young ladies and gentlemen. I hope your journey was pleasant. I am Thomas Birks and I will be supervising your time here. As a welcoming gift I have provided you all with a shilling as a sign of our appreciation."

Mr Birks seemed very pleasant and not the slightest bit unkind so when he passed me a shilling I took it proudly. I could already see myself in a beautiful gown walking along the river.

"There is only one thing I must ask of you", he said as he finished handing out the shillings. "We have a small tradition here at Cressbrook and that is that all newcomers must make the sign of the cross on our crest. Now, now children, an orderly line, if you please."

We all rushed to the desk that stood at the end of the room, eager to please Mr Birks. As soon as we'd made the sign of the cross, we were quickly shuffled away. They hurried us along until we could hear the sounds of machines working and arrived in front of two intimidating doors. They slowly creaked open to reveal a ginormous room filled with scruffy children tiresomely powering machines. I couldn't believe my eyes. Obviously we were eh lucky ones, we wouldn't be doing jobs like this. I felt sorry for these children. I turned around to see where we would be led next but our guides had disappeared. I stood in the room with its roaring noise and I felt so lost and confused until suddenly I was pulled over into the row of works. I looked over to see who had grabbed me in and saw a tall girl of around thirteen with wonky legs and swollen hands. I protested, trying to get her to let go of me, but she put her finger to her mouth as though trying to hide me. I did as she asked and saw Mr Birks coming round the corner. I wanted to ask him what I was doing here but the girl pulled me back.

“Look, I know you’re confused, I was too. Keep your head down, mouth shut and just work. It’s not safe to talk now, I’ll explain later,” the girl quickly whispered her words and gestured to the machine to show me what to do. I watched her and tried to catch on but all I could think was that there must be a mistake, I shouldn’t be here, and more than ever I missed my mother.

#### Chapter 4: A Shilling

I later found out the girl’s name, Mary Goodling. She was thirteen years old and quite tall (unlike me, who was tiny). She looked after me as though she was my mother and I honestly don’t think I could’ve survived Cressbrook Mill without her.

When we eventually finished work on that first day at nine o’clock I was exhausted and very disturbed. I felt so hopeless, like I had no control over anything. For dinner we were given potato pie with boiled bacon in it. The fat was so thick I could barely swallow it and Mary said that it was the same every evening. After eating we shuffled along to little cottages gathered behind the mill where Mary quickly ushered me into the nearest one. It was small and only had enough room for a few beds, exactly like the Bristol Workhouse. There were many other girls with us and they all got into bed without fuss. Mary did the same. I noticed it was two girls to a bed so I crawled in beside her. She whispered in my ear.

“The first thing you need to know about this prison is to avoid Tom The Devil.”

“Who’s that?” I said, shocked that there could be a devil among us (my mother and I had gone to church every Sunday). “Do you mean Thomas Birks? He seemed friendly enough.

Mary laughed at that. “You won’t think that in a moment” she replied, but she had stopped laughing and looked worried.

“But he gave me a shilling?! I was feeling very wary now; Mary looked extremely anxious.

“He gave all of us a shilling.”

I now realise why Mary had looked at me like I was some poor puppy. It had all been a trick. Mr Birks may have greeted us with a jolly expression and seemed to give us money out of generosity but really he was buying us. He bought me for a shilling! Apparently when I made the sign of the cross, I had given myself to Cressbrook Mill under the eyes of God until I was twenty-one. I felt so stupid and angry. What had I done to deserve this? I cried myself to sleep while Mary tried comforting me. She stayed awake until I drifted off.

#### Chapter 5: Scavenger

“You’ll probably be a scavenger.”

I woke up the next morning to a gaggle of girls excitedly welcoming me to my new ‘home’. The oldest girl in my dormitory was Caroline Thompson, aged seventeen. She was bar far the most confident and constantly spoke out of turn. Her back was red from punishment and her legs had turned in from the hours she’d been standing up, although she still had tangled yet beautiful long hair. She must’ve been at Cressbrook for at least eight years. She was trying to bet over what job I’d have with the four pence she’d been given for the fair. Normally we got eight pence a year, four pence for the wakes and four pence for the fair.

“What’s a scavenger?”

“Youll find out soon enough,” Caroline responded, a grin on her face.

She was right. I was a scavenger. It turns out Cressbrook Mill produced cotton and my job was to crawl under the spinning machines to pick up loose cotton while the machines were working. It was horrible under there and I was constantly being injured. I often had to duck so that I wasn't nipped by the huge wheel. Mary and Caroline were Piercers which meant they had to lean over the spinning machine to mend broken thread. We weren't allowed to stop for even a second otherwise we would be beaten with a leather strap and told to hurry up by Tom The Devil.

He really was a monster. He was sadistic and thoroughly enjoyed tormenting us with belts. He'd march around the work floor examining every corner, checking we were working well. I kept my head down, like Mary told me, so wasn't beaten too often. However I witnessed some horrific sights.

My first real sight of torture was after my first month. They had left the mill doors open and unlocked by accident and Caroline saw this as the perfect opportunity to get away from this dump. She peered over her shoulder discretely to see if The Devil was watching and slowly tiptoed around the work floor. She was barely noticeable over the roar of machines. As she walked past us she beckoned with her finger and pointed to the wide open door.

"I'll be ringleader if you all follow," she said with a hopeful expression.

We gave her questioning looks. Was she mad? There was no way she'd make it, and even if she did, where would she go, she'd told us she had no family? Mary shook her head quickly then hurried back to work. I copied. If Mary wasn't brave enough then I certainly wasn't. Caroline shrugged and carried on towards the door anyway. After what felt like an age, she reached the door and we actually thought she might just make it! Our surprise didn't last long because at that very moment Mr Birks turned around and saw Caroline standing in the doorway as thin as a twig. She looked so startled, as though she may snap at any moment. That's when she ran. She probably didn't get far with her wonky legs because she was in the next day with the most morbid face I've ever seen.

Her expression wasn't the only thing different about her. All of her hair had been cut off so that she looked like a boy. We all tried asking her what had happened but she wouldn't say anything, in fact she just stared into space as though she hadn't even heard us. It was like they'd broken her confident spirit. She was no longer the Caroline who had teased us and been like a big sister, she was now an empty body. She would work like a clock in the day, no longer chatting when Birk's back was turned. She just worked on auto-pilot.

I could see Mary endlessly worrying about her and trying to break the barrier Carolien had seemed to build. The most terrifying thing, though, was that she refused to eat. Breakfast and supper were the same, oatcake in a tin covered in boiled milk and water, which although it wasn't tasty, everyone ate anyway except Caroline. Even when we had our once a year brown bread and cheese she still couldn't swallow. If she was a twig before, she was now thin as a thread.

One day, about ten months after Caroline's attempted escape, she clasped in front of the spinning wheel, falling to the ground and wailing as though in pain. She started rocking back and forth, clutching her knees to her chest and mumbling to herself. It was the first time she'd spoken since that fateful day. Tom The Devin strolled over, whip in hand, and started to beat her with the leather strap yelling, "Get back to work NOW" and "What you looking at, hurry up all of you."

But Caroline couldn't stand up, she just carried on mumbling to herself as though she hadn't felt the force of the whip upon her back. None of us stepped in, we were all too scared. I wish I'd had the courage to do what was right.

The next day Caroline was gone. Rumour had it that she'd gone mad and been taken to a hospital. We never saw her again. I like to think that she found a way to finally be free but deep down I know Cressbrook had done her too much damage, she was beyond repair.

### Chapter 6: 'Accidents' Happen

It'd been a year since Caroline's disappearance when Mary became ill. She was coughing and her forehead was burning. I was scared she had pneumonia and I could see how dreadful she was feeling. Her eyes were half closed and her nose red. She'd been sneezing since winter because in the mill it had to be damp and warm for the cotton to be spun, so that when we went outside into the cold night air she'd caught a chill, however it was only now starting to get worse. Other children were ill because of the dust in the air but Mary looked particularly bad. She was as white as a ghost and could barely lift her legs to walk because she was so tired. I told her she should rest for the day but she said she'd get found out. Birks tended not to have compassion towards ill children and they were expected to work the same as usual. I could see the pain on her face with every step she took. I had no idea how she was going to work in that much discomfort. I didn't want her to get hurt!

I'd seen many accidents in my time at Cressbrook Mill including limbs getting caught in machinery resulting in missing hands, fingers and more. Of course I witnessed other, more fatal incidents that still give me nightmares.

Injuries were sometimes caused by the poor conditions in the factory and probably the reason Mary became ill. Even though in 1802 a factory act was passed stating that children can't work over twelve hours a day and that the factory floor had to have basic cleanliness and ventilation, these rules were obviously not enough. In 1811 I worked for fourteen hours a day, seven days a week from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. No one cared and nothing was done until after I left the factory world. If there had been more laws to protect us or the laws were actually enforced, Caroline and Mary would be telling their stories too. Instead I have to tell them for them.

Mary was slowly working on her machine and becoming very close to chopping her finger off. I could see she was worried and she looked like she was about to faint. She turned her machine off and Birks immediately spotted and strolled towards her exactly like he had done with Caroline. I was overcome with panic. Mary was like family, what would I do if something happened to her? He was getting closer and closer. If I stopped working and tried to protect her, then I would get either injured, beaten or both. Tom The Devil stared over Mary with a glare and an evil smile spread across his face. He hit her weak bones many times and I froze. I was unable to do anything. Then he hit her head hard and she went all limp. She was still alive as I could see her chest rising and falling, but Thomas Birks looked scared. He got some people to help him drag Mary to the apprentices' houses. Tears trickled down my face but I had to carry on working. I couldn't concentrate and the rest of the day was a blur. When I rushed to the dorm after our potato pie dinner the room was empty. I cried myself to sleep like every night only this time there was no Mary to comfort me. The next day there was still no sign of her. I heard people saying that she had died of a mysterious illness. I knew that she would've been fine if she'd been looked after properly. I gulped back my tears and more than anything I felt angry, angry that Birks could get away with murder, angry that I was stuck in this prison and forced to work and angry that I had been separated from my family. I vowed that I would escape Cressbrook Mill whatever the consequences.

## Chapter 7: The Woman Behind the Glass

I spent five years planning my escape. I planned to leave in the dead of night, counting on the overseer forgetting to lock the apprentice house where we lived which, I noticed, he sometimes did. There was just one problem I couldn't overcome, where would I go? Cressbrook Mill was in the middle of nowhere and there was no civilisation as far as I could see. I didn't have any idea as to where I was and how I would find my way if I ever escaped. Anyone who had attempted to leave never got far because they were either not fast enough or returned in a matter of days after getting lost, thinking bad food is better than no food. I kept my eye out for anything that could give me a clue to where to go if I managed to break free. I often thought of sneaking into one of the carts that new children were brought in as it left the mill, however this was too risky. I could easily be discovered, sent back to Cressbrook Cotton Mill and given the punishment that all runaways got, an iron weight around the neck. This could cause back and neck problems. When I do escape I will succeed, that's what I told myself.

One night, after a gruelling day, I heard a tap on the window above my bed. I looked up to see two familiar eyes staring back at me. I thought I must be dreaming, it wasn't possible... There behind the glass stood my mother. She looked older and her hair was grey but it was definitely her. I pinched myself to check I was awake. A million questions were rushing through my head and I looked around to check if the other girls were asleep. They were snoring loudly and when I looked back around my mother was no longer at the window, instead she stood behind the open door. They'd forgotten to lock again. I rushed to my mother's arms but she just grabbed my hand and pulled me out the door towards the river in a panic. We ran along the water's edge for what felt like hours and I was so out of breath I felt like I was going to be sick. My ankles and knees were weak from work so I couldn't run fast. My mother was in no better state than me and she looked weary and tired.

"How did you find me?" I asked her when we eventually stopped to refill our lungs.

She pulled me into a warm embrace but then took my hand and continued our journey, leaving my question unanswered.

It was only later, when we were safe, that my mother told me what she'd been doing in our six years apart. She'd left the workhouse to marry a fairly well off baker and was now living quite comfortably. However before she left she managed to find out where I'd been taken to. She was sorry it took her so long to find me. She told me she had walked all the way from Bristol to Derbyshire which was apparently where Cressbrook Mill was. She knew something was wrong with the place as soon as she set her eyes on it, so she had hidden behind the trees watching me. It just so happened that on that day they didn't lock the doors and so here we were, reunited, family again. It seemed almost too perfect to be true, like we were the luckiest people on Earth.

Now, with my mother, maybe I could finally be safe and in that moment, as we ran away from Cressbrook and all the terrible memories it held, I felt as free as a bird.

## Chapter 8: And Where My Story Ends

When me and my mother returned to Bristol to live with her husband I had to get a job in domestic service but at least I made a decent wage, not much but enough to keep me going. When I was eighteen I married a shop keeper and I've been blessed with five children. My life is simple but at least I'm safe. I cook with what little we have, clean and have raised three boys and two girls. I'm not well educated but I felt that my story had to be written down for Mary and Caroline and all the other children who worked at Cressbrook Mill and all the children who will. I think something must be done about the poor conditions and horrific

pounishments in the textile factories but I'm not in a high enough position to make a change. I'm just a shop keeper's wife, but there are others who made new factory reform acts in 1833, 1844 and last year in 1847. These made working hours shorter and allowed cleaner factories. I don't want children to be forced into factories at all but I think the new laws are a step closer, however I doubt if it will happen in my lifetime. I am nearing fifty so I fear I haven't long. I can only hope for a better future for my children. I can remember the horrible things that happened in the mill like it was yesterday, even though it was forty-one years ago when I was only eight.