



Chapter One

A STRANGER

Tyldesley, Lancashire
August, 1829

“**Y**ou’re a liar, Edward Entwistle!”
“Admit it!”
“We won’t let you get away now. Hold tight, lads!”

There are three of them, all sneering voices and snatching hands, and they are upon me. Desperation lends me strength. My shirt sleeve rips noisily as I tug free from the lads’ grasp.

I suck air into my lungs and charge down the street. My feet burning as they pound on the hard cobbles towards my village.

Clumps of soil and stones thud against my back. I glance over my shoulder and nearly get a face full of horse manure!

The boys are catching up. They are older than me, bigger, I know I can’t outrun them.

I desperately scan for somewhere to hide. The chapel, maybe? There’ll be no one there now.

I launch myself around the corner.

Oof! I rub my sore chest and look up. The man is well-built and at least forty years old.

“Woah there, boy! What’s the hurry?”

I quickly take in his crisp white shirt, knee high boots, tailcoat and overcoat. *A gentleman.*

“Sorry, sir!” I bend over, gasping for breath. I have to think quick. The boys will be upon me in just a moment. I straighten up. “I am in training for a . . . for a race.”

“A race indeed!” The gentleman tips back his top hat so he can meet my eyes. “What a coincidence! I am in preparation for a race myself!” He gives a hearty laugh, eyes twinkling.

“*Really*, sir?” I can’t keep the surprise from my voice. I glance round again, working out my next move.

“You do not believe me?” The gentleman raises an eyebrow.

“Of course I do.”

The lads have gathered across the street. They watch me, all mean eyes and curled lips.

I stick out my tongue at them. I’m safe in the company of this gentleman.

“You have heard, perhaps, of The Trials?”

“Oh yes, everyone has,” I fib, hoping to keep the man talking. “I’ve been thinking of entering myself, actually.” I run on the spot to prove my point.

The man laughs again. “Excellent. How impressive. I thought my son, Robert, would be the youngest entrant, but you must be only eleven? Twelve?”

I scowl and stretch my body as much as I can. “Fourteen.”

“Ah, my apologies. All the running must keep you lithe . . . Master . . .”

I can't help smiling. "Entwistle. Edward Entwistle."

The man thrusts out his hand. "I am Mr George Stephenson."

"Ow do." His handshake is firm but warm.

Mr George pushes his thumb into his overcoat's top buttonhole.

"It is a pleasure to meet a young man who is as quick with his words as he is with his feet, young Edward. You're a canny bairn!"

I like this man. "Pardon me, sir, but you don't sound like you're from round here . . ."

Mr George puffs out his chest. "Well observed, Edward. I am from Northumberland originally."

"Is that why you sound funny?" I quickly slap my hand over my mouth.

But George Stephenson just laughs. "I could say the same about you, lad! I can't understand a word you Lancashire folk say, sometimes!"

I chuckle.

We walk down the street in silence until we reach the main crossroads. The boys have sloped away. My chest relaxes.

I point across the street to a row of terraces. "I'd best be goin' wom."

"And I must be going too." Mr Stephenson pulls out his pocket watch. "I have an important meeting to attend. But no doubt I will see you again at Rainhill!" He gives a wink.

"Oh yes, certainly!"

Rainhill! Where on earth is Rainhill?

I dash home, then run upstairs to the small front bedroom I share with my brother. I go to the window to check the street.

Mr Stephenson is walking away, there is no sign of the boys, thank goodness.

You don't get many gentlemen round here! I wish I'd asked him more about the race he and his son are entering.

There is a jug and bowl of water on the washstand. I have a quick strip wash then change into a fresh shirt. I gently bite my lip, gathering up the torn shirt, and head downstairs.

Ma and Pa are sitting in the front parlour. There is bread, cups and saucers, a milk jug and a brown teapot on a small table. My brother, William, is holding a dish in front of the range fire to warm the butter. My stomach rumbles in anticipation.

Gingerly, I hold out my damaged shirt.

"Oh Edward, what's happened now?" asks Ma.

"It wasn't my fault. I was trying to rescue a lady's cat and it scratched me," I fib.

"It must have had claws like a dragon," says Pa.

"Or a lion," adds William.

I shoot my brother a dark look. "You didn't see it. It were fierce."

"You should be a writer, the number of stories you tell, Edward Entwistle," says Ma, while looking for her sewing basket.

"It's true!"

"Course it is," mocks William, spreading the softened butter on to the end of the bread with a knife. "Just like that story you told last week about seeing a ghost in our yard . . ."

"Only it turned out to be my nightshirt on the washing line!" ribs Pa.

"And what about that story you told the other week about how you found that gold coin . . ." adds William. "Only that magpie flew down and got to it first."

“It did!”

“In your imagination,” mutters William, “Like all your stories!” He pulls me aside and lowers his voice, so Ma and Pa can’t hear. “What really happened?”

I shrug. “I got in a spot of bother with some lads from the other village, that’s all.”

“I’ve warned you, those tales you keep telling will land you in hot water.” William pulls himself up even taller, as he often does when emphasising his two-year advantage over me in age. “Well at least they didn’t bust your nose this time.”

I shudder and touch it. The room begins to spin as I remember how the sticky blood ran down my face. *Blood*. Even the word makes me feel woozy. I clutch the mantlepiece. It’s too hot in here.

There is a knock on the door.

“Now, who could that be?” wonders Ma, putting aside her needle and thread.

“It’ll be the lady come to thank Edward for saving her cat,” teases Pa, taking the bread knife to the loaf.

Ma whips off her apron and dusts down her skirt before opening the front door.

William and I peer round to see.

It’s the gentleman from earlier! He takes off his top hat and introduces himself.

Cold fear plunges into the pit of my stomach. Am I in trouble again? I slink back into the parlour and tuck myself in between the fire and Pa’s armchair, trying to make myself as small as possible.

William mouths. “What does he want?”

I glue my lips together.

Ma is so flustered she simply invites our unexpected visitor in. George Stephenson seems to fill the room as he glances around at our rather plain furnishings. He indicates the range's coal fire with a flick of his head. "Do you mind if I warm my hands?" He claps them together. "It is rather a cold day."

"Be my guest," says Pa, sitting rather straighter in his chair. "Mother, have we a drop left in the 'pot?"

Ma is still a bit dazed, but she gives her head a little shake as though waking herself, then picks up the brown teapot. "A cup of tea, Mr Stephenson?"

"Aye, that would be most kind, Mrs Entwistle." He takes off his overcoat and passes it, with his hat, to William. I can see confusion spread over Ma's face as she wonders how he knows her name.

"Some bread and butter?"

"I have already eaten, thank you."

I wish they would stop with all the niceties and ask him why he has called on us.

"You're not from round these parts," comments Pa.

"No, Mr Entwistle. I have travelled down from the town of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. My son runs an engineering works there."

Pa nods.

"How nice," says Ma, as she pours the tea.

"I am here for a meeting with the owners of the new Bolton to Leigh Rail Way," Mr Stephenson continues.

The rail way! My ears prick – The rail way! I have been fascinated by all the talk and newspaper articles about the new rail ways – special iron roads used to transport coal and passengers to the big towns – and the steel horses, or steam locomotives, which

pull the wagons. I am burning with questions I want to ask about this exciting new technology, but Ma will give me a clip around the ear if I speak out of place.

Ma gestures for our guest to sit as she holds out a teacup and saucer.

Mr Stephenson accepts the tea but remains standing. He is a man who seems more comfortable on his feet, addressing his audience. "Your cottage reminds me a little of my own childhood home in Wylam." His gaze falls on two shelves of books in the corner of the front room. "You enjoy reading, I see."

"Very much so," agrees Pa. "Knowledge is key to a man's progress in life. My two boys both went to school."

"I am glad to hear that. I was not fortunate to have a formal education myself, but I have ensured my son Robert received the best schooling possible," he says proudly. "And that brings me to the reason for my calling here today." He sips his tea. "I met briefly with your son earlier." He nods at me. "Edward told me that he was considering entering The Trials."

I squirm.

"Did he?" says Pa, widening his eyes.

"The Trials are a race," I explain, ignoring him.

Ma, Pa and William look confused.

"But not for runners," adds George Stephenson, his eyes twinkling again.

Now I feel confused.

"They are for steam locomotives! And I know I have only just met your son, but I think he might just be the person I need – to win!"